

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Workplace Mediation and Facilitation: The Hot and Cold under Corona

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Monday, January 24th, 2022

For many years now, I have been conducting workplace mediation and facilitation, including conflicts in teams and between staff and team leaders or between owners, and also regular away-days, strategy and management meetings and the like – where a conflict or dispute is not the main focus and people are taking time to reflect with the assistance an external moderator can offer.

The first Covid-related cancellations of agreed sessions came in March 2020. It seems so long ago. Since then there has been a constant series of stops and starts – organisations coming for mediation and facilitation, perhaps beginning a process with a first in-house session where needs are discussed and a process agreed upon, or a first meeting in a mediation, or a first team day, then having to postpone the rest due to Corona. A number of meetings has taken place online, while other organisations have said to themselves that they would prefer to wait until the meetings can take place “in person,” as they are doing so much other work online. This decision often came after also trying facilitation online, and then saying that they really do need to come together and talk in a physical location. In many cases it has been a long wait.

When the case in question is a mediation with parties to that conflict that can be (more or less) named, delaying the chance to talk may lead to it “going away,” as other matters become more important, but more often than that the relationship has worsened, as the parties to the dispute begin to wonder about each other’s willingness to actually tackle it.

This has led to a new kind of need for facilitation that would not have been required without the *hot and cold* of Covid at the workplace. And by hot and cold I refer here also to conflict theory – hot conflicts and themes that need to be discussed are in the open and being somehow negotiated (whether constructively or not), while cold conflicts are on hold and not seldom becoming more hardened. The threshold to raising an awkward or conflictual topic is higher when working remotely, or – put the other way – it is easier not to broach it as “we won’t see each other anyway.”

Teams have not been coming together as much as before Covid, while individuals have experienced new challenges due to Covid. Much of the difficulty has been that communication has fundamentally changed. Before Covid there was office small talk and there were countless informal opportunities to discuss and decide work matters or to share what people were doing – dropping by the office, coffee, lunch, even the shared trip to work and home again, as well as regular social events outside work hours. Since Covid there is the online jour fixe and there are appointments that have to be made to use an online tool, or the pre-arranged phone call. Many

organisations have done a wonderful job of changing to off-site work and home office. And many of those that did that well are facing a new need for conversation due to a Covid-related sense of emptiness or inertia, which itself is a feeling that is not reality tested. People simply do not know enough about what their immediate colleagues are doing, and bosses do not know enough about what their teams are doing and vice-versa.

And not knowing can lead to frustration, which is expressed in dissatisfaction and conjecture. The chemistry in teams changes; it is as if the molecules are drifting further and further apart. Where once there was regular friction and exchange and – to stay with the metaphor – chemical reactions that produced momentum, now there is only loose contact. Many bosses know and appreciate that their team members are doing their jobs well from home. It isn't necessarily about a lack of trust in "remote" working. It is about not being able to grasp, perhaps quite literally, what is going on. This gets particularly hard when team constellations change and new members join a remotely working unit of people they have never met except online. The distance grows. There is a sense of conflict in the air, but people cannot always put their fingers on it.

And so teams and their leaders are asking for mediation and facilitation, just so that they can get back on track. There is a large backlog of things to discuss, questions to ask, decisions about the future to be made. It may well start with simple sharing and listening on what working from home has meant to each individual and the team as a group, on what Covid has changed. My first facilitation which began with this theme was back in summer 2020, during a brief window of in-the-office "normality." There was a very moving ninety minutes of sharing. Since then this has been on the agenda again and again. I facilitated a team day in October 2021 where exactly that was the first item on the agenda, before more specific work-related themes should be discussed. The agreement was to do two team days with me. The second was scheduled for January. It has been postponed to April, due to Covid. And so it continues ...

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