

Mediating the Four Meanings in a Message

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It is often said that listening is one of a mediator's core skills. At the same time the parties' ability to listen to each other is equally important. Where parties' communication has broken down to such an extent that they are unable to really hear what each other is saying, mediators can step in and assist them to listen more effectively.

How can they do this? Consider the following conflict that eventually made its way to mediation:

Dr Tooth asks his dental assistant Ms Smile to whether the appointments for the next day have been confirmed. She glares at him, picks up her handbag and walks out of the practice. Dr Tooth calls after her, 'Well if that is your attitude to work, then don't bother coming back.' Not long after this episode, Dr Tooth receives a letter from a lawyer acting on behalf of Ms Smile seeking compensation for unfair dismissal. Dr Tooth calls his lawyer who suggests that the parties attend mediation.

During the mediation, the parties recount their different experiences of the event that led to Ms Smile walking out of the dental practice. Their mediator encourages them to talk through their respective experiences of that interaction with a view to identifying the different meanings embedded in their communication.

Four messages in every meaning

On one level, Dr Tooth was providing Ms Smile with information that the patient appointments scheduled for the following day required confirmation. However, Ms Smile seemed to be responding to Dr Tooth's message at another level. The message to which she was reacting was something along the lines of: 'You are lazy, disorganised and incompetent.' But that is not what Dr Tooth said. Or is it?

German psychologist Friedemann Schulz von Thun has spent much of his life delving into the intricacies of interpersonal communication and helping people master the art of communicating with one another. In the course of his work, he has found that messages contain four different meanings. Let's look at what these meanings might be from Dr Tooth's perspective (knowing that Ms Smile may legitimately offer a different view that requires exploration at the mediation table).

Factual meaning. One of the four meanings contains factual data such as Dr Tooth's information that the patient appointments need to be checked. The factual message is usually gleaned from the words of the person sending the message.

Self-disclosure meaning. Another meaning contains information about the person sending it — what is important to them or what they might be experiencing or feeling. For example, Dr Tooth could be communicating that he is anxious about the number of no-shows in the practice recently. Self-disclosure information can be revealed by non-verbal aspects of communication such as the tone of the sender's voice (vocal), body language and eye contact (visual). It can be gleaned not only from what is said, but also from what is not said—the little things that we choose to include (or not include) in our message.

Relationship meaning. Yet another meaning communicates how the sender of the message — here Dr Tooth — feels about the receiver — in this case Ms Smile — and views the nature of the relationship between them. Here, for example, Dr Tooth may doubt Ms Smile's commitment to the job and experience ambivalence in her attitude towards him as her supervisor. Receivers can be particularly sensitive to this aspect of the message and react strongly to it. Here Ms Smile is reacting to the relationship aspect of the message as she interprets it: namely, that Dr Tooth is unhappy with her work and that he thinks she is disorganised and perhaps even lazy. Relationship meanings are often sent through subliminal vocal and visual communication channels.

Request. Messages also contain a request (either explicit or implicit) to do, or desist from doing, to think or to feel something. This is the final and fourth meaning in a message. For example, Dr Tooth's implicit request might be, 'I would like you to organise your day so that you can confirm patient appointments as a matter of course and without me reminding you.'

What this means is that every time each one of us communicates, we are sending out many messages, some consciously and others subconsciously, some explicitly and some implicitly. Not only that, the person we are communicating with may pick up a different meaning than we intend to send, but one that is just as real. Dr Tooth may have intended to send the factual message indicated above; however Ms Smile may have heard something quite different.

So how can we as mediators help parties deal with their crossed messages?

Tips for mediators

The following points may be helpful for mediators wanting to make use of the '4-meanings-in-a-message' model.

- It is essential first to get a sense of the parties' behavioural tendencies. Notice the parties' communication patterns from the first moment you engage with them.
- Become aware of the meanings in messages that each party tends to hear first. Do they have a strong relationship ear, picking up on what the message seems to indicate about them, or what the other person thinks about them? Alternatively they might focus on what they think the message says about the other person, for example, that Dr Tooth seems anxious about the practice. Then again, they might have a strong factual ear, tuning into the information and data with a tendency to miss the rest? Or does their request ear dominate, so that they feel overwhelmed with the burden of being expected to fulfill endless requests?
- Assist parties to become aware of the communication messages they might be missing. Make use of reframing techniques to identify different meanings in parties' messages; ask parties to summarise and reframe themselves; encourage parties to engage directly with each other to explore the different meanings in their respective messages.

Once parties begin to make this shift and recognise different meanings in a message, it becomes easier for them to negotiate directly with each other and begin to move forward towards resolution.