

Resolving the conflict within becoming your own mediator

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Acas Chief Executive Susan Clews has worked in Acas frontline operations and as Director of Strategy and Chief Operations Officer.

The last thing any of us needs is someone telling us that we are not good enough or could be doing better at work. But what if the voice comes from inside our own head?

Wellbeing is at the top of most workplace agendas and rightly so as the pandemic is as much a mental as a physical health challenge. As we all adapt to new working patterns and search for positive coping strategies, what can Acas's expertise in resolving conflict teach us about the internal conflict many of us are dealing with now?

Stepping back from the conflict

I read an interesting [article in The Guardian](#) the other day which likened self-criticism to a dialogue between 2 aspects of the self. A psychotherapist working in the NHS, Toby Bell, suggested that "By seeing it as a relationship, you can step out of it and relate to the conflict in a different way."

At Acas, we are experts in conflict prevention and conflict resolution. [Our new research on the economic impact of Acas services](#) shows that our [dispute resolution services](#) alone benefited the economy by £286 million in the last financial year (April 2018 to March 2019).

Part of what makes our dispute resolution work so successful – in conciliation, arbitration or mediation – is that our advisers get both parties to see the other person's point of view, and start to see beyond firm positions and towards interests and motivations. It's an approach worth trying on those negative voices. Have I really been doing so badly, and do I need to hear this right now?

Be the facilitator, not the judge

As well as objectivity, a core Acas principle is impartiality. We don't judge. And nor, do I think, should people be quick to judge themselves in the current environment. Applying value-ridden labels about what personal choices are good or bad is not always helpful. We are being pulled in so many directions at the moment. We're trying to support ourselves, our family and loved ones ? and keep working. Not to mention home schooling and helping to shield the most vulnerable.

The real skill of a good mediator is to hear the individual stories and to get these to be heard by both sides. Once you introduce the personal voice, nuances come out, emotions are conveyed in their true rather than their distorted form and roads to resolution can be found.

Train your internal mediator

Over the decades, Acas has been approached to offer advice on resolving all kinds of conflict – everything from civil wars to high-profile squabbles between celebrities.

There is some sense in this, as the core principles of effective conflict resolution apply pretty broadly:

- the earlier you intervene the better
- representatives can be a great aid
- alternative ways of resolving disputes are nearly always worth a try

My tip for coping in these very challenging times is to train your own internal mediator. It is unrealistic to expect to completely silence your inner critic – but you can, as Bell did, train up another voice to counter it. And if that doesn't work, maybe just put it on mute for a while? But, as with mediation, the ultimate aim is to maintain an ongoing equilibrium.

Monday 18 January has been labelled by some as Blue Monday – supposedly the most depressing day of the year, so hardly something to celebrate! But it might act as a further reminder that we need to concentrate on the important things in life right now. Like turning up the volume on the voice that tells us to manage our own wellbeing as best we can and reach out to those around us who are most in need of help. As Acas's head of mental health and wellbeing, Françoise Woolley, said in a [recent article in Personnel Today](#) "Give permission to be kind to yourselves, permission to be at peace with your worries and anxieties."