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Roger John Seaman

Abstract

It appears to be commonly claimed by workplace mediators that they are 'neutral', that is, they do not influence parties' decisions but merely help them to find their own solutions to a conflict. This is problematic if, beneath a cloak of an illusory neutrality, mediators unwittingly contain and manage conflicts to meet overarching needs for organizational efficiency. A closer scrutiny of workplace mediation, both theoretical and practical, reveals mediators to be very influential in ways that are often obscure, being hidden within naturalised and dominant discursive patterns of contemporary organizational life.

Issues of confidentiality and political sensitivity precluded access to actual mediation sessions. Therefore, a video recording of three experienced workplace mediators conducting role-play mediations was used. By studying mediators' spoken interventions it was possible to assess the 'subject positions' they maintained and enacted. Whilst the mediators facilitated reflection by the parties upon their conflict, strong tendencies to manage resolution or reconciliation were observed. Follow up discussions with the participating mediators revealed a reluctance to acknowledge this finding. For them, workplace mediation was best conceptualised as a path to more efficient working behaviours via the mediated resolution of conflict. In sum, founding values of mediation, concerned to support movement towards dialogue, had been supplanted by an instrumental application inside the workplace.

Building on a critique that posits workplace mediators acting as proxy managers, an alternative, counterfactual, style of mediating is proposed that may help to partially free mediation practice from colonizing organizational pressures. Resting upon an understanding of the social construction of the 'self', this alternative style suggests that mediators bring a compassionate humility to their practice to support parties in an *exploration* of a conflict and an *understanding* of their part in it. As far as possible, goals of resolution or reconciliation are eschewed by such mediators, though probably and understandably not by the parties. In this way a conflict may be opened up to a sense of the radical contingency of social relations, in which both the politics and our fantasies of the social are sometimes revealed.