UPSTREAM EFFECTS FROM MEDIATION OF WORKPLACE DISPUTES: SOME PRELIMINARY EVIDENCE FROM THE USPS

By Jonathan F. Anderson and Lisa Bingham

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In depth, in person participant interviews with 42 U.S. Postal Service employees in three Florida cities were conducted 18 months after the inception of a pilot mediation program for employment disputes at the USPS. Ninety-two percent of supervisors and 41% of employees experienced recognition of the other's perspective. Over two-thirds of all participants felt increased empowerment over their situation. There is evidence that mediation is having a transformative effect on participants, particularly those who participate in mediation more than once, and particularly supervisors. This preliminary evidence demonstrated positive upstream effects of the pilot program, which has since been expanded to 27 cities.

INTRODUCTION

Many commentators endorse mediation as a superior method for resolving employment disputes. There is a growing body of literature on employer dispute resolution programs (i.e., Bedman, 1995; Bowers, M., Seeber, R. L., and Stallworth, L. E., 1982; Conti, 1985; McDermott, 1995; Sherman, 1995; Singletary, Shearer, and Kuligofski 1995), and on agency experiments with mediating discrimination complaints (Daus, 1995; Bingham and Wise, 1995; Bingham, 1997). But what do we know about the effect of such programs on the conflict management skills of participants? Does mediation change the way the disputants view each other? Can it contribute to enhanced conflict resolution by the parties themselves?

Researchers have examined workplace mediation in the context of grievances in a collective bargaining relationship (Brett and Goldberg, 1983; Ury, Brett and Goldberg, 1988), and found that the parties were highly satisfied with the process as an alternative to a more adjudicative process such as traditional grievance arbitration. Most of the literature on grievance mediation concerns the context of labor-management disputes, that is, grievances alleging a violation of a collective bargaining agreement (e.g. House, 1992; McPherson, 1956; Roberts, Wolters, Holley, and Feild, 1990; Silberman, 1989; Skratek, 1987a, 1987b, 1990; for a more comprehensive review of this literature, see Feuille, 1992; and Feuille and Kolb, Mediation of Workplace Disputes
1994). Context can shape procedures and their results (Kolb, 1989). These reports
contain anecdotal accounts of constructive results such as enhanced conflict resolu-
tion skills gained by the participants (House, 1992; Quinn, Rosenbaum, and
McPherson, 1990). More generally, research on employee voice in organizations has
found positive effects when employees have an opportunity to voice concerns and
managers to explain decisions (Bies, 1987; Folger, 1977; Sitkin and Bies, 1993, and
see generally Sheppard, Lewicki, and Minton, 1992).

Recently, some organizations have adopted mediation programs for workplace
disputes arising outside the collective bargaining agreement (e.g., Bedman, 1995;
Bingham, 1997). Commentators emphasize the potential for non-adjudicative
processes to improve relationships at the workplace (e.g., Daus, 1995; Rowe, 1981,
1990a, 1990b; Winograd, 1995). Outside the employment arena, joint problem-
solving by the disputants was related to complainant perceptions of improved
relations with the other party in community mediation (Pruitt, Peirce, McGilli-
cuddy, Welton, and Castrianno, 1993).

A central finding in all our analyses is that those who have
more experience with mediation value the process more and experi-
ence its benefits more.

Scholars who have reviewed the empirical literature on mediation observe that
there has been relatively little work done on one particular category of outcomes
for the participants: the effect of mediation on their relationship and perceptions of
each other. Wall and Lynn (1993, p. 176-177) observe that some evidence from
community justice centers, divorce mediation, and international conflict suggests
that mediation seldom alters the long-run climate for conflict, but they cite no
evidence in the employment arena. Instead, they feel the link between mediation
outcomes and the post-dispute climate or working relationship is an open issue
warranting further research (see also, Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992, p. 241;

The exploratory research reported here is an effort to begin to fill this gap.
Undertaken 18 months after the USPS implemented the pilot program, it was in
part stimulated by Bush and Folger’s (1994) groundbreaking new work on media-
tion theory. These experienced mediators and scholars opened a much needed
dialogue within the dispute resolution community. In a normative and prescriptive
work directed to practitioners, they argued that mediation can reach its greatest
potential if practiced as transformative mediation. Transformative mediation
centers on providing opportunities for personal empowerment for participants, and
on enabling participants to give and receive recognition of the other’s needs,
concerns, perceptions and interests. Bush and Folger argue this form of mediation
is qualitatively different from problem-solving mediation (related to interest-based
or principled negotiation, see Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1991), the dominant para-
digm in the dispute resolution movement. Their chief critique of problem-solving
mediation is that it leads the mediator down the path of judging the fair, correct, or
best outcome for the participants, and directs them toward that goal in order to
satisfy them (the ‘satisfaction story’). Bush and Folger theorize that transformative
mediation also engenders participant satisfaction, but only as a byproduct of
empowerment and recognition, not as an end in itself.

Empirical research on participants’ perceptions of dispute resolution processes
indirectly supports this approach. The literature of procedural justice predicts that
participants will be more satisfied with the outcome of a process if they believe the process is fair (Lind and Tyler, 1988). They will more likely believe a process is fair if they have an opportunity to participate in the process, if they have more control over the process, and if they feel they are treated with respect; these procedural justice effects are independent from the objective economic outcome of the process (Lind, et al., 1990). This may be a function of group value theory, that is, people’s concern with belonging to and recognition in a group (Lind and Earley, 1992). Procedural fairness may be a decision heuristic or short cut that participants use in deciding whether or not to accept a particular outcome or obey an authority (Lind, et al., 1993).

Building on Bush and Folger’s theory, we ask first whether participants actually experience recognition and empowerment in mediation, and we hypothesize that if they do, their approach to future conflict should be transformed. They will be more likely to listen and hear both sides of dispute stories. They will feel less defensive and more likely to believe they can resolve their own problems. If individuals are transformed by the mediation experience there should be an ‘upstream’ effect on the grievance resolution system, and individuals will approach and handle future conflict differently as a result of the recognition and empowerment they experienced. This research examines first, whether individuals actually experience such empowerment and recognition in mediation, and secondly, whether the participants believe these experiences are affecting their subsequent approaches to conflict.

**STUDY METHODS**

The United States Postal Service (USPS) implemented the REDRESS program (Resolve Employment Disputes Reach Equitable Solutions Swiftly) in fall 1994. The program affords employees a mediation alternative to the traditional Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) complaint process. Under the traditional EEO complaint process, an employee may file an informal complaint with an EEO counselor who attempts to resolve the matter. Generally, the EEO counselor contacts the parties by telephone, and while he or she may interview the parties individually, in most cases the counselor will not conduct a joint meeting with the parties. The counselor attempts to conciliate or resolve the dispute by conveying settlement offers between the parties. If the dispute is not resolved, the employee may file a formal EEO complaint. This formal complaint triggers an investigation, and may culminate in an adjudicative hearing before the EEOC, further administrative EEOC and USPS review, and federal court litigation if earlier steps fail to resolve the dispute.

In the REDRESS program, an employee with an informal EEO complaint may request mediation of the dispute. Under a contract with the USPS, the Justice Center of Atlanta selects and supplies mediators from a list of over 70 qualified, experienced neutrals. In its recent report on Employment ADR, the General Accounting Office characterized the Justice Center as "a private, nonprofit organization recognized as one of the leading institutions in the United States for the practice and teaching of mediation" (General Accounting Office, 1997, p. 16, n. 23). The mediator meets with both complainant and respondent "on the clock," and uses interest-based techniques to attempt resolution of the dispute. If mediation does not resolve the dispute, the employee may return to the traditional EEO process; additionally, if the employee feels a mediation settlement has been breached, she or he may request arbitration.

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During the period of this study, the program was offered at three sites in northern Florida: Pensacola, Panama City, and Tallahassee. The Justice Center of Atlanta reported an overall settlement rate in Spring 1997 of 70%. Previous research on the program has found that both supervisors and employee complainants are highly satisfied with the mediation process, the mediators, and the outcomes of mediation in this program (Bingham, 1997). The USPS has since expanded the program, and there are currently 27 cities nationwide that offer some form of mediation for employment disputes.

This study was undertaken 18 months after the inception of the program to determine whether it was having any upstream effects, and to evaluate whether to continue or expand it. In July 1996, researchers conducted in depth interviews with 29 employees and 13 supervisors who had experienced REDRESS in the three Florida cities, concerning their perceptions of the program and how it has or has not affected their workplace and themselves. Researchers used a structured interview protocol and coded responses for subsequent analysis (See Appendix A). While some disputants may, initially, have felt reluctance to express criticism openly, personal interviews helped mitigate this tendency, and interviewees freely offered criticism as well as positive feedback. The sample of interview participants was identified through a multi-stage process. A mailing list was developed of all participants in the program for the period November 1994 through May 1996. Researchers mailed all participants (320 employees) the interview protocol and invited them to participate. This together with follow-up telephone calls produced the sample of 42 employees, which represents approximately 13% of the population. The sample is not random as only volunteers were interviewed, but it does reflect the population of participants in terms of demographics, job category, and nature of dispute. Results were similar in each of the cities visited, and cross site analyses found no significant statistical difference in responses. While data drawn from volunteers’ individual self-reporting poses a risk of bias, this study examined participants’ own perceptions and feelings about the process, not some external reality. Moreover, the morale issues at the USPS have been well documented (Baxter, 1995), and we found discussion of them to be fairly open.

CODING “RECOGNITION” AND “EMPOWERMENT”

Key to this research was whether participants “recognized” the other disputant, whether they, themselves, felt “recognized,” and whether they felt “empowered” by the mediation process. Since this was at the time one of the first efforts to measure outcomes using Bush and Folger’s theory, we needed to identify criteria for determining whether recognition or empowerment had occurred.

Bush and Folger define recognition as an event concerning one participant’s views of the other participant. It falls into the five categories: consideration of giving recognition, desire for giving recognition, and giving recognition in thought, words or action (Bush and Folger, 1994, p. 85-91). A mediator is fostering recognition when he or she helps a participant understand the motivations of the other and acknowledge those as understandable or legitimate. Similarly, a mediator is also fostering recognition when he or she creates an environment where one participant can acknowledge the other through words, for example, an apology or expression of understanding, or positive action to accommodate the other’s interests.

Once again, it is possible to develop a priori categories for participant comments about their experience in mediation that might reflect recognition. For example, consideration of giving recognition might occur when a participant

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reflects on the importance of keeping an open mind, looking at the dispute from all perspectives, or hearing the other side’s viewpoint. Desire for giving recognition might occur in a caucus, for example with participant expressions of desire to understand what motivated the other side of the dispute. Giving recognition in thought might occur when a participant was ready to acknowledge, if only to the mediator privately in caucus, that he or she understood now why the other participant acted a certain way. Giving recognition in words might occur if the participant explained to the other party that he or she understood, might include any expression of regret that the dispute escalated or that there was a misunderstanding, or might include an apology. Giving recognition in action might include compensatory conduct or payment, promises to perform an act or behave in a certain way in the future, or public apologies to more than just the other disputant.

If employees come to view mediation as a way supervisors can avoid addressing a real problem or taking needed action, it will rapidly lose the credit it has so far accumulated.

Bush and Folger define empowerment as an event where the participant learns or realizes something about him or herself and the situation. There are five categories of empowerment: as to goals, options, skills, resources, and decision-making. A mediator who helps a participant clarify what his or her goals and choices are is fostering empowerment. A mediator who helps a participant express him or herself in the process, and make choices about how he or she wants the process to proceed is also fostering empowerment.

It is also possible to develop a priori a series of categories to evaluate participants’ comments about mediation as reflecting empowerment. For example, empowerment as to goals might appear in statements showing a participant realized something new about what he or she wanted out of the mediation, which might relate to the economic outcome, the behavior of the other participant, the behavior of the organization, or the participant’s own behavior. Empowerment as to options might appear in statements showing a participant realized he or she had an alternative course of action available, which might be the participant’s best alternative to a negotiated agreement (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1991), or one of a range of other alternatives. Empowerment as to skills would probably be reflected in statements regarding the skills one uses in mediation, for example, listening, advocacy for oneself or others, problem-solving, or learning. Empowerment as to resources might occur if the participant realized there was some person outside the dispute who could provide substantive information (lawyers, counselors, family) or assistance (financial or otherwise). Empowerment as to decision-making would likely be reflected in comments regarding increased confidence in one’s own judgment, acceptance of responsibility for an outcome, or choice of alternative.

We chose to code recognition as either present or absent in two categories: where the interviewee recognizes the other participant (giving recognition), and where the other participant recognizes the interviewee (receiving recognition). Examples of interviewee responses coded as "giving recognition" include:

- "The process helped me learn what was the true, underlying issue in the employees’ mind."
- "We get to see how others perceive us."
- "I understand their position."

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"He’s a decent guy. He has a lot of pressure."

Responses coded as "receiving recognition" include
- "After all this time he was willing to listen."
- "After getting things off their chests they can see things differently."
- "They learned I was a knowledgeable person."
- "Now there’s a certain integrity. There’s a mutual respect."

We chose to code empowerment as either present or absent. Responses coded as empowerment included:
- "People feel they can talk to me now."
- "I learned I am good at this."
- "I’m starting pre-mediating."
- "They learned they can’t push me around."

RESULTS

With a single exception, all respondents had positive things to say about the REDRESS program. It is worth noting that the one respondent with a negative reaction is a repeat user of mediation. In other words, despite professing a negative attitude, the individual repeatedly and voluntarily made use of the program. **TABLE 1** reports positive, mixed or negative attitudes toward mediation by participants. Responses are divided into categories of employee or supervisor, and one-time or repeat user of mediation.

**TABLE 1 ATTITUDE TOWARD MEDIATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Supervisors</th>
<th>One-Time User</th>
<th>Repeat User</th>
<th>All Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researchers ran Chi square analyses on all variables in each table to ascertain statistical significance between various employee categories. In **TABLE 1**, no significant statistical differences were found in attitudes toward mediation between employees and supervisors or between one-time and repeat mediators.
RECOGNITION AND EMPOWERMENT

Since the purpose of this research was to evaluate the upstream or ripple effects of the REDRESS program, researchers focused on participants’ perceptions about the mediation experience and how it affected them. Specifically, we sought to discover whether they gave or received recognition and/or experienced empowerment during the mediation process and whether they felt the mediation process had affected the manner in which they deal with conflict. We were also interested whether these perceptions differed between employees and supervisors, between those who represented disputants and those who had not, between repeat and single users of mediation, and between prior users of traditional EEO and those without such experience.

**TABLE 2** examines the different responses between employees and supervisors. Almost three fourths of respondents agreed that mediation was better than the traditional EEO process. There was a decided enthusiasm for the program expressed particularly by supervisors, but also by 2/3 of regular employees.

**TABLE 2 EMPLOYEE/SUPERVISOR EFFECTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employee N=29</th>
<th>Supervisor N=13</th>
<th>Total N=42</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Said mediation better than traditional EEO</td>
<td>19 (66%)</td>
<td>12 (92%)</td>
<td>31 (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation affected how they handle conflict</td>
<td>8 (28%)</td>
<td>12 (92%)</td>
<td>20 (48%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave recognition</td>
<td>12 (41%)</td>
<td>12 (92%)</td>
<td>24 (57%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received recognition</td>
<td>18 (62%)</td>
<td>8 (62%)</td>
<td>26 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced empowerment</td>
<td>20 (69%)</td>
<td>10 (77%)</td>
<td>30 (71%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant difference between groups at the .05 level

Both employees and supervisors overwhelmingly believed mediation to be better than the traditional EEO process. However, while 92% of supervisors also asserted mediation affected how they handled conflict, only 28% of employees felt similarly, and a chi-square analysis showed this difference to be significant (chi-square = 15.074, P<.0001). Clearly, the mediation experience is perceived differently by the two groups. An illustration of how mediation affected one supervisor’s conflict management skills had to do with learning to hear an employee out, that is, listening without interruption. The supervisor reported that he had always believed he had an obligation to contradict immediately anything an aggrieved employee said that he felt was untrue; otherwise, the employee might take his silence as some sort of tacit agreement or admission. As a result, he constantly interrupted an employee’s presentation of the grievance, and every grievance

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meeting escalated into a yelling match. In mediation, he learned to listen without interruption, and to listen actively. As a result, he found that he was much better at handling disputes, and that some of them would just 'go away by themselves' if he heard the employee out. Most employees, on the other hand, reported that they had acquired conflict management skills through life experience, outside reading, or other education.

The two critical measures examined in this study are recognition and empowerment. Supervisors (92%) reported giving recognition more frequently than employees did (41%), and the difference was significant (using a 2x2 contingency table with employee or supervisor as a factor and presence or absence of giving recognition, chi-square=9.507, P<.002). While 92% of supervisors reported giving recognition to employees, we are somewhat cautious about this response, because it is subject to a distinct self-reporting bias. Managers may believe they are supposed to be objective and see both sides of an issue. Yet, it is telling that, within the mediation setting, 41% of employees also expressed an understanding of management's position.

Moreover, the fact that 62% of the employees reported that they received recognition tends to confirm supervisors' reports of giving it. The results of whether participants felt recognized or understood by the other party are especially encouraging. This question is fairly bias free. Participants have little motivation to report the other side recognized their perspective unless they actually felt it to be true. It is also significant that supervisors and employees reported receiving recognition in equal percentages (62%). Clearly, most participants in mediation feel listened to and often understood.

The empowerment question captured whether participants felt mediation provided them choices and an ability to control, to some extent, the dispute process. Over 70% of all participants felt empowerment based on increased control over their situation. Although supervisors (77%) reported empowerment more frequently than employees (69%), this difference was not statistically significant.

TABLE 3 divides the responses between those who had participated in mediation more than once as opposed to one-time users. All supervisors were repeat mediation users, as well as a number of employees and employee representatives.
TABLE 3 REPEAT VERSUS SINGLE MEDIATION EFFECTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Repeat User N=25</th>
<th>Single User N=17</th>
<th>Total N=42</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Said mediation better than traditional EEO</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation affected how they handle conflict</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>48%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gave recognition</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>57%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received recognition</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced empowerment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Significant difference between groups at the .05 level

There were significant differences between single and repeat users of mediation in response to whether mediation affected how they handled conflict and whether they gave recognition to the other participant. Repeated use of mediation tends to increase one's understanding of the process. Significantly, repeat users more frequently reported that mediation has affected their conflict style (2x2 contingency table using repeat user as a factor and presence or absence of effect on conflict style, chi-square=3.796, P<.05). The single greatest effect reported by participants was that they learned how to listen to the other party, and listening, in turn, tends to lead to giving recognition to the other participant. Repeat users were significantly more likely to report giving recognition (2x2 contingency table, chi-square=5.567, P<.02). A central finding in all our analyses is that those who have more experience with mediation value the process more and experience its benefits more. This suggests the beneficial upstream effects increase with usage of the program, and may increase over time as more employees and supervisors acquire repeated experience with the program.

TRANSFORMATIVE “UPSTREAM” EFFECTS OF MEDIATION

Our findings showed respondents were generally enthusiastic about mediation as a process. Responses indicate many interviewees experienced recognition and empowerment during mediation. Half of all respondents, including most managers, reported the process changed the way they dealt with conflict, and a significant majority (74% of all respondents and 92% of supervisors) report mediation to be better than the traditional EEO process. Supervisors commonly responded that mediation "is much better than EEO," and several expressed hope the program would be expanded nationwide. This widespread enthusiasm, particularly among supervisors, indicates the strong impact of the program.

A majority of respondents, including most supervisors (92%), in some way recognized the perspective of their co-disputant. They heard and recognized
another point of view. Supervisors often noted the process allowed them to get to "the root of the problem," or "what was really bothering" the employee.

On the other hand, even employees who did not recognize the supervisor's perspective often felt the supervisor recognized their own perspective. Some, grudgingly agreed they had been "listened to." It seemed the opportunity to vent feelings was particularly integral to recognition. Supervisors were less likely to believe employees recognized them, but still, 62% said they experienced some form of recognition. Some mentioned a growth in "mutual understanding; however, a few others stated employees "can never understand" managers' perspective.

Over 70% of both supervisors and employees experienced empowerment during mediation. Sometimes individuals expressed empowerment negatively as when an employee said management now knew they "couldn't push (him) around," or more positively as "they know now that I'm not some dumb" person. One manager proudly asserted, "I discovered I was really good at this [mediation]." Changes in feelings of recognition and empowerment allow persons to enter into conflict situations more positively. If one feels listened to (recognized), one is more likely to listen to the other side. Empowered individuals are less likely to act defensively and more likely to pursue a positive solution to conflict.

The results of this study indicate the REDRESS program positively affected both supervisors and employees. Supervisors overwhelmingly (92%) reported mediation affected how they handle conflict. They "learned how to listen," and "understood the importance of allowing employees to vent." Only 28% of employees reported mediation affected their approach to conflict resolution (perhaps the result of fewer uses per individual), yet the positive evaluation of the REDRESS program by employees demonstrates their willingness to use mediation, rather than follow the traditional EEO route. This, in itself, is a change in approach to conflict at the USPS.

It is promising that significant percentages of repeat filers and repeat mediation users say REDRESS affected how they handle conflict. It is not surprising that one-time mediation users report such effects at lower rates than repeat users. It takes repeated use to understand the mediation process, and one would expect a learning effect over time, after multiple exposures to the process. These responses strongly indicate an upstream effect of the REDRESS mediation program.

**CONCERNS OF PARTICIPANTS**

Some of these positive effects could result from the novelty of a new program. Researchers note 41% of the employees are concerned there is no enforcement of agreements. There is a provision in the process for follow-up mediation if a participant believes there has been breach of a settlement; however, employees may be reluctant to use this. If employees come to view mediation as a way supervisors can avoid addressing a real problem or taking needed action, it will rapidly lose the credit it has so far accumulated. One possibility is follow-up contact from the mediator.

Nearly half (48%) were concerned the process does not punish offenders. This, however, may indicate a lack of understanding of the mediation process. In general, the objective of mediation is not punishment for a perceived wrong. Even litigation may not achieve this objective, as individual supervisors do not pay any damages to the employee, if the employee prevails. This suggests that more attention needs to be paid to explaining to participants the object and possible outcomes of mediation.

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LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

While the previous section paints a positive picture of the REDRESS program, there are limits to this study. The most basic caution is that the study reports tendencies, not certainties. Not everyone believes mediation better than the traditional EEO process. Not everyone had a positive experience with REDRESS. Suspicions and bad feelings remain. What this study does indicate is the overall positive effect of REDRESS, which should increase over time.

Time is the second limitation. Many effects of mediation may not be evident until more employees experience the program. Change in conflict behavior is not an overnight phenomenon. Many employees expressed a "wait and see" attitude toward the program. This circumspect attitude may also contribute to a "honeymoon effect" of the program. REDRESS is still a relatively new program about which many employees expressed uncertainty, and many were reluctant to prematurely criticize the program. The newness of REDRESS may also facilitate a novelty effect. "Anything is better" than the previous process, according to some.

POSSIBLE RESPONDENT BIAS

There is a possible bias in supervisor responses because managers may self-report what they believe upper management wants to hear. They may feel mediation is viewed positively by upper management, and they should respond accordingly. Management training may also imply mediation is a desirable technique. These influences may have affected the strong positive opinion of mediation expressed by supervisors. Despite this possible influence, even a change in supervisors' discourse is beneficial for work place conflict. Talking more about conflict resolution raises the profile of conflict resolution and its importance. Additionally, since researchers heard parallel positive reports by employees, albeit at lower levels, we believe managers' reports to be generally accurate.

FUTURE RESEARCH

It takes time for a program to have a substantial effect on work place relations, and there may be a honeymoon effect with any new program. Thus, one unanswered question is whether positive views of REDRESS will persist. Another is whether non-participants see any change in work place conflict management as a result of the program. Can we measure whether employees who have never participated in mediation, and supervisors who have, are resolving their own disputes without resort to any formal dispute resolution process? There is preliminary evidence from this study that REDRESS may be teaching supervisors in particular how to be more effective in resolving conflict. This would warrant further research.

CONCLUSION

Bush and Folger (1994) argued that mediation has the potential to transform participants through empowerment and recognition. There is evidence that the REDRESS program is having such a transformative effect on participants, particularly those who participate in mediation more than once, and particularly supervisors. These participants are learning new skills for handling work place conflict. Supervisors are learning to listen, and employees are learning to articulate their concerns directly to their supervisors. Thus, the REDRESS program may be having a beneficial, transformative effect on the workplace, in addition to the practical resolution of disputes.

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**APPENDIX A**

**Protocol For Interviews on Redress**

1. What is your name and how long and in what capacities have you worked for the USPS?

2. How many times have you participated in mediation? When did mediation take place?

3. What was your role in mediation?

4. Why did you go to mediation? Did you participate voluntarily?

5. How long did the mediation take? How many hours were you there?

6. How did the process work?

7. Did you discuss issues other than the complaint itself? Was this discussion helpful or not? Why?

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8. What are your perceptions of how mediation differs from the traditional EEO complaint counseling process?
9. Did you learn anything in the mediation about yourself, the other party, and or your relationship with the other party?
10. After the mediation, on the work floor, were your perceptions of the other person in your conflict the same or different, and if different, how?
11. Can you describe how you presently go about trying to resolve conflict? What steps do you take?
12. Think about the last conflict situation you faced at work. How did you deal with it?
13. Be specific—can you outline steps you used to deal with this conflict?
14. What has contributed to your strategy for dealing with conflict? Please give examples.
15. Have you always handled conflict this way? If no, what caused you to change your approach?
16. Before you ever participated in mediation, how did you go about trying to resolve conflict?
17. Has your involvement in mediation affected the way you deal with conflict?
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