



Ashley Kate
HR & Finance

HR Director Boardroom Summary

March 2026

Chaired by

EVERSHEDS
SUTHERLAND



Speakers:



Vanessa Kelly

Partner
Eversheds Sutherland



Victoria Currey

HR, Change Director &
Workplace Mediator
Two Magpies

Discussing the topic:

*'Leveraging Workplace Mediation to
Resolve Conflict and Strengthen
Relationships'*

Setting the Scene

This session explored how the landscape of workplace conflict is rapidly shifting – fuelled by cultural expectations, increasing legal change, and technological influences such as AI. The discussion focused on how organisations can use mediation proactively to reduce legal risk, protect relationships, and strengthen trust across the workforce.

Delegates shared experiences of entrenched disputes, growing employee assertiveness, and increasing pressure on HR to address issues earlier, more transparently, and with greater psychological sensitivity.

This session was led by Chloe Themistocleous, Partner at Eversheds Sutherland, and Victoria Currey, accredited workplace mediator and senior HR leader. Chloe is a highly experienced employment lawyer with a strong UK-wide tribunal practice, extensive litigation expertise, and a significant track record advising organisations on complex employee relations matters. Victoria brings deep global experience in conflict resolution, HR transformation and employee relations, with a strong record of resolving complex disputes and partnering with senior leaders to drive culture and performance.

Key Points Explored

The Changing Shape of Workplace Conflict

- Rising employee empowerment and shifting legislation have moved control away from organisations and towards individuals.
- HR leaders agreed that traditional tools, such as grievances, performance processes, and formal investigations, are becoming slower, riskier, and more adversarial.
- Culture, communication and early intervention are now essential conflict-prevention levers.

Why Mediation is Becoming a Critical Capability

Victoria emphasised that unresolved psychological and emotional needs (esteem, belonging, trust, purpose) sit at the heart of most conflict, not the issues presented on paper.

Mediation can:

- Repair relationships in ways grievances rarely can.
- Surface underlying interests, not just positions.
- Create a safe, confidential environment where accountability is shared.
- Enable employees to feel heard, valued, and respected – even when outcomes cannot fully meet expectations.

Real-world examples illustrated how entrenched disputes often collapse when deeper needs and motivations are explored.

Where Pain Points Currently Are

Entrenched conflict loops

- Employees and managers often reach a point where “winning” becomes more important than resolution.
- Lengthy processes, legal involvement and AI-generated documents can escalate and distort situations.

Lack of trust in HR as a neutral party

- Many employees view internal HR as aligned to business interests, reducing their openness.
- External, independent mediators often build trust more quickly.

Late-stage mediation is often too late

- By the time a case reaches a judicial or ADR mediation route, positions are fixed, costs are high, and emotions are inflamed.

Actions and Insights

Use Mediation Earlier

- Delegates agreed that mediation should be a first-line intervention, not the final option.
- Early neutral conversations prevent “small fires” from becoming organisational wildfires.

Equip HR Teams with Mediation Skills

- While full accreditation isn’t always necessary, practical mediation-skills training helps HR manage low-level disputes before they escalate.
- Important distinction: HR should not be the mediator for complex issues - impartiality is key.

Invest in Psychological Safety

- Confidentiality, fairness and space for honest dialogue are crucial.
- Mediators must control the emotional temperature, pace the process, and manage breaks carefully.
- Flexibility, not rigid adherence to a model, is what makes for successful outcomes.

Use Mediation to Strengthen Culture

- Mediation can help re-establish team trust, address passive-aggressive behaviours, and break long-standing patterns of avoidance.
- Group mediation is especially effective where team dynamics have deteriorated.

Generational, Cultural & Cross-Border Considerations

Participants highlighted:

- Corporate teams tend to have quieter “grumbling” cultures that can explode without warning.
- Cross-country conflicts often stem from cultural expectations, not performance issues.
- Younger generations expect transparency, feedback, and agency - making early intervention essential.

Legal Update: Why Mediation Matters More Than Ever

Chloe provided a clear message:

The Employment Rights Act changes represent the biggest shift in a decade, and risk is significantly increasing.

Key changes impacting conflict management:

- Unfair dismissal cap removed from 2027 - claims could become far more expensive.
- Qualifying period reduced to six months - more employees eligible to claim.
- Tribunals are already at breaking point, with cases often taking 2–3 years to conclude.
- Trade union access and recognition rules expanding, increasing workforce activism.
- AI is escalating dispute volume and complexity, with lengthy AI-generated grievances becoming common.

Practical implication:

If organisations do not strengthen early, human-centred conflict resolution routes, they will face increasing litigation, higher costs, and greater employee disengagement.

Using Insight and Mediation to Drive Targeted Action

Participants agreed the most successful organisations will:

- Recognise that grievances rarely fix relationships.
- Invest in preventative measures and early resolution routes.
- Support leaders to recognise emotional triggers and act quickly.
- Provide employees with multiple routes to raise concerns safely.
- Use mediation outcomes to inform training, leadership development and organisational design.

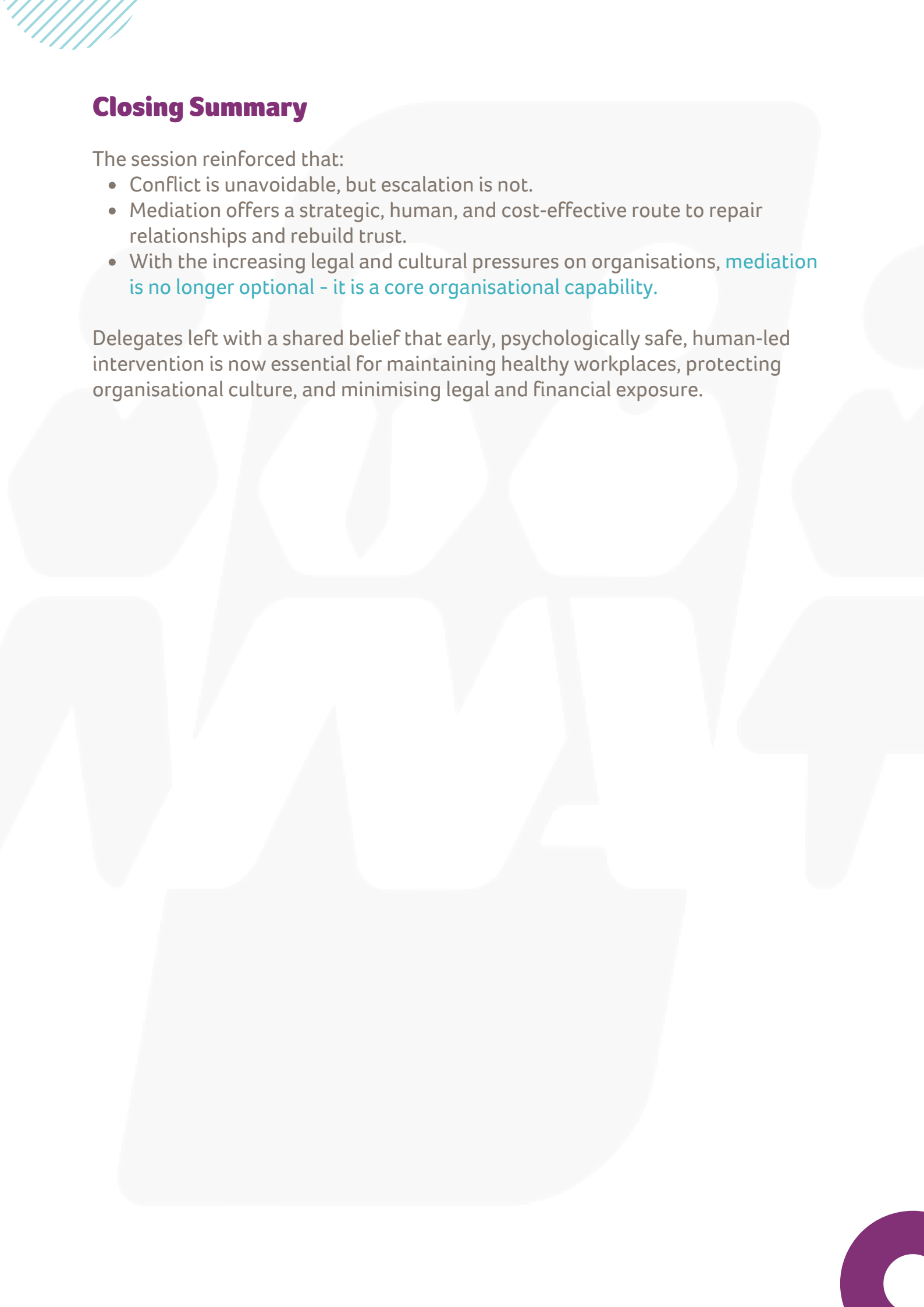


Closing Summary

The session reinforced that:

- Conflict is unavoidable, but escalation is not.
- Mediation offers a strategic, human, and cost-effective route to repair relationships and rebuild trust.
- With the increasing legal and cultural pressures on organisations, **mediation is no longer optional - it is a core organisational capability.**

Delegates left with a shared belief that early, psychologically safe, human-led intervention is now essential for maintaining healthy workplaces, protecting organisational culture, and minimising legal and financial exposure.





Ashley Kate

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