

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Triggering The Narrative – The Power Of Narrative Hooks

Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Thursday, November 22nd, 2018



Picture: Derek Gavey / Creative Commons

A man walks into a bar .....

I have to work quickly now because I can visualise readers reaching for the delete button. That's because my six words have quickly taken you to an already constructed narrative.

Before hitting delete there was probably a sigh; an eye roll and an inner voice expressing disappointment that a forum for the thoughtful and thought-provoking had sunk to a new low of recycling well-worn faux humour.

It was easy to take you there and I am glad you have stayed because there is a point coming.

Before I make it, I just want to remind you that what just happened is not a one-off.

I could just have easily have said... 'A man walks into a Saudi Consulate...'

Another quick trigger – this time to a current and sinister news story.

Let's explore what just happened and why it matters in life in general and in our mediations in particular.

These triggers are operating constantly in our daily life and have the power to impact our interactions significantly. This is particularly relevant for mediators as they seek constantly to assess the dynamics unfolding during the mediation, considering whether and how to intervene.

For most of us our training in re-framing serves us well. We are alert to the opportunity to

reconstruct ‘our relationship is not working’ so it becomes ‘the way we are relating is not working’.

However narrative triggers happen so quickly and create an impact that is often unspoken and unobserved – this means the reframing tool does not have a chance to be engaged.

I am still bearing scars from a recent long-running mediation between rich, angry family members over the distribution of their father’s estate.

No-one needed any more money. They all had more than enough.

However the principal achievement of their wealthy deceased father had been to belittle his children and constantly to goad them into personal attacks on each other. My private assessment, as their stories unfolded, was that he thought this would ‘toughen them up’ and prepare them for a life when he and his financial wizardry would be gone.

The mediation stretched on for many sessions – the narrative wars were constant, triggered in each case by the same few words – ‘dad always said.....’

My toolbox was empty. I was at my wits end.

My mediation coach rescued me – patiently walking me back through an analysis of the narratives and the triggers. I saw clearly that I had been putting my energy into nudging the individual siblings to reframe their own narratives around sibling conflict and they would not budge.

This analysis gave me the answer – opening the space for me to insert a new narrative from the deceased father – a previously absent party – by placing his (empty) chair at the table.

Even in death he was larger than life and despite their antagonism to each other, the siblings had very consistent ideas of their father’s narrative. Surprisingly this broke the impasse and provided a frame with which they could all agree.

The mediation was resolved. I was astonished. The lessons were powerful.

Because most of my mediations involve significant business or personal relationships there is always the likelihood that narrative hooks will be triggered by apparently innocent phrases. I have resolved to refine my repertoire to incorporate what this mediation taught me. This means I will:

- Reinforce the value I place on intake processes and reaffirm my reluctance to mediate where parties are unwilling to invest this time in pre-mediation preparation. I am working on enhancing the conflict mapping I do as part of this intake process so that I encourage parties to share their narrative in a non-linear way. I see this as a way to help parties recognise their own narrative, how it is triggered and how it frames their response to conflict.
- Enhance my practice of encouraging parties in long-running mediations to engage a mediation coach as a way of providing a safe place to explore personal narratives and hardwired ‘[immunity to change](#)’ identified by the wise educator Robert Kegan.
- Continue to engage in a professional supervision process with my experienced mediation coach and advisor as a way to learn from what I do well and investigate what I might do differently and better.

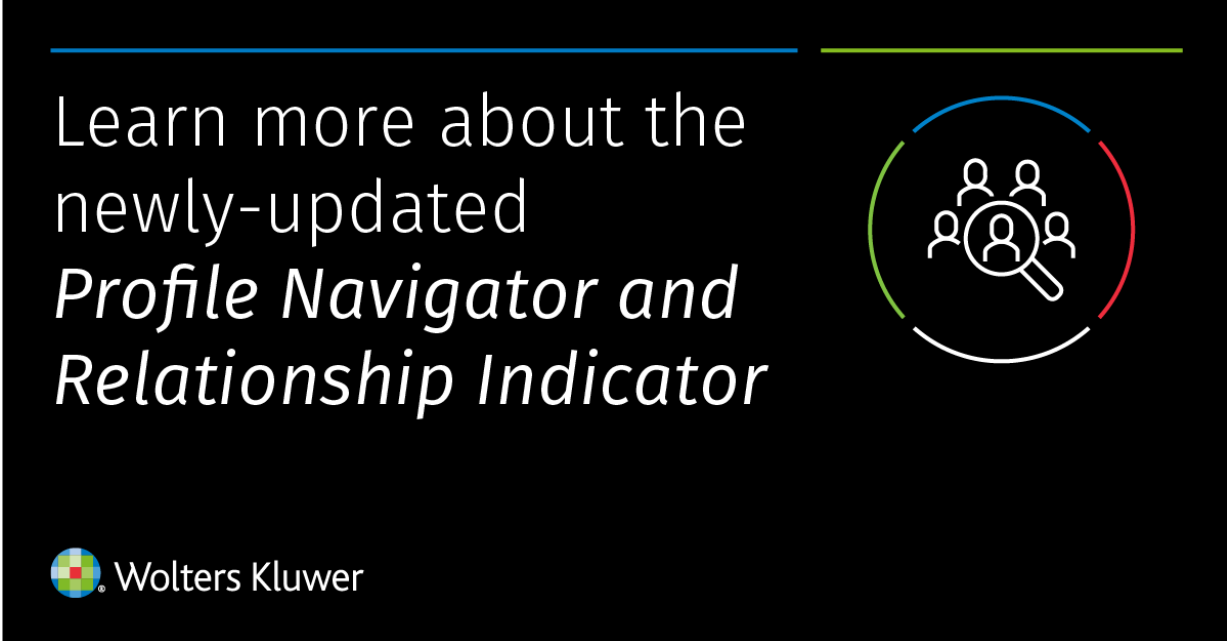
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A promotional graphic with a black background. On the left, white text reads "Learn more about the newly-updated *Profile Navigator and Relationship Indicator*". On the right, there is a circular icon with a white outline, containing several stylized human figures and a magnifying glass. The circle is decorated with colored segments: blue at the top, green on the left, and red on the right. At the bottom left of the graphic is the Wolters Kluwer logo, which consists of a colorful circular icon followed by the text "Wolters Kluwer".

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