

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Feeling the Non-Verbal: Analogue and Digital Communication in Mediation, Facilitation and Training

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Wednesday, June 24th, 2020

Paul Watzlawick's well-known axiom "you cannot not communicate" has taken on a new relevance in recent months. It means that silence and other non-verbal behaviour are just as much a form of communication as what people say. We cannot switch the communication channel off, at least not if it is analogue – meaning continuous. Take a mediation (or any other) setting in one room. When people are not speaking, they are communicating, and the non-verbal messages they are sending are being read by everyone else, consciously or unconsciously. Mediators and facilitators are constantly reading the room carefully, to see if there are messages that might need to be made verbal.

There are popular theories that argue that the messages we send are made up only to a smaller degree by our verbal communication, and that the non-semantic, which includes matters such as tone of voice, frequency and length of verbal utterances, and the non-verbal, which includes the language of our bodies and our attire, make up for larger parts of the message.

When communication is digital, meaning that it can be switched on and off, then Watzlawick's axiom applies too, though under different conditions. If I do not answer an email, I am communicating to the sender. The sender may be left guessing why and what my message is, but I have nonetheless sent a message, even if I did not intend to.

I have experienced this phenomenon in online training over past months. When there are a dozen or more participants and someone turns their screen black, or leaves the online session, or when cameras are not used due to lack of bandwidth, I am left wondering what their state of mind is. Have they lost interest? Have they got something better to do? Are they listening actively but unable to participate for good reason? I can only know by asking, which I have done using private chats. In analogue training, I can usually see when someone is drifting away – because I am watching their faces and their bodies. Online the need for verbalized feedback is so much greater.

In my online mediations and facilitations of meetings this year, mostly screens have been used. Even when I see the participants on screen there is a reduced sense of presence. The body is not talking. The face is, but it is harder to read. Here I have involuntarily come to rely on one of the underlying assumptions of modern mediation, which is that if people have something to say, and interests to promote, they will speak up for themselves. Autonomy matters, and perhaps more in online formats, where the mediator cannot so easily sense that someone is wanting to speak. People need to raise their concerns. And I have come to invite contributions even more frequently than I

might do in analogue settings, asking if anyone has anything to add, and particularly if everyone is ready to move on with agendas when the moment seems right.

I most keenly noticed the difference between the analogue and the digital when I returned to facilitating a large (semi-)public community meeting recently. It was live. I was in a large physical space (an enormous converted barn) with around fifty people sitting in chairs dotted around the room – spread out due to the need for social distance. The matter at hand was sensitive, and would have a considerable effect on the participants’ lives. As moderator, I felt able again to feel the energy in the room in a way that has not been possible online. And this was good.

I could see confusion, the frustration, the scepticism in faces and in the ways people were sitting. I could see them murmuring to each other and to themselves. Folding their arms and leaning back. Raising their eyebrows. Signalling with their eyes that they wanted to speak. And a few people smiling to themselves, others offering me encouragement in my role with their smiles. The organisers’ physical presence mattered greatly too. It was more “honest” that they were standing there for real, to face the music.

I am sure that my own presence was also significant, as I took my position between the participants and the organisers. I was aware of my own body and the effects it might have. I walked around the room, sometimes shortening the space between myself and speakers. I used my hands, my arms and my eyes. This work was physical, and it mattered, as I was to a degree responsible for making the best of the physical space we were all within.

The organisers could have held this meeting online, and they might have had to if contact restrictions had not been relaxed. They would not only have lost some of the participants entirely, as they would not have had the technology to participate, they would also have lost the physical space^[1] mediation blog by Jonathan Lloyd-Jones and the non-verbal messages that were so important. At some point they might have had to try an online format, or just inform the people concerned by post. Due to contact restrictions they had already postponed the meeting once.

It was right to wait. It mattered that relationship work was done face to face, that we could all see others’ faces, and feel each others’ presence. Online is fine in many contexts, and it can be effective and efficient in surprising ways. In other contexts, we need analogue communication.

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