
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Meta-Communicating Matters

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I read a long time ago that lessons for life can be found everywhere as long as we look for them. As with many of these quotes that we read, my response was to nod sagaciously, file it away for future reference and then forget all about it.

I was driving the other day, about to make a right turn at a traffic light. There was an oncoming vehicle which looked like it was intending to travel across the lights so I stopped. As that vehicle reached the traffic lights, it turned right and only then did it turn its right indicator light on.

Apart from swearing a blue streak in the way my mother taught me, I remember remarking to my wife “indicator lights are meant to signal one’s intention to act, not one’s action!” My long suffering wife, who has heard this a million times, nodded affirmingly.

What does this have to do with conflict resolution? This incident got me to think about the gap between our intentions and our actions. Thomas Schaub of CMPartners often says in his Conflict Resolution workshops that while we know what we intend, our intentions are invisible to others and their conclusions about our intentions can only be drawn from our actions. The field of Neuro-Linguistics expresses it as “The meaning of your communication or action is not what you intend but the response it gets.” Put another way, it doesn’t matter if you had the best of intentions. As the saying goes “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”. What matters is the meaning the recipient of the communication or action receives and perceives.

This can of course be the source of many misunderstandings and conflicts. We’ve all had the experience of being misunderstood despite our best intentions.

The problem however can be a bit more insidious. As Patton, Heen and Stone state in “Difficult Conversations”, if all a person can do is to judge our intentions by our actions, it follows that to make sense of our actions, they would have to invent an intention which, to their minds, is consistent with those actions. The problem of course is that this “intention invention” is often skewed by his or her own attribution and confirmation biases.

How then do we bridge this gap between intention and actions? Developing telepathy aside, what we need is some sort of signalling mechanism, much like the indicator lights on a vehicle, that indicate our intention before we engage in action.

This is where meta-communication comes in. “Meta” is essentially Greek for “About”. Meta-communication is therefore communication about communication and includes paralanguage,

kinesics and body language. I would like to share some thoughts about a form of meta-communication called meta-commenting.

In its simplest form, an example of meta-commenting would be to comment on an action that you have done eg. "I have asked you a difficult question". The more effective form is to reverse the order of events so that one meta-comments on what one is about to do eg. "I'm going to ask you a difficult question". It can also extend to meta-commenting, not about one's actions but one's intentions eg. "Let me play Devil's Advocate for a moment and ask you a difficult question".

It is suggested that meta-commenting on one's intentions is one way in which the gap between intention and action can be narrowed, if not bridged. This works because an ounce of framing is worth a pound of reframing. Most people do not like to be caught by surprise. This is even more so when parties are in conflict and under stress. Meta-commenting before one's action gives one's counterpart advance notice of what you are about to do. It may seem like a small thing but in my experience, it makes them less likely to attribute a negative intention to your actions and more likely to keep an open mind.

In a sense, the mediator's opening statement is a form of meta-commentary on the entire mediation process. Another example is where mediators call process checks when parties are at an impasse or are about to transit from one stage of a mediation process to another.

However, just like indicator lights, meta-commenting can be used more often, if not vis a vis the mediator and the parties then as between the parties. The mediator can assist in 2 ways. First is, when helping parties to communicate and negotiate directly, to coach them in the use of meta-commenting. Secondly, when a mediator can see that one party is not responding well to another party's actions and s/he feels that there is a benign or positive intention, the mediator can ask for that party's intention for that action. By making explicit the intention, one is essentially reframing the action in the eyes of the counterpart thereby helping parties towards a more constructive relationship.

In closing, It is hoped that these thoughts will assist you in your mediation practice. I guess they were right. Lessons for life and mediation can be found everywhere.

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