

Mediating for the long game

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In recent weeks, I have had the privilege of mediating and facilitating in different matters with representatives of four governments. On one occasion they were on the same "side"; on another, notionally on different sides. A common theme to emerge was the needs and behaviours of political masters who were not present.

The representatives themselves were very aware of the need to try and build good relationships with their opposite numbers. That required a degree of honesty about the political realities. I could sense that frankness was helpful as it built confidence. It also allowed reflection on what could and couldn't be done. Critically, the conversations were possible because of the framework of confidentiality which prevailed. And we ate together, which always helps to break the ice.

A good deal of time was spent thinking about "victory speeches". What were the needs of those outside the room? How could they be addressed? What could be said that would help get any agreements over the line? Paradoxically, of course, the representatives needed to work together to achieve outcomes that would be deliverable. In a sense, they had more in common in this task than they had with their constituents outside the room.

Such cooperation on matters of process builds the kind of goodwill that feeds into substance. Trust is built and understanding enhanced. Us and them becomes "us" for the purpose of the negotiation. There is nothing unusual in this. Sophisticated negotiation often requires this kind of collaboration. That's where the input of the mediator can be vital to create and sustain the safe space for this to occur, especially when the going gets tough.

The prize is worth the effort, as it was in the matters of which I was part, as those involved made real breakthroughs in the course of a day, avoiding or ending months or even years of deadlock. Often, of course, there would be more work to be done over the months ahead. An important component therefore is agreeing some sort of protocol for future engagement, both in terms of communication and substantive topics.

Equally, it can be important to commit to meeting again, out of the ordinary run of the mill, in order to reflect on progress, address any regression and be accountable both for what has worked well and for that which can be improved. This can be the difficult part as there is a tendency to think it will now all work out fine and that one such engagement should be sufficient. Mediators and facilitators, therefore, have also to be able to encourage a long game, just as much as taking pleasure from the quick fix and instant gratification of "settlement" on the day.