

Mediation as a tool for Conflict Management in Organizations
Presentation at the EMNI Conference 2013 in Bratislava
Dr. Stephan Proksch, MAS

There are many „popular errors“ about conflicts in organizations. For example: Conflicts can be solved by decisions. Or: If there is a conflict, somebody is to blame. Or: conflicts should be avoided.

Those are reasons, why many organizations do not know how to productively handle conflict. The consequence is that conflicts escalate and produce a huge amount of cost (on the people side, on the financial side) to the organization.

In an Austrian Study of 2004 we found that there are four basic forms of how conflicts can be handled:

- Separating forms (e.g. to lay off somebody)
- Integrating forms (e.g. to mediate)
- Issue-related forms (e.g. to do an analysis)
- Person-related forms (e.g. to offer coaching)

Unfortunately, in many cases the conflicts are handled the wrong way. Some Managers have a tendency to use separating forms, some tend to use issue-related forms or person-related forms. There are only very few managers who use integrating forms. So the use of the different methods is not balanced. If a conflict is handled the wrong way, it becomes very costly to the organization.

Therefore the first thing managers should do in conflicts is to analyse and decide which form of conflict management should be used.

The reason why integrating forms are rarely used are:

- Cost (Time, Money)
- Fear of conflict
- Loss of power and control
- Fear of uncovering hidden matters
- Loss of image among peers and colleagues
- Lack of know-how in dealing with conflicts
- Missing conflict culture

Most of these reasons are grounded in a lack of understanding that conflicts are not only negative but also positive and can be used productively.

If we look at the integrating forms of conflict management, we find that there are a number of different methods:

- Coaching
- Facilitation
- Supervision
- Team Development
- Mediation

Each of these methods has strengths and weaknesses and can therefore not be used in any situation. You will find more about these methods and how they are used in my book: „Konfliktmanagement in Unternehmen. Mediation als Instrument für Konflikt- und Kooperationsmanagement am Arbeitsplatz.“; Springer Verlag, Heidelberg 2010.