Kluwer Mediation Blog

Warmth and Competence

Bill Marsh (Editor) (Bill Marsh Mediator) · Sunday, April 4th, 2021

I am not really one for elevator pitches. But I did hear one the other day about creating impact in a very short space of time, and I was struck by its relevance to mediation.

Essentially, the message was that the people we meet make up their minds about us based on two key criteria, and they do so in an impossibly short time. Those two criteria are **Warmth** and **Competence**.

I will leave the psychologists and anthropologists to argue about whether those judgment calls are made in two seconds or ten. For mediators, the point is that a key component of our work is to meet new people, in a high-intensity and low-trust context, and be able to establish effective relationships. And to do so quickly. So the questions those people are asking about us, however intuitively and unspoken, are critical for us to address.

Warmth

The warmth question is superficially "*Do I like you*"? Clearly being liked may be helpful – or rather, being disliked is probably fairly unhelpful. But in its more basic and primal formulation, the question is really "*Are you a friend or an enemy?*".

The context of conflict pre-disposes parties to ask this question, at least sub-consciously. Perhaps as mediators we too easily forget that we are often strangers to those with whom we work and yet are expecting them to invest immense trust in us. So the warmth question is really "*Can I trust you*?".

In the divided and binary world of conflict, the question "*Can I trust you*?" can often mean "*Are you for me or against me*?". If we talk about our neutrality or impartiality, we perhaps forget the impact that this may have on the parties. At a fundamental level, most people in conflict are seeking allies (see for example Bernie Mayer's excellent book *Beyond Neutrality*). Intellectually, of course, they appreciate that we mediators are not their exclusive allies, but at a gut level the message that we are not fully on their side – or better, that we have a breadth of allegiances – can lead (at least sub-consciously) to equivocal reactions towards us.

This may of course be why some mediators have adopted the description "multi-partial" to describe their role – as a conscious attempt to build stronger connections. It tries to indicate "*I am for you. It's just that I am not **only** for you. I am for them **as well***".

But however we approach it, we need to recognise that when parties scan the field for allies and enemies, our role is not always clear to them – certainly not in their sub-conscious reactions, and perhaps not fully in their conscious analysis either. They are quite understandably asking the question of us "*Are you friend or foe?*".

Competence

The competence question is essentially "*Can I rely on you? Can you deliver? Are you up to this challenge?*"

And not just that, but "*Can you cope when the going gets tough, and can you still deliver value in those circumstances?*"

More subtly, it can also be "*Can I be real in your presence? If I show my anger, are you up to handling this? If the other party abuses the process, are you able deal with that?*"

And it can also mean "*Are you intelligent enough to understand the issues, and my priorities?*".

It all boils down to "*Are you up to this?*".

Self-reflection

Both questions are central to what parties are looking for. Neither should surprise us. The challenge is how we respond, and this invites some significant self-reflection.

For example:
• How do I behave when I meet new people in mediations?
• Specifically, how do I speak about myself and my work?
• Specifically, what is it about that that will communicate warmth and competence?

Take a concrete example. When you introduce yourself to parties, what do you say from which they might derive the impression of competence? Do you talk about your practice and track-record? Personally I tend not to unless asked – but I know some who do as a basis for establishing their perceived competence. If you do, where is the line between boasting ("*I have been mediating for X years, in more than Y,000 cases*") and establishing confidence? To me the former usually comes across as insecure, and removes the focus from the parties, but that's a personal perspective.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, I think that establishing confidence is more effectively done by not talking about our competence. Rather, it is done by getting on with the task in hand, by focussing on the parties and their concerns, and so on. But of course all that doesn't happen in the first ten seconds, when (we are told) they form strong impressions.

Authenticity

Another challenge is not being too self-conscious about these things. I recall when I started mediating ("30 years ago", I insert, to establish my competence!), I was very focussed on trying to be "*a mediator*". Now I am focussed on being "*me, mediating*". For me, this is a product of experience breeding confidence, and confidence enabling authenticity. Authenticity seems to me to be a central component of conveying warmth and competence. We have probably all met people whom we describe as "*very at home in their own skin*", "*very natural*", "*very themselves*" and so

on. Essentially, we are picking up their authenticity. Somehow we relate more easily to them. Just as it is said that sharks and horses can smell fear, so most of us can spot inauthentic behaviour at a distance.

Mind you, authenticity alone is not enough. We can easily be – and be perceived as being – authentic but incompetent!

Culture

Culture can play a role in this too. The things which elicit impressions of warmth and competence will differ in different places and contexts. Informality will engender trust in some places, and mistrust in others. Talking about one's own practice will generate perceptions of competence in some places, and of self-aggrandisement in others.

Roles

Nor should it be thought that the qualities of warmth and competence are important only for mediators. They apply equally to parties and advisers in mediation. When parties look to trust each other, they are not looking for the same trust as they would place in an ally. Rather they are looking for the kind of trust they would wish to place in an adversary – for example, will you fight clean, or dirty? If you say you will deliver X, will you actually do so? When (as so frequently happens) you say that you are "*here to negotiate in good faith*", will you live up to that when the going gets tough? What is the quality of the dialogue you will engage in – is it serious and exploratory, or superficial and point-scoring?

I have no objective research data on this, but my anecdotal experience as a mediator has been that trust between adversaries – recognising its very real limits – still delivers better outcomes. And so the warmth and competence questions are very much for negotiators to wrestle with, as well as for mediators.

Timing

For all that the pyschologists speak of impressions being formed in a vanishingly small amount of time, those impressions need not be a life sentence! Initial impressions can be, and often are, changed as time goes by. So for example we use the phrase "*building* trust", which is itself an implicit recognition that it doesn't all happen at once, and certainly not just at the outset. As always with mediating, it is not about "not making mistakes" but rather about engaging with people to build effective conversation and engagement. There will be lumps and bumps along the way. The issue is what are we building.

Conclusion

In the end, perhaps the lesson is that we cannot fully control what people think of us, and it doesn't pay to try too hard. But it does at least pay to understand what they are looking for, and to spend some time reflecting on how we might offer it.

So I invite you, as I have been doing, to reflect on this – In what ways do my words and actions enable people to perceive warmth and competence in me?

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