

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Mediation Moves - A Conference, a Workshop, a Movement

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Wednesday, October 24th, 2018

I would like to begin this blog with a big thank you to Prof. Dr. Ulla Glässer and the European Viadrina University of Frankfurt an der Oder in Germany (the “other” Frankfurt, the one on the German-Polish border). Thank you for the [Mediation Moves](#) international workshop and conference, which took place the first weekend of October.

What was this all about?

By way of background, it is important to know that the Viadrina is a thriving centre for mediation and conflict management research and activity in Germany. They have a long-running master’s in mediation that includes thorough practical training, their own Institute for Conflict Management, a chair in mediation, conflict management and process design in the law faculty, held by Ulla Glässer, and they are involved in mediation training for diplomats, judges, businesspeople, and the local community. The conference was an international event focusing on the many different ways mediation can “move” us, whether parties, mediators, trainers and trainees, or protagonists in society and politics. By taking a broad approach to mediation, the aim was to reflect on what it can achieve on so many different levels - from the very personal and individual to the political and global.

Please read on. There will be no more background information.

In this blog, I will write about how the preparatory workshop “moved” me, and only about the first two hours of that.

For two days prior to the conference itself, twenty invited mediators and mediation scholars from Denmark, Germany, India, Israel, The Netherlands, Poland, Singapore, Scotland, Ukraine and the USA met for a mediation workshop in a hotel in the west of Poland. The aim was to help to prepare some of the public workshops and panels for the public conference. But was that really the aim?

We started late. Some of us got held up by train delays, and everyone else waited for the stragglers. Then the bus began to move, and with it twenty curious “experts.”

What would you expect from a meeting of twenty international mediators, many of whom had never before met many of the others? A workshop on best practice? On mediation in different jurisdictions? Sharing of information and expertise? War stories? Focused work on the imminent conference?

If you are anything like me, you really do not like long introductions to whatever. Especially not to workshops, where, sitting in a circle, everyone introduces themselves and talks about their expectations. By the time it is your turn you have forgotten most of what everyone has said. An hour passes by and it feels like it has been wasted.

This was what I was worrying about when the facilitator invited us for precisely such an opening round. When she then said that each of us had three questions to answer, I figured out immediately that it was going to take up to ninety minutes, and I was sure I was going to be frustrated and bored. When were we going to actually start work?

The three questions seemed at first to me to be an invitation for us all to lose focus. I was wrong. They were: describe an object that symbolises your mediation practice, say something about what matters to you in your life right now, and say something you want the group to know about you.

It was the facilitator herself who kicked off and set the tone. She talked about something very personal, which of course I cannot share with readers. And from then, one by one, everyone shared very personal concerns and stories, and no one wasted a word on his or her professional achievements and standing. This was the most remarkable round of introductions I have ever experienced, and I have participated in and facilitated what feels like hundreds. I too was able to talk about something that has been deeply concerning me, with people I did not know well or had never met, and I had the feeling that everyone was really listening.

I confess to only really asking myself what this was all about a few days later, and I shared my thoughts then with the facilitator, who I happened to meet again in Frankfurt. I told her how I had expected to be frustrated by the round of introductions, and how I was amazed at what actually transpired. I told her that I guessed that she (and her co-organisers) knew very well what they were doing when they invited personal stories and she began with one of her own. That there was a strategy there. And that behind that strategy was a very powerful hypothesis: that talking about and reflecting on how mediation moves (parties, society, the world . . .) should best begin with talking about and reflecting on our own vulnerabilities. And, in this case, that this kind of exchange between experts would also bear fruit for the much larger public conference that followed this two-day preparatory workshop (which it did). The facilitator was able to confirm all of this.

This introductory round was also about listening – the ability to focus for seventy-five minutes on everyone in the room. It was about mediators practicing what they preach, if you like. Getting down to what matters. About establishing openness and trust. And so it made so much sense that the next task was to go for a walk outside (move) with someone from the circle we had never before met, and to do twenty minutes of deep listening each, with no prescribed topics or questions. Just walk, talk and listen. Then switch roles, walk back, talk and listen.

I am reminded of a piece of conceptual art done in 1977 by the German artist Joseph Beuys. Its title is "Zeige deine Wunde" - "[Show Your Wound.](#)" Could it be that being able to talk about our own vulnerability and to listen to the vulnerability of others makes a difference? And not only to our mediation practice? Whatever and however that may be. I am sure that this is so.

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