Taking Risks? Taking Responsibility…

By John Sturrock, Founder and Senior Mediator, Core Solutions Group

"It was the simplicity of taking a step back and being ok with saying we got it wrong".

These words from a senior HR executive summed up the way in which she viewed what had been a tough mediation day.

In an intriguing several hours, we had seen and heard that senior person use the formula AARREE** so well: "we accept that there are two sides to this story"/"we acknowledge that this is not personal and that you were doing your job, which was not easy within the system we had"/"we recognise the impact on the business and on you"/we want to reassure you that, if this can be resolved, this will be an end to the situation on our side"/"let me explain that I genuinely believe we were trying to do things properly and not deliberately trying to do harm"/"being completely transparent with you, we need to do x".

More specifically, she had spoken from the heart: "I am finding this really hard; you have had an extremely poor experience as our employee. I get that and I'm sorry. Today, you have taken us to a completely different level and I thank you for that. I have been afforded an opportunity to understand. I take what you say at face value. I am not trying to defend the business because I don't have any defence. We need to learn from what we got wrong. We need to take the opportunity to do things differently. We need to find a way through so that you can move on."

The employee's response was from the heart too: "Speaking to the mediator made a difference to me. It was nice to speak to someone who is not my friend or my partner and is independent and who was listening. It was like a breath of fresh air. And I felt a great relief when you apologised. Your assurances about making changes have given me a sense of hope that the issues are being taken seriously. If I can move forward, I will feel better emotionally and physically. I will have freedom."

For many of us, these will seem like risky things to say on both sides. But the thing about mediation is that it provides a forum for taking these risks. And for reminding ourselves that the alternative to doing so also carries risk, often more substantial and less controllable. We cannot abdicate making choices about risk. We can only work hard to find ways to deal with it more effectively. That is what had been done in this difficult matter.

The theme of taking responsibility arises again in this further mediation example:

"We have had an opportunity to talk about what happened. We have both acknowledged that we should not have said what we said to each other back then. We can move on. But we also realise now that the main reason for our confrontation is the sheer stress we are being put under by management. They don't understand how the department works. They don't appreciate the value of what we do. There have been a number of changes in structure and it's all about saving money. Or making money. But, if we didn't do our research, the money would not come in. It takes time to do what we do. We are not moving widgets around and we can't just be judged according to the number of student places we fill. It's taken a year to get the grant re-application filed. I went to the office and sat with the new person and we got it all done in three hours. But that is not my job!"

Another heartfelt plea for understanding, and a clear explanation of the dawning realisation that the head to head issue (the presenting "conflict" in the mediation) was actually only a symptom of a much broader set of concerns. Obvious, perhaps, in hindsight but not when you are in the heat of things. It had taken a facilitated series of meetings to unpick the reality of the underlying problems and their impact. The two protagonists (themselves very senior specialists in their respective fields) had then met in private to summarise their learning together. Now, on the wider issues, they presented a united approach to the management of the organisation.

Fortunately, the mediation had been set up in such a way that two members of senior management were present to hear what was being said. The response was unequivocal:

"Thank you. I hear what you say. I have to accept that the policy on departmental financing has created real difficulties. I'm really sorry you have been through this. I have been tasked to look at this over the whole institution. One thing I want to be clear about is this. What you do is world-leading and we value it enormously. It is difficult work and often very lonely. We need to find ways to appear more supportive. I'm glad that the application process is sorted this time. We need to make sure we have the right system in place so that this does not happen again. What do you suggest?"

This was a model response. Listening, accepting, acknowledging, apologising, reassuring, clarifying, explaining, exploring, inquiring. Critically, it had all been expressed with genuine authenticity. And all in one short statement. It seemed mostly intuitive. But, actually with a lot of thought and awareness, it was adding real value at the margins, with points that made a big difference to the two members of staff.

But, of course the proof of the pudding is always in the eating: One player in a similar situation commented: "I hope that the tension between my colleague and myself will now be resolved, but I'm less optimistic about the wider structural issues!" This points to the reality of these types of conflict, which are not one-off transactions for most organisations. There is a need for perseverance, follow through, resilience, hard work, institutional commitment and reflection. Above all, implementing the outcomes requires really skilled leadership, which can be learned.

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