

Kluwer Mediation Blog

What's In A Word?

Bill Marsh (Editor) (Bill Marsh Mediator) · Sunday, November 3rd, 2013

Mediators deal in words – not exclusively, but a great deal (and perhaps sometimes too much, but that's another blog). So it pays for us to think carefully about what words really mean.

A couple of years ago, I came across an article entitled “US facilitation yes, mediation no: Omar”. It detailed how Pakistan, through its then chief minister Omar Abdullah, had asked the US not to “make an overt *mediation*” in the long-running conflict in Kashmir. Pakistan did, however, recognize a useful US role in “*facilitating the dialogue*” (emphases added by me).

Mediators might well ask – “What's the difference?” If you are “facilitating a dialogue”, are you not “mediating”? Granted, you can be more or less “overt” about it, but isn't the essence of the process the same?

Here's where it might pay to look carefully at the words themselves, and in particular their origins.

“Facilitate” comes from the French “facile” (meaning “easy”). So literally it means “to make easier”. You can make a task (such as resolving a conflict) easier for others in all sorts of ways. Mediating is one way, of course, but so are things that do not necessarily have any direct involvement between the parties. For example you can comment from the sidelines, contribute wisdom or knowledge to either or both sides, and so on.

By contrast, “mediate” comes from the latin verb “mediare” – meaning “to be in the middle”. Interestingly, the word itself seems to presuppose the taking up of a “position” in between the other parties. This suggests (to me at least) a greater degree of involvement than merely making something easier for another person. It has a physical, almost geographical, connotation, suggesting that taking up a physical position between the parties is inherent in the meaning of the word.

So in terms of their origins, the words themselves are very different. But what are the implications for what we do?

Thinking about it, “facilitate” seems to bring with it an almost endless range of possibilities. If your sole objective is to make a conflict easier for parties to resolve, there are countless ways of doing that. Merely the expression of sympathy for their plight may help. As might some suggested solutions, or some advice. Or some impartial analysis. Or some confrontation. Or even withdrawal. None of these presuppose taking up a position between the parties. Any one of them could be extremely valuable to parties locked in a conflict.

“Mediate” (from its origins) seems to me to imply a much more limited set of actions – all of them hide-bound by having to be *between* the parties. Maybe this obsession with “being between” is a problem.

Perhaps our view of ourselves as mediators leads us sometimes to define our role too much by reference to positions – ironically, our own position of “being in the middle” – and not enough by reference to needs – that is, the parties’ needs which we can facilitate – as in “make easier”. I suggest that viewing the mediator’s role as much from the perspective of *their needs* as from the perspective of *our role* would engender a greater freedom in how we do what we do. The endless focus on what is appropriate for mediators to do (including the whole facilitative/evaluative/transformational debate, which has become so sterile in recent years) might elicit a much more creative set of conclusions. That is not to say that our role is exclusively *defined* by parties’ needs, but nor is it defined solely by mediators’ perceptions of what it means to be in the middle.

Wouldn’t it be a delicious irony if we mediators have become too “positional”? Might we consider being less desirous of taking up our position (read “status”?) in the middle, and more willing to countenance a whole range of involvements focused on making it easier for the parties to resolve their conflict?

And don’t even get me started on the word “conciliate”, which comes from the latin “conciliare” meaning to assemble, unite, win over, from the word “concilium” meaning assembly or council. That seems to countenance some fascinating possibilities!

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