IMAW 2026

International Mediation Awareness Week

Helping People Understand How Mediation Can Make a Difference

MEDIATION INSTITUTE

The Dispute Resolution Training and Membership Specialist



The Power of Workplace Mediation

Building healthier workplace relationships through constructive conversations, early intervention and effective conflict resolution.

Conflict is inevitable — how we respond matters



Workplace conflict is inevitable — and it can reveal where expectations, systems or relationships need attention.



Conflict itself is not always harmful; the way it is handled can support learning or allow harm to grow.



The aim is not to eliminate every disagreement. It is to respond early, fairly and constructively.

Move from “Who is the problem?” to “What is the problem AND What do they need to improve their relationship?”

Key take aways...

1	Recognise common sources and early signs of workplace conflict.
2	Understand why unresolved issues can become more complex and costly.
3	Know what workplace mediation involves — and what it does not do.
4	Identify practical opportunities for early intervention.
5	Recognise when an independent mediator may add value.

Understanding workplace conflict



Conflict is a difference in needs, expectations, perspectives, values or interests.



It may arise between colleagues, within teams, between employees and managers, or across functions.



It can be visible — disagreement, complaints or tension — or quiet: withdrawal, avoidance and reduced cooperation.



A disagreement is not automatically bullying, misconduct or a formal grievance. Context and behaviour matter.

Look beyond the incident to the relationship, work context and organisational conditions.

Where workplace conflict commonly arises

Role clarity	people are unsure who owns decisions, tasks or accountability.
Work flow	workload, competing priorities, limited resources or constant change.
Communication	assumptions, poor handovers, unclear feedback or different communication styles.
Leadership and fairness	inconsistent decisions, perceived favouritism or lack of follow-through.
Relationship dynamics	damaged trust, unresolved past issues or differences in working styles.

Escalation Pathway

1

A small issue is left unspoken, minimised or repeatedly deferred.

2

People begin to interpret actions through assumptions about intent.

3

Communication becomes defensive, indirect or avoidant.

4

Others are drawn in; positions harden and trust declines.

5

The issue shifts from the original concern to the way people have treated one another.

Delay does not make conflict disappear. It often gives the story around it, time to grow.

Early warning signs to notice



Repeated misunderstandings or the same disagreement resurfacing.



People avoiding meetings, handovers or direct conversations.



A noticeable change in cooperation, tone, participation or team morale.



Increasing complaints, email escalation or reliance on HR / Manager.



Absence, turnover intentions, reduced confidence or work quality concerns.

Early Intervention Support

1. Listen without jumping to conclusions or promising a particular outcome.
2. Clarify what happened, what impact it is having and what each person needs.
3. Check for immediate safety, health, conduct or power-imbalance concerns.
4. Agree on proportionate next steps, responsibilities and a review point.
5. Do not force direct conversation or mediation where it is unsafe or inappropriate.



"Early action works best when it is safe, fair and proportionate."

What workplace mediation is

01

- Structured, voluntary process
- Led by an impartial third party
- Confidentiality limits clearly explained

02

- Participants explain their perspectives
- Everyone hears one another
- Workable options are identified

03

- Mediator manages the process
- Participants own their decisions
- Participants own any agreement

04

- Often future-facing
- Focus on how people communicate
- Work together more effectively



A Typical Mediation: 2-Step Process

1 Assessment and preparation (intake sessions)

- Understand the issues, context, suitability and any risks.
- Explain the process, clarify expectations and identify any support needs.
- Hear each participant's perspective and prepare them for the joint session, including any relevant strategies that may assist them to manage their stress on the day.

2 Joint conversation and follow-up (joint session)

- Explore their concerns, impact, needs and explore possible ways forward. Ensure that they each feel heard and have spoken about their individual impacts and provide any examples (if any).
- Includes private session break (approximately 10 minutes each) and this allows for a reset, reflection and explore any proposals they are seeking.
- Capture any agreed outcomes that they both commit to and get both parties to sign it.
- Check progress by following up with their Manager.

Mediation: its strengths and its limitations

What it can do

✓ improve understanding, support communication, clarify expectations and help participants develop practical agreements.

✓ provide a structured space to address issues that have become difficult to discuss directly.

Limits and cautions

✗ determine the truth of contested allegations, impose a disciplinary outcome or replace a formal investigation.

May not be suitable where there is a significant power imbalance, coercion, serious misconduct, safety risk or a need for formal fact-finding.

Mediation is a good option, but not the answer to every problem!

What the findings tell us

1 in 2

surveyed Australian workers reported being bullied, harassed or exposed to conflict or inappropriate behaviour.

SOURCE
Australian Workers' Union survey of 1,200+ workers (Oct 2023)

14,290

disputes settled without arbitration with Fair Work Commission support in 2023–24 (a record 40,188 applications).

SOURCE
Fair Work Commission, President's statement on 2023–24 (Aug 2024)

$58,615

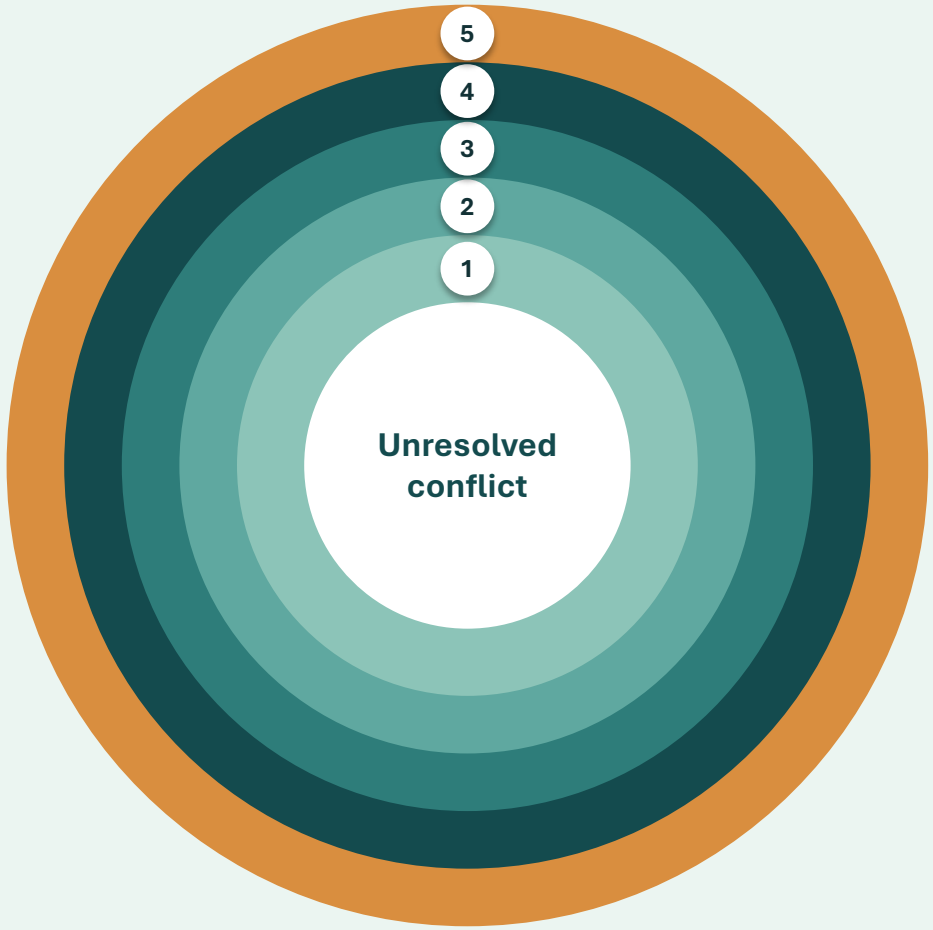
median compensation per serious work-related mental health claim, vs $15,743 across all injury claims (2020–21)

SOURCE
Safe Work Australia, Psychological health and safety in the workplace (Feb 2024)

Conflict is common, AND costly when it escalates SO early intervention is best to manage workplace conflict

Figures are drawn from the published sources shown; check each against the original before external use. The AWU figure comes from a union-commissioned survey, not a nationally representative sample. The 14,290 figure counts award, enterprise agreement and dismissal disputes settled without arbitration, not a mediation-only success rate. The $58,615 figure covers all work-related mental health claims, not conflict alone; harassment and bullying was the leading cause (27.5% of claims, 2021–22).

The hidden cost of workplace conflict



1 Time
Managers and HR repeatedly responding to the same issue.

2 Productivity
Distraction, rework, delayed decisions and reduced collaboration.

3 People
Stress, disengagement, absence, turnover and loss of confidence.

4 Culture
Teams become cautious, divided or reluctant to raise concerns.

5 Risk
Unresolved psychosocial hazards and breakdowns in complaint or performance processes.

The longer conflict stays unresolved, the further its impact spreads. Early intervention stops the ripple at the centre.

Why early intervention matters

- It creates a chance to address concerns before positions become entrenched.
- It can prevent avoidable misunderstandings from becoming relationship breakdowns.
- It helps leaders identify whether the issue is interpersonal, systemic — or both.
- It supports fair, timely and proportionate responses.
- It helps organisations learn from recurring patterns rather than treating every incident in isolation.

Address the immediate issue — and examine the conditions that allowed it to arise.

Illustrative case study 1: the handover breakdown

The issue	The dynamic	The conversation	The outcome
• Two experienced colleagues disagree about incomplete handovers and who is responsible for follow-up.	• Each believes the other is careless; communication becomes brief and defensive.	• A facilitated conversation separates observable events from assumptions and clarifies the impact on each person.	• They agree on a handover checklist, a clear escalation point and a short review after four weeks.



Learning: clarify the work process as well as improve the relationship.

Illustrative case study 2: a strained team

Context	A team experiences tension after a restructure, with uncertainty about roles and decision-making.
Impact	Several employees feel unheard; the manager feels undermined and increasingly isolated.
Facilitated response	A facilitated group discussion surfaces common concerns and separates shared issues from individual matters.
Follow-up	The organisation follows up with clearer role expectations, regular team check-ins and an agreed way to raise concerns.



Learning: work design and leadership context may need attention too.

What the case studies remind us

1. Start with curiosity: what is each person experiencing, and what is the work impact?
2. Distinguish facts, interpretations and assumptions.
3. Consider whether the problem sits in the relationship, the system or both.
4. Choose a response that is safe, fair and proportionate.
5. Follow through — agreements need ownership and review.

A Checklist: When to engage an independent mediator

- Direct conversations have been attempted but have not resolved the issue.
- People are avoiding one another or communication has become unproductive.
- A manager or HR team needs an impartial process to support a constructive conversation.
- A group needs help addressing tension, rebuilding working arrangements or agreeing team norms.
- Early support may be valuable before a formal grievance or relationship breakdown affects health and wellbeing.



Preparing for an effective intervention



Describe the concern in neutral, behaviour-based terms.



Be clear about the desired outcome and what is within the organisation's control.



Share relevant context while protecting privacy and limiting unnecessary disclosure.



Consider support people, accessibility, cultural needs and any power or safety concerns.



Plan how commitments will be supported, monitored and reviewed.

The shift that makes the difference

From “How do we manage this disagreement?”

to

“What needs to happen so people can work together more constructively?”

Conflict handled well can become a starting point for clarity, learning and stronger working relationships.

Questions and discussion

? What makes it difficult for people to raise concerns early?

? Where does conflict recur — and what might that tell you about the system?

? What is one practical step you could take to address an issue sooner?

Thank you | NorthStar Workplace Solutions

A note on application

This webinar is general information and does not constitute legal advice or an assessment of a specific workplace.

Respond in line with applicable WHS duties, employment obligations, policies and regulator guidance in your jurisdiction.

Where there are allegations of serious misconduct, bullying, harassment, discrimination, violence or immediate safety concerns, obtain appropriate advice and consider formal processes.

Mediation should only be used where an impartial suitability assessment indicates it is appropriate and safe.