

Thoughts on Direct and Indirect Communication

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I have in previous posts referred to the distinction between direct and indirect forms of communication. Mediators will certainly have encountered these forms of communication before. Without seeking to offer a comprehensive or technical definition of what direct and indirect communication is, I would like to share some thoughts on this topic.

First, it is important to be clear that both forms of communication seek to convey the same message. The message could simply be "This deal is not a good one" or "I am hurt". Those that engage in direct communication will simply say what they mean. Those who engage in indirect communication will find some other way to convey this message that requires the listener to read between the lines. This could even be expressed as a metaphor. This usually leads to the unfortunate perception of indirect communicators as "shifty", "evasive" and "unwilling to communicate". On the other hand, direct communicators are perceived as "insensitive", "abrasive" and "brash". Of course, these labels are attributed by those who have a preference for the other style of communication.

Secondly, it is important to realise that direct and indirect communication is not a digital either-or distinction. Instead, it is an analog distinction that traverses a continuum. Put another way, it is not useful or easy to say whether any piece of communication is "direct" or "indirect". One can more usefully say that one piece of communication is more direct or more indirect than another piece of communication.

Thirdly, accepting this second point above will affect how we think about our communication styles. While there are "tests" or survey instruments that one can take to determine whether one is a direct or indirect communicator, it is probably more useful to think of these as indicators of one's communication style preferences. Further, instead of being a single point on the direct-indirect communication continuum, our communication style preference is more of a range within this continuum. Put another way, our communication style preference is a continuum within a continuum and for some, their range could be greater or narrower than someone else's.

This was illustrated starkly in a series of inter-cultural mediator trainings conducted by the International Mediation Institute. Part of this training involved getting participants to take sample phrases and to first identify whether they were forms of direct or indirect communication and secondly to rephrase them in a way that was the opposite of what it was identified to be. One of the learning points of this exercise was that people would perceive the same phrase differently depending on their communication style preferences. Put another way, if one was close to the indirect end of the direct-indirect continuum, even phrases that were considered indirect by those closer to the direct end of the continuum, would be considered direct. Therefore, even when a person who was closer to the direct end of the continuum restated a phrase more indirectly, it may not be heard by one on the indirect end of the continuum as being indirect.

Finally, since we can operate within a range within the direct-indirect continuum, most people exercise some discretion and choice about where within their range they will communicate. What guides this choice can be the values they have about communication (it is important to be open and direct) or the model of mediation being used (in the interests-model of mediation as practiced in many western jurisdictions, direct communication is prescribed) or the context and conditions that the mediation is being conducted in (where there is a concern about preserving the harmony of the collective and saving face of individuals, indirect communication may be prescribed).

What are the implications of these random thoughts for mediators? Consider the following permutations.

- The mediator prefers direct communication and both parties prefer indirect communication. The mediator can be perceived as being insensitive and pushy and unable to understand the nuanced complexity of the problem and relationship between the parties. The mediator perceives the parties as being unwilling to communicate and being evasive.

- The mediator prefers indirect communication and both parties prefer direct communication. The mediator can be perceived as being wishy-washy and not really getting to the point. S/he may even be seen as being ineffective. The mediator perceives the parties as being impatient and pushy.

- The mediator and one party prefers one form of communication and the other party prefers the other form of communication. Aside from the labels that may be attributed in the first two permutations, there is also the possibility that the lone party perceives the mediator as being partial and siding with the other party.

In all of these cases, it is important for mediators to be aware of the direct-indirect communication continuum. They need to be aware of what their own range is and to be able to identify (from the behaviour and language) of the parties what their range is. The mediator needs to find ways to develop their own range so that they can bridge the gap between the parties.

There are a number of ways to bridge the gap. One is for the mediator to play the role of a translator. This will usually be in relation to a piece of indirect communication as the party who is a direct communicator is not likely to "get it". Another is for the mediator to address the labels (which may be unspoken) that one party has attributed to the other party by reframing the behaviours in question. The mediator may have to reframe more direct instances of communication (whose meaning is clear but abrasive) so that the message is more palatable and not lost. Yet another is for the mediator to play the role of a coach and assist one party (preferably in private session) to communicate in a manner that better fits for the other party.

It is hoped that these thoughts and suggestions will be helpful to mediators in bridging this particular communication gap that may occur in the context of their interactions.