
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Open and Closed Doors – A Mediator’s Tale

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Thursday, October 29th, 2015

I’ll start with a story. Bear with me as it unfolds. I’ll discuss the learning later. Here goes:

The door closed behind me and I descended the stairs. I often take the stairs in hotels to get some exercise. Sometimes, the stairs combine as a fire exit. But you can (nearly) always get out at the floor leading to reception. On this occasion, however, three floors down, there was no exit to reception. The only exit seemed to be another flight down onto the street but, seen from further up the stairs, the door was clearly marked with a notice in red capitals: “Do not open except in an emergency. Fines may be levied. Opening this door will activate fire alarms and water sprinklers.”

There was nothing for it but to retrace my steps back up four flights. I did so. I reached the door through which I had entered. I pushed it but it was locked. What a nuisance. I made my way to the door for the next floor. Also locked. Indeed, each door on each floor was secured. You could pass through from the hotel corridors but you could not return.

I returned to the door for my floor. Reluctant to ask for help and therefore, hesitatingly, I knocked gently and muttered “hello”. Surely someone would hear me. I rattled the handle. Thankfully, I could hear voices in the corridor. They would respond and open the door. But they didn’t. I didn’t want to set off all the hotel alarms by activating the last door, so I reckoned that disturbing a few people on one floor was preferable. I tried all of the doors on all of the floors, my “hellos” becoming louder and my rattling more pronounced and agitated. No response. I was, literally, trapped. (In case you are wondering, my mobile phone was charging in the room)

It was getting hot and stuffy. Perspiration broke out on my brow. What if....? After about 25 minutes, I ventured down to the last door, this time right to the door itself. Where was the bit about activating the sprinklers? I was sure I had read that, albeit from my vantage point further up the stairs. Anyway, the rest of the notice was clear enough – thou shalt not pass. Except that...the door was slightly ajar. Light filtered in from outside. I pushed it gently. It swung open. No alarm sounded. I was released. I felt both relief and embarrassment.

Later that day, I shared my experience with the duty manager who agreed with me that it would be sensible to have signs on the doors for each floor warning: “Do not enter except in an emergency.” There was already a sign reading: “Fire door – do not obstruct” but there was no indication that the doors themselves could not be used and the exit was clearly marked as a stairway. After an amicable conversation, without prompting or expectation, the duty manager offered my wife and I a complimentary full breakfast the following day. Low cost to him, high value to us.

So, what do I take from this (apart from the frank advice my wife offered to me when I eventually reappeared in our room)? Life is about doors opening and closing. That much we know. But what intrigued me about this was the assumptions I had made. That the door through which I had gone would open in both directions, ie that I could go back – or at least that another similar door would open where I expected it would. I assumed that what worked elsewhere would work here, without checking. Most tellingly, I assumed that the one door which was in fact open was closed to me.

Informed by my preconceptions, I read more into the warning notice than was in fact there. Sprinklers? I was sure I had seen the word. Wilfully blinded, with my biases confirmed, I had not actually explored whether the door was in fact closed. In the circumstances, I had simply assumed so and proceeded accordingly. As such, I could have lost my only opportunity to reach freedom. Or at least to explore new possibilities, new horizons.

Further, as the reality of my predicament dawned on me, how easily a mild panic came upon me and all sorts of negative possibilities sprang to mind. Doors had closed, I had nowhere to go. The adrenalin surge had its impact. Any offer of help in those moments would have seemed disproportionately kind. I would have grabbed it.

The question remains: why had I finally ventured down to the last door when my previous experience told me that should be a futile exercise? Well, all other hope had gone. Possibly, intuition kicked in. Nothing rational. It was like checking a pocket for keys when you've checked it several times already. But keys do turn up where they have not been before. We miss things all the time.

Perhaps the lesson is to keep open all possibilities even when to do so does not seem rational. And to look for unexpected openings where they ought not to exist. To keep pushing gently at doors which seem least likely to yield. And to accept as closed those which once seemed so easy to go through – and safe – but which in fact have become the most backward-looking and least likely to bring new things.

And for mediators? Metaphors abound. There is so much in what we do which is about leading people to new openings, which seem obscure and unattainable to them. About helping them to accept that the old doors have closed, perhaps forever. That no amount of shouting or force will produce a satisfactory outcome. Also, recognising the effect of panic, anxiety, discomfort, unwillingness to ask for help – and perhaps guarding against the tendency to jump at something offered when all else seems lost. And remembering that we all, parties, lawyers and mediators, can miss the obvious – and see things which don't exist.

Much to ponder. Finally, always carry your mobile phone. You never know when you might need it.


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