

Mediation in Academia: Practicing What We Preach

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This paper addresses the use of mediation in academia as a valuable technique for resolving conflict that exists between individuals or among groups. A model for mediation in academia that incorporates organizational development approaches and mediation strategies is discussed. The following issues are addressed: the environment of the conflict, parameters of the mediation process, identification of the client, the process of engagement, and the process of termination and follow-up.

Many human organizations are characterized by interpersonal conflict. Academia is not exempt from this phenomenon. While the major mission of colleges and universities is to teach, providing new knowledge to the public (students), the environment that this occurs in is often conflictual.

Conflict in academia is handled in many ways, from institutional faculty committees to the more recent movement toward formal external labor unions. As in other organizations, the further you move the conflict resolution process from the source of the conflict, the more formal and dehumanized the process becomes.

This paper will examine the use of mediation in academia as a valuable tool in resolving conflict that exists between individuals or among groups. There are numerous reasons for using mediation in academic settings. Among them are the preservation of academic freedom and the use of creative conflict resolution approaches. The following issues will be addressed: the environment of the conflict, parameters of the mediation process, identification of the client, the process of engagement, and the process of termination and follow-up.

An Intervention Model

A search of the literature reveals that little has been written on the use of mediation in higher education as a conflict resolution technique, except

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for articles on union-related negotiations. On the other hand, according to a study commissioned by the National Institute for Dispute Resolution, the teaching of dispute resolution within a wide variety of disciplines is rapidly expanding (Crohn, 1985).

Since institutions of higher education are as prone to conflict as all other human organizations, it is imperative that academia practice what it purports to teach in the area of conflict resolution. Although conflict in higher education takes many forms, including faculty/administration conflicts, student/faculty conflicts, student/administration conflicts, and faculty/community conflicts, this paper addresses the area of faculty/faculty conflict.

In addition, mediation in an academic setting can focus on many levels of conflict, such as individual versus individual, or as is often the case, group versus group (for example, department versus department). The process and tasks used in the proposed model work at any level of conflict.

The model developed for this intervention is a synthesis of the process consultation model discussed by Schein (1969) and the mediation approach discussed by Folberg and Taylor (1984). An outline of the model is presented in Figure 1.

Discussion of the Model

Because of the complex nature of conflict in academia, the model is intended to address two organizational components: the external administrative milieu where the faculty conflict is occurring and the internal environment of the faculty/faculty conflict. Stages One, Two, and Four address the critical activities that must occur to foster an environment in which mediation can occur. Several elements are essential, such as: (1) selection of the mediator(s), (2) the role of the mediator(s), (3) confiden-

Figure 1. A Model of Mediation in Organizations

Stage One:	Establishing contact and defining a relationship
Stage Two:	Selecting a setting and method of work
Stage Three:	Intervention A. Creating structure and trust B. Fact-finding and isolation of issues C. Creation of options and alternatives D. Negotiation and decision making E. Clarification and writing a plan F. Review and processing stage G. Implementation, review, and revision
Stage Four:	Evaluation of results and disengagement/follow-up

Source: Adapted from Schein, 1969; and Folberg and Taylor, 1984.

tiality in the mediation process, (4) a moratorium on all official actions by administration and faculty involved in mediation, and (5) a time frame for the mediation process.

A critical factor in Stage One of the model is the university administration's willingness to risk allowing the faculty to take responsibility for resolving their own conflicts. The administration must be willing to accept a broad array of solution options developed by the faculty. Solution constraints, or areas where the administration will be unable to compromise, need to be addressed early in the establishment of a contract with the administration. Since timing is a critical issue in the mediation process, it is ideal and preferable to use mediation during the initial phases of a conflict, rather than intervene in a conflict that has been ongoing for years.

During the early stages of the conflict resolution process, it is helpful to obtain sanctions from other faculty groups. If faculty senates or councils have been involved in or are aware of the conflict, it is beneficial to the mediation process to have the support of these groups. Broad faculty support for the mediation process and the mediation team helps keep the mediators neutral by making the process more public.

Stage Three is the process of mediation. Lesnik and Ehrmann (1987) suggest a comediation approach when working with multiparty disputes. This approach is invaluable when working with a diversified faculty group. Consideration should also be given to using female/male comediators to add depth to the mediation process and to address the realities of gender-based conflict. It is also helpful to select neutral institutional faculty members, as opposed to bringing individuals in from the outside. This ensures the credibility of the mediators and guarantees their availability during the disengagement and follow-up phases of mediation.

Process and Tasks

Orientation. An orientation session for all parties should be held prior to commencing mediation. The mediators will clarify their role and establish the rules of the mediation process, such as confidentiality, a moratorium on actions (grievances/administrative sanctions), time frame considerations, and so on. In this session, the faculty, not the administration, is identified as the client. This gives the mediators more credibility; an organizational consultant usually considers the administration the client. Also, a consultant from outside the institution is not as available, especially to the faculty, after the original consultation has been completed.

During the orientation session, the expectations of everyone involved in the process of mediation should be identified: the administration, the faculty, and the mediators. This is the time to clarify control issues that relate to the administration and faculty.

Individual Interviews. Following the orientation session, it is critical for the comediators to interview all individuals involved in the conflict, including faculty, staff, administrators, and students. It may be necessary to interview certain individuals more than once to clarify issues. Through joint interviews, the comediators can help each other understand the individual disputant's perceptions and help him or her begin to identify options. By understanding each individual's perspective, comediators can plant the seed of empowerment within each individual in the conflict situation.

Feedback Session. A feedback session with the faculty, staff, administrators, students—together and separately—follows individual interviews. These sessions help the parties work on options as well as group empowerment.

Negotiations and Decision Making. Next are the mechanics of negotiating an agreement between the conflicting groups. If groups are large, it is helpful to have them select representatives who will work directly with the mediators in developing an agreement. Many sessions will be necessary during this phase. It is critical, now, for the administration to remain neutral and inactive. Maintaining a balance of power between conflicting faculty groups is imperative. The degree of power balance between groups is a direct measure of the ability of the mediators to establish confidence and trust in the earlier stages of the mediation process.

Submitting the Plan to Administration. Once a negotiated agreement is developed, it should be submitted to the administration during a large group meeting, if possible. Everyone will have an opportunity to address individual or group concerns in a public setting. If the administration has made the necessary commitment to the mediation process, acceptance of the agreement plan worked out by the groups should not pose a problem. Immediate action should follow this session, or, at the very least, the administration should identify action steps that will be taken.

Follow-Up. During the follow-up stage, mediators should be available for consultation by the participants. Selecting comediators from members of the institution facilitates ongoing interaction. Continuity in the mediation process is facilitated when disputants have access to mediators after the mediation process has been completed.

Summary

Mediation in academia is a viable process for resolving conflict. It preserves the concept of academic freedom and allows for faculty empowerment in a constructive, growth-producing process for the institution. This paper suggests a model that can be used in institutions valuing these ideals.

References

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