

Mediation: a cricketing metaphor

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Recently, I was ruminating about analogies between cricket and mediation. Cricket is a much-loved sport in Scotland. Sadly, nowadays, changes in the climate mean that cricket in my home country is more often affected by summer rain and damp conditions than a generation ago. Its future is less certain as a result. I have always been a cricket fan. Ever since England played the West Indies in 1969, and the great Gary Sobers was still in his prime. When I was in my early teens, I was coached by a kind, talented West Indian professional called Noel Robinson. He played a few seasons for my home cricket club, Stirling County. I learned to bat properly. My cover drive had such a flourish that, in my first year at university, I was selected high up the batting order for the first XI after impressing at practice in the nets. It did not take long, however, for my fear of really fast bowling to be exposed. The 2nd XI soon beckoned.

But it was in defensive play that I excelled, both on the front foot and the back. I practised for hours. I could bat for ages. My schoolmates would be frustrated as I ground away in those 20 over games, collecting singles and accumulating runs at a snail's pace. 39 not out seemed to be my badge of honour. That England legend, Geoffrey Boycott, famed for persevering at the crease, was my role model.

Unlike many sports, for an individual batsman one mistake is all it takes to end participation in the game. A mistake that may result from a moment's inattention. Or a rush of blood to the head. A split second of indecision. A distracting thought. Conversely, sharpened focus, a micro-second's pause, a determination not to let the overall circumstances get in the way of giving complete attention to the next moment, blotting out an earlier near miss - all these promote longevity and continuation in the game.

For a batsman, stroke selection at the critical moment is what it is all about. I recall hearing that the distinction between an average opening batsman (the example given was one Nick Compton, who never quite established himself as an England player) and Alastair Cook (the most successful opener of all time for England) is a tiny fraction of a second. Cook takes that little bit longer before committing himself to his stroke. He takes just a little more time to process, sub-consciously, the bowler's action. That makes all the difference. How much of that is practice, how much is intuition and how much is personality, I don't know. But this does makes you think.

In mediation, we operate with a mixture of spontaneity, flair, caution and discernment. Often, how we react in the moment makes all the difference. We need to be able to take risks sometimes, or we'd never move the process on. On the other hand, over-playing our own role, letting the ego prevail, can be fatal. It's such a question of balance. Usually, of course, our errors are not decisive. The ball metaphorically drifts past the wicket into the safe hands of the wicket-keeper without nicking the bat or striking a wicket. It can be touch and go at times. We are all human, error prone. And there is that point in the afternoon when we just have to eke out whatever we can. In mediation, progress, like runs in cricket, can be slow to make.

What then sets apart a really effective mediator from the average? For me, it has to include an ability to focus on the process regardless of the outcome, an ability to operate with consummate skill in the moment, knowing that, paradoxically, this will enhance the prospect of a successful result. It has to include a willingness to practise skills, never assuming mastery, with humility about the reality of our role and its importance. I would add awareness of one's own personality and psychology, and of those triggers which might set off a chain of events leading to unhelpful loss of confidence during mediation. It's about standing back, surveying the field, viewing where the mediation players have positioned themselves, trying to work out where the opportunities lie for getting past unhelpful defences, picking the moment to drive towards a breakthrough.

And being brave enough to allow that extra momentary, fractional pause. A little more time before responding, a little more time to elicit - and hear - an answer and to process the real meaning. Concentration, even when tired at the end of a long day (remember that Alastair Cook once batted for 836 minutes in a crucial match, albeit over two days). An ability to stay engaged, to persevere, raising your performance when all seems lost and, as with so many of the best sportspeople, seeing unexpected things in one's peripheral vision that others would often miss.

A few seasons ago, my Scottish mediation business, Core Solutions, sponsored the Scotland cricket team. Our billboard carried the eye-catching slogan: "Mediation - There Are No Boundaries". That nicely summed up our adventurous hopes for what we were doing. Mature reflection might suggest that recognition of boundaries is actually necessary too. In cricket, a draw is often seen as an unsatisfactory outcome for both sides, but it can also represent a realistic equilibrium when two well-matched sides have done their best.

In mediation, a negotiated agreement may also seem unsatisfactory if your objective has been victory. However, as we know so well, the optimum result in mediation may be both parties leaving with a sense of dissatisfaction - but knowing that, with this match finally over, a whole new game can start the following day, on a new wicket with fresh opportunity and renewed optimism.