

# Case Study

## Managing Conflict With Mediation



InsightHR

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Mary, a team member in a busy Finance department, raised several concerns about her manager, John, accusing him of bullying behaviour at work.

Mary alleged that John set her unreasonable targets, belittled her during meetings in front of colleagues, raised his voice when reviewing her work, and was unfairly critical of her performance.

She also claimed he deliberately excluded her from team lunches and relevant emails, which she believed was intended to isolate her. Additionally, she described feeling ignored by John when greeting him in the hallway. These incidents had a profound impact on Mary's mental and emotional health, leading to sleepless nights, stress, anxiety, a loss of appetite, and relationship strain due to constant discussion of the situation at home.

John, however, denied all allegations. While he acknowledged raising performance issues with Mary — specifically relating to her attention to detail and the quality of her work — he denied any bullying behaviour. John expressed frustration over the extra time he spent correcting Mary's mistakes, which he felt was affecting his personal life, particularly his relationship with his wife, as he often had to work late.

He admitted to raising his voice once when Mary interrupted him, but claimed he apologised immediately and denied any pattern of unprofessional conduct.

He insisted his actions were aimed solely at improving her performance and denied deliberately excluding her or ignoring her.

Both parties remained firmly rooted in their positions and requested a formal investigation, each citing the toll the ongoing conflict was taking on their mental wellbeing.



"Mediation is all about collaboration and compromise. The onus is on problem solving, not apportioning blame, so you can come to a situation where these two people can continue to work together in the future."

Joe Thomson, Head of HR Services

## HR's Response

Our client, Karen, a member of the HR Team, approached Joe Thompson, Head of HR Services and a qualified mediator, for advice on handling the dispute, suggesting that she thought a workplace investigation was the most appropriate course of action. After listening to Karen's concerns and assessing the situation, Joe recommended mediation as a first step, rather than immediately initiating a formal investigation.

Joe explained that while an investigation focuses on establishing findings of fact, it is a formal process that can be time-consuming, stressful, and adversarial for everyone concerned. Although sometimes necessary, investigations rarely lead to restored relationships or improved team dynamics. In contrast, mediation provides a confidential, voluntary process that encourages both parties to engage in constructive dialogue, with the aim of understanding each other's perspectives and identifying practical steps toward resolution.

Karen offered mediation to both Mary and John. They agreed to try it as a first step, with the understanding that if it didn't lead to a resolution, a formal investigation could still be pursued.

## The Mediation Process

Once both Mary and John agreed to participate, Joe began the process by meeting with each party individually in pre-mediation sessions, providing a safe and supportive environment for them to share their concerns. These sessions helped clarify the underlying issues and allowed Joe to prepare both individuals for a joint mediation session.

Joe then arranged a joint session in a neutral space. He began by setting ground rules: confidentiality, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to resolving the issue. Each party was then invited to speak.





Mary described how John's behaviour had affected her, sharing specific incidents and explaining the emotional toll they had taken. John listened without interrupting. When it was his turn, he shared his frustrations about Mary's performance, the impact on his own workload, and the strain on his family life. While reaffirming his intention to support improvement, he acknowledged that his approach may not have helped foster a positive working relationship.

Joe facilitated the discussion, encouraging empathy and reflection. Gradually, both parties began to see how their behaviours had contributed to the breakdown in communication and trust. With Joe's guidance, they identified shared goals and discussed practical ways to improve their working relationship, including clearer performance expectations, open communication, and a more supportive environment.

## The Mediation Agreement

Once common ground was established, Joe drafted a mediation agreement capturing the commitments made during the session. This agreement was signed by both Mary and John to confirm their understanding and acceptance of the terms.

The agreement included key elements such as confidentiality — with both parties agreeing not to disclose details of the discussions — and a focus on resolution, follow-up, and accountability. The only information shared with the organisation was that the mediation had succeeded and that an agreement was in place.



## The Outcome

Four weeks after the mediation, Joe conducted a follow-up meeting with Mary and John. Both reported significant improvements. Mary felt more supported and appreciated the clearer communication around her performance. John, too, expressed satisfaction with the progress, noting that Mary's work had improved, and his approach had become more constructive.

Through mutual understanding and continued dialogue, trust was gradually rebuilt, and the need for a formal investigation was avoided. Both parties learned to address issues more collaboratively and respectfully, creating a more positive and productive working environment.

## The Learnings

Mediation played a crucial role in resolving the conflict between Mary and John. It allowed both individuals to express their concerns, acknowledge the impact of their actions, and agree on a way forward. With the support of Joe, the parties avoided a formal investigation and instead developed the tools and understanding needed to work together more effectively.

That said, mediation doesn't always work. Sometimes individuals are too entrenched in their positions to even agree to take part. In other cases, it may break down during the process. When this happens, a formal investigation is often the only remaining route — but that's another story.

In our experience, early intervention is key. Mediation can be an incredibly effective tool for resolving conflict before it escalates, but even after a workplace investigation or disciplinary process, it still has a valuable role to play in restoring working relationships. Conflict doesn't necessarily end when a decision is made — and the more proactive an employer can be in addressing it, the better the outcomes for everyone involved.

Mediation provides space to pause, reflect, talk — and move forward.

## How we can help

If you're facing challenges that seem impossible to resolve, remember – you don't have to go through it alone. Our mediation services have helped countless individuals and organisations find common ground, rebuild trust, and achieve lasting solutions.

Let us guide you towards a positive outcome with the same expertise and care that made this case study a success.

Reach out to us today and discover how we can help you turn conflict into opportunity. Your path to resolution starts with a simple conversation – contact us now to take the first step.

# Get in touch!

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