

Conflict Management & The Air Force Leader

Written by

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“One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears.”

Dean Rusk

Former Secretary of State

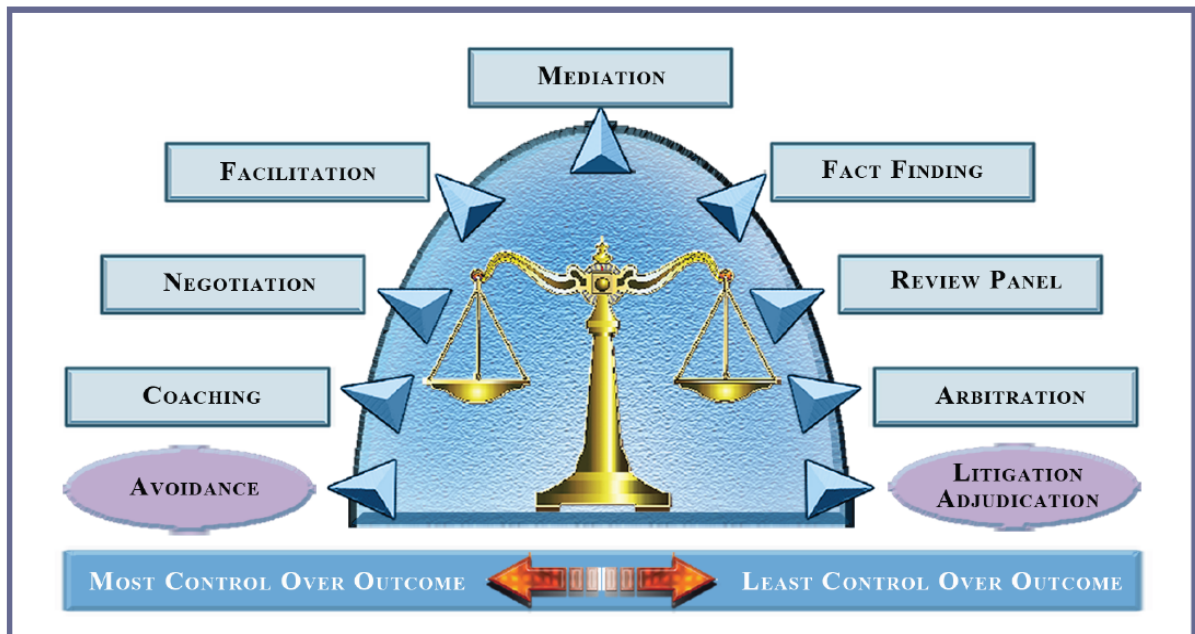
Managing conflict is a critical leadership skill. When problem solving processes or negotiations come to an impasse a leader may resort to using a more direct approach and/or simply tell someone what to do. This type of conflict management may be effective, at times even a necessity, but it may not be the most appropriate method to solve the problem. This article explores the concept of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), but will focus predominately on the mediation and **facilitation** process. We are not suggesting mediation/**facilitation** skills should be used for all dispute resolutions or conflict management; only that it's a valuable leadership tool, when used appropriately, can help manage conflict at the lowest level.

According to the Chief of Staff, “the squadron is the beating heart of the Air Force, our most essential team. We succeed or fail in our missions at the squadron-level because that is where we develop, train, and build Airmen.” This statement, taken from the Chief of Staff Focus Area document from 2016, is why managing conflict is so important. When one considers why damaging conflict develops within the squadron or office, it often stems not from vindictive leaders, but possibly leaders who are so busy trying to accomplish the mission, they fail to make sure people are being heard. Recent studies show almost every office conflict can be traced back to a lack of communication. As the University of Navarra's IESE Business School writes for Forbes, “Good internal communications helps employees feel trusted and connected to each other.” So, what happens when communication falters or conflict is unresolved?

Unresolved or unmanaged conflict can damage trust, create disengaged employees, and lastly and most importantly reduce productivity. CPP Inc.--publishers of the Myers-Briggs Assessment and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Instrument--commissioned a study on workplace conflict. They found in the U.S. employees spent 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict. This amounts to approximately \$359 billion in lost productivity or the equivalent of 385 million working days. In addition, Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) surveys have shown less than 50% of employees who have dealt with workplace conflicts such as “claims of discrimination,” report these incidents. The survey states the reason why most people do not report is a fear the incident would not be taken seriously, fear of reprisal, and/or a perceived lack of support from the Chain of Command. A program the Air Force has been using to help bridge the conflict management and communication gap is called Alternative Dispute Resolution or (ADR).

ADR is a term that encompasses many different means to resolve or manage conflict. The term “alternative” comes from the Administrative Dispute Resolution Act (ADRA) of 1996 which states ADR is an alternative to litigation in the Federal courts. AFI 51-1201 *Conflict Management and Alternative Dispute Resolution Workplace Disputes* states: “Maintaining a productive work environment in which disputes are prevented or settled quickly and at the lowest possible organizational level is essential.”

Department of Defense (DoD) Instruction 5145.05 *Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and Conflict Management* directs: “each DoD Component to establish and implement ADR program(s) to resolve disputes at the earliest possible stage. Any conflict or dispute, regardless of subject matter, is a potential candidate for ADR.” (Para 1.2 POLICY b.) What does this mean to you? Understand how to tap into the program and when appropriate use the education and training available to manage conflict at the lowest possible level.



Alternative Dispute Resolution Sample Spectrum
(Air Force Mediation Compendium, *How to Manage and Mediate Workplace Disputes*, 4th Ed, 2012)

The above graph provides a visual example of the ADR spectrum and highlights different problem solving processes. As you move to the left side of the graphic, each process gives participants more control over resolution outcome. As you move to the right, whether by law or choice, participants start to give up some or all outcome control. For example, in litigation the parties have the least amount of control, giving up that control to a judge who has the ultimate authority to decide their outcome. We begin by looking at the Air Force mediation program, then we will discuss informal mediation/facilitation process.

Mediation is a formal dispute resolution process where parties retain control of the outcome while relying on a trained third party neutral to assist with the process. In

mediation, the Administrative Dispute Resolution Act (ADRA) defines a neutral as someone who has “no official, financial, or personal (conflict of interest) with respect to the issues.” In other words, the neutral has nothing to gain or lose and is there to help the disputing parties discuss their issues and develop their own resolution. In an official mediation, a neutral serves at the will of the parties. Why is this critical? If participants in a mediation, whether perception or reality, believed the mediator was biased, pushed for a resolution, or favored one party over the other, trust in the mediation process would break down and become ineffective.

A trained mediator/neutral is an individual who meets specific criteria for mediating workplace disputes. Training includes complying with foundational guidelines and mandatory continuing education that includes standards such as self-determination, impartiality, confidentiality, and competence. These standards are designed to serve as fundamental ethical guidelines and have been adopted by the American Bar Association, American Arbitration Association, and the Association for Conflict Resolution. The primary goal of these standards is to guide the conduct of mediators, to protect the mediating parties, and to promote public confidence in mediation as a process for resolving disputes.

A military leader may use the concepts of mediation to manage or resolve a dispute, but they are never truly a neutral when dealing with conflict in their organization. Execution of authority (although absolutely appropriate for a military leader) would violate the standards of conduct a mediator must protect. For example, mediators avoid conflicts of interest at all costs, but a military leader will never be able to avoid conflicts of interest, nor should they. These interests include commander’s intent, maintaining good order and discipline, and when appropriate, ensuring orders or directions are followed. For that reason, we will transition from formal mediation to the role of a **facilitator**.

A leader has the unique ability to determine the merit of allowing the parties to retain responsibility for resolution outcome. A trained facilitator (in the organization) can assist with this process by helping the parties understand underlying interests instead of simply focusing on positions. In essence, the facilitator helps the parties use negotiation skills to resolve their conflict. Often, problem solving from a positional basis (what someone wants) can lead to one party or the other using legitimate or even illegitimate power in an attempt to resolve the conflict in their favor. A skilled facilitator can help the parties recognize biases, see blind spots, and communicate openly to uncover each parties’ interests.

Interest-based problem-solving techniques are characterized by understanding why a person wants what they want. A facilitator does not ignore positions, but helps the parties dig deeper by asking a series of critical thinking questions. These questions encourage an open exchange of information as the facilitator guides the parties towards a mutually beneficial resolution. They serve as a **buffer**, ensuring both parties are heard, respected, and not judged as wrong or right.

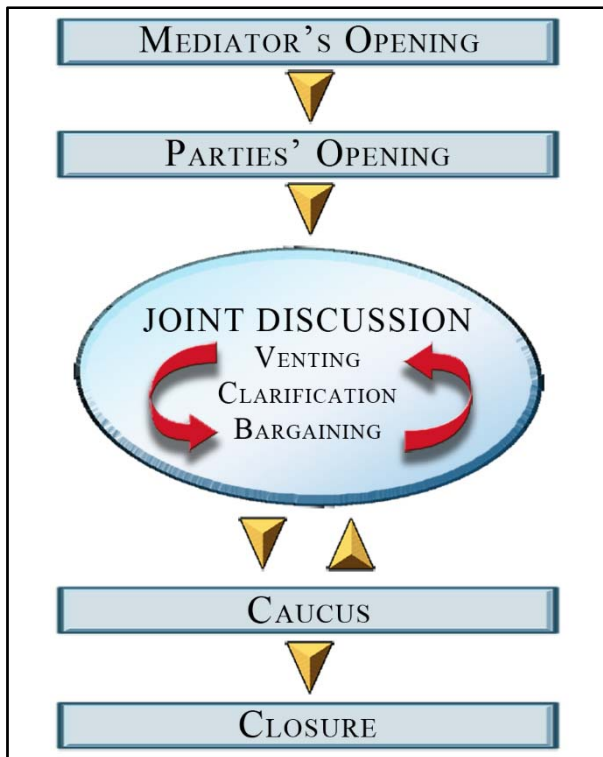


Figure 2 (Air Force Mediation Compendium, 4th Ed, 2012)

Trained facilitators use a defined process (See Figure 2) to discuss what happened in the past, but then move the discussion from what happened to a focus on the future. The facilitator, typically opens the session by setting clear ground rules that include mutual respect (no interruptions), and explains the process from beginning to end. Most facilitators encourage the parties to explain their views about the problem and have them explore ideas to best resolve the issue. As the facilitator maintains process control, a psychological movement unfolds... the parties shift from anxiety, fear, and/or distrust, to a mutual trust in the process. This takes time, but as the parties start to understand underlying biases and sense someone is actually listening, tensions often ease and the parties are usually willing to open up and discuss issues. With coaching from the facilitator, the parties typically begin to move from

speaking to the facilitator, to communicating with each other in what is called a joint session.

The key to this process is facilitators **do not impose** a solution. The goal is to help the parties explore underlying interests and guide them to a solution using active asking and active listening skills. A facilitator's power lies in process control and although they may suggest a solution or, provide some coaching, the parties need to know they do not have to accept the recommendation. In essence the facilitator may not be a true neutral, but they can maintain neutrality to the issue at hand. During the process the facilitator may speak with one party at a time, attempting to build trust and find common ground among the parties.

This private one-on-one session is called a caucus and is used to allow more direct questioning. The same direct questions in a joint session could inadvertently give the perception of favoritism. In a caucus, as the facilitator often begins to learn about underlying interests. Then they typically encourage the parties to come back together in joint session to discuss the issues, often resulting in movement toward resolution.

Facilitation skills have value for military leaders. Knowing when and how to apply these skills is the challenge. Consider how these skills could improve your ability to facilitate a dispute between two or more of your subordinates or coworkers. For example, when two people, with your support, work together to come up with a solution, the solution often has a better chance

of actually succeeding because it's their solution, not one that has been imposed on them. This is not an easy process, but with training and practice leaders gain another tool to manage conflict and reduce workplace hostilities.

Understandably, mediation/facilitation is not the answer to all military disputes. There are appropriate times to use your authority to accomplish your will as a leader. But, consider how continual use of this power approach, especially with more senior employees, can negatively impact mission accomplishment. Simply telling someone what to do may work in some situations, but other circumstances may require additional tools or methods to help parties manage conflict at the lowest level.

Our goal is to help you understand the value of learning and implementing these skills in the workplace, but also help you know when to reach out to and what to expect from a well-trained mediator. It may bring some comfort to a commander knowing that a mediator is bound to confidentiality. When appropriate, a trained mediator can assist any organization to resolve or manage conflict. One of the greatest leadership traits is to know when outside support is necessary and how that support could benefit an individual and ultimately the organization.

Finally, consider a role as a facilitator in your organization. With so much organizational conflict stemming from poor communication, employees feeling unheard, an individual with appropriate training could make a difference helping manage workplace disputes. Early intervention could dramatically improve communication and improve employee performance.

(NOTE: You can learn more about the Air Force ADR program by contacting the Air Force Negotiation Center. You may never serve as a neutral, but understanding the value of trained mediators can help you and your organization be more comfortable with and know when to ask for outside support.)

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