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Outsiders make better mediators

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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Workplace stress often leads to situations where colleagues refuse to work together or even speak to each other. This could be anything from worry about a forthcoming merger to a dispute about pay or working conditions or a complicated argument between individuals or departments. At these times, mediation is an important first step to re-starting talks and avoiding costly work stoppages.

A good mediator needs several obvious qualifications (and qualities), such as credibility and trustworthiness, good communication and people-handling skills and ideally, specialist experience of mediation itself. But the key qualification is outsider status - the sheer fact of not being identified with either side.

Also, if 'familiarity breeds contempt', then a new face around the building is liable to be treated with natural courtesy and consideration, a good atmosphere in which to launch a mediation exercise. Being a neutral observer and listener gives the mediator powerful advantages, both on the rational problem-solving level and in the deeper irrational zone of suspicions, prejudices and repressed feelings.

On the rational side, the most obvious benefit is that the mediator will not be affected by the outcome of the dispute either way, so discussions can be entirely open and objective. It also removes a major obstacle to clear dialogue, and that is possible association with the various players in the dispute.

By being a total stranger to everyone involved, the mediator can rightfully insist on a purely logical account of the events and the issues from their beginnings, with individuals identified by their job-title, rather than their name.

In other words, it discourages lazy explanations that fall back on "usual trouble when Sayeed gets upset" or "you know what Fatima is like."

This reasonable pressure to communicate in proper boardroom style may lead to a clearer view of the problem, in which you may both see down to its roots for the first time. In addition, the outsider is able to contribute a fresh analytical perspective that may prompt a workable solution sooner rather than later.

On the irrational side - which tends to grow bigger as the dispute drags on - the neutral mediator represents an important channel for the discharge of emotion and

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the expression of strong feelings within a safe forum, which may assist in the de-escalation of the conflict.

Also firmly in the irrational zone is shuttle diplomacy, where a proposition that would not be listened-to from the original negotiator, is acceptable if spoken by the mediator - literally, the very same words. This demonstrates the function of mediation as a valuable lubricant, with the mediator occupying a non-judgmental role, not apportioning blame, and this may encourage rapport and revelations in confidence which can bring the perception of a grievance back into proportion.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

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