
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Engineering Peace: Achieving the promise of mediation in the world's most difficult conflicts. Part 3.

Irena Vanenkova (International Mediation Institute) · Tuesday, August 20th, 2013

This is the third in a series of four postings written by Irena Vanenkova, Tina Monberg, Nadja Alexander and Michael Leathes. The previous posts appeared on the [17th](#) and [20th August](#) on the Kluwer Mediation Blog. Previously we noted that the UN and world political leaders increasingly perceive mediation as vital for avoiding and resolving conflict at all levels in society. Yet mediation has not taken off in the practice of peace. In this posting we begin a discussion on changing mindsets.

Changing Mindsets

Three fundamental factors are critical to bridge the gap between the strong collective policy demand for peace mediation on behalf of almost every country and the systematic implementation of mediation in the real world at an early stage.

1. The enhancement of convening skills to bring parties to the negotiating table.
2. A real understanding of what mediation is and how and why it works.
3. Widespread confidence in the quality of mediators and provide the tools to select the right mediators given – as the Group of Friends of Mediation has put it – mediation's diverse and crowded field.

1. Convening the Parties

Getting conflicting parties to the negotiating table in the right frame of mind – convening them – requires the intervention of a third party having position, strength, humility and persuasion ability. It is an important professional skill that is frequently overlooked in mediation education and training.

Often, people locked in conflict situations are not on speaking terms, or if they are, there are unspoken limits on what might be proposed. Each side becomes obsessed with their own tactics and goals and the weaknesses of their opponent. In this game of pretence, bluff, tactics, positioning, demands and threats, to propose negotiation is to blink. Blinking suggests weakness and uncertainty. In a Mexican stand-off, nobody dares do it first. Parties then plough on regardless, unable to stop pouring more oil on already troubled waters. Ultimately, the eventual winner often ends up a joint loser, nursing a Pyrrhic victory. As Professor Friedrich Glasl expresses it in his nine-step conflict escalation ladder, “Do you have a conflict, or does the conflict have you” .

The role of the convenor is to anticipate and break that mindless spiral of self-destruction. Convenors generally need to be outside the epicentre of a dispute, be perceived as impartial, and have the skills and insights to persuade warring parties to talk. A convenor can end up as the mediator, but can also simply be one who proposes mediation, gets the principle accepted by the parties, helps find the right process and identify the right mediators.

In her seminal work on the subject, *Referral To Mediation*, Judge Machteld Pel identifies the numerous challenges facing convenors, many of which cross subject boundaries and are equally applicable to achieving peace negotiation.

The UN and other multilateral organizations have the position to be Convenors. Whether they are fully resourced to execute that function, with the appropriate range and level of skills, is another matter. The UN's Mediation Support Unit, for example, is focused on administration, which is a vital facility, but distinct from convening.

Thorough training is required to develop the skills of convenors and to recognise this as a core field of expertise.

2. Understanding for the why, how and what of mediation

As discussed in a [previous posting](#), there is a surprisingly low level of appreciation of mediation. This is particularly true at State level – among politicians and administrative staff in national governments who have come to understand “mediation” as shuttle diplomacy, political wrangling dressed up as neutral intervention, and arm-twisting by interfering third nations with the power to impose sanctions. They fail to appreciate it because they see it does not function well. Actually, none of these things is mediation. There is a need for education not only on what mediation is, and how it works, but why. The “what” can be summed up in seven words: negotiation facilitated by a trusted, neutral person. The “how” – the skills and techniques can be taught in training programs. Systematically integrating explanations of what mediation is and why it works into educational, civil society, governmental and other settings is essential, but it needs to go beyond that, into the “why”.

The simple answer to “Why mediate?” is “Because this person can help us resolve this problem”. “This person” is a particular individual, or several individuals, who the parties believe has or have the personality, background, knowledge, skills and experience to help them. The “why” element is critical – the mediator must have credibility, be trusted and be perceived as neutral. Quality and selection of mediators are therefore key.


In the next and final posting in this series, we look at the issue of what makes a quality peace mediator (the third factor highlighted above) and how to generate confidence in these mediators and the processes they conduct.

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