

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Of Perception, Impasse and A\*\*holic Behaviours – Creating Movement in Our Minds

Joel Lee (National University of Singapore, Faculty of Law) · Saturday, August 12th, 2017

I had the privilege of running a workshop with Marcus Lim (Executive Director, Singapore International Mediation Institute) at [CDRC Vienna](#). For those of you who are unfamiliar with CDRC Vienna, it is a law school competition which focuses on components of negotiation, mediation advocacy and mediation. It is in its third year of running, and this year, the first day was devoted to a series of workshops relating to conflict resolution to help the teams prepare for competition. The topic that Marcus Lim and I were asked to address was “Dealing with Challenging Negotiations”. I don’t propose to traverse the content of that workshop. Instead, I would like to devote this month’s entry to some random musings relating to how we can create movement in our minds when dealing with challenging situations.

Impasse is something that happens more often than not in negotiation or mediation. We often speak of an impasse as a concrete thing and, to be fair, it often feels that way. However, the word “impasse” is an abstract noun or, in linguistic terms, a nominalization. Put simply, a nominalization looks like a noun, acts like a noun but is actually a verb that has had the process beaten out of it and frozen in time. So, unlike a car or a chair or a pen (all concrete nouns) where you could physically hold in the palm of your hand (although admittedly, in some cases, one would need a rather large palm), an abstract noun does not exist in this physical reality. It is essentially a process that we engage in which our mind then concretizes as a “thing”. Apart from “impasse”, other examples of nominalizations are “love”, “success”, “problems”, “challenges”, “lessons”, “negotiation”, “mediation” and of course “conflict”. Each of these are processes that we engage in to create.

At this point, some of you may be saying, so what? From a linguistic perspective, recognizing that something is a nominalization allows us to denominalize it. We can convert it back into a process. Sometimes, it is as simple as converting the abstract noun to its “ing” form. “Negotiation” would be “negotiating”, “love” would be “loving” etc. Words like “success” and “problems” don’t take to this conversion so comfortably but with apologies to the English language, “problem-ing” and “success-ing” still has the same effect. When we convert a nominalization back to a process, the experience of most, if not all, is that there is a feeling of movement and more of an ability to influence events. Take for example the following two sentences:

1. “Our relationship isn’t working out”
2. “The way we are relating isn’t working out”

While both sentences look like they are communicating the same message, they aren't. Most would read the first sentence as final. It's over. The second sentence is perceived as the parties taking responsibility for the situation and has the power to change or influence how they are relating. A small shift, to be sure, but often very powerful because it creates the possibility of movement in our mind.

Technically, "impasse" is therefore the process of "impasse-ing" or of "creating impasse". How then are we, or the parties in a mediation, creating an impasse? Sometimes, it is about communication (or lack thereof). Sometimes perceptions get in the way. Or misunderstandings. (All of which are also nominalizations). Sometimes, the challenge is found in the people who are creating the impasse. And this leads us to the second random musing.

The study of bias tells us that we tend to be quick to label others. Therefore, the people who are creating impasse are often seen as "difficult", "unreasonable", "stubborn" or even an "a\*\*hole". And this is not just a common response but an understandable one. After all, we are never the unreasonable one, it's always the other person who is the idiot that refuses to be reasonable. It should not be surprising that the same thoughts are running through the other person's mind about us!

Attributing labels to others is our brain's way of coping with a complex world. Labeling or naming something allows us to generalize and therefore function more quickly in the world. Positive examples of this are when we learn. For example, as a child, when we learn that a particular structure is a door or an animal is a cat, we quickly generalize that to all other structures or animals. Put another way, we save time by not having to relearn every time we see that structure or animal. Labels however, can be limiting as well. When we label something, we often are no longer able to conceive what it is not. Training in creativity often involves getting taking something familiar and thinking of a use for it that is entirely unconnected with what we would normally associate with it. This is commonly expressed as "thinking outside the box".

As with nominalizations, labels about people concretize them. It is said that Gregory Bateson once asked the question "What is the biggest nominalization in the English language?" His answer? "I". Whenever we label (others or ourselves), we essentially take the process of human-ing and nominalize it. It takes away from us the responsibility we have in creating ourselves as well as the power to change or re-create ourselves.

Therefore, to create movement here one has to think outside the label or identification box that we have put ourselves in. This is perhaps expressed by the phrase "Whatever you think you are, you are all ways more than that" (for the eagle-eyed readers out there, this sentence is correct and constructed deliberately). We are essentially far more complex than the identity labels we have either given ourselves or have been given to us. The Danish ad "[All That We Share](#)" is a beautiful illustration of this.

How then do we apply this in an impasse? We could intellectually acknowledge that the "a\*\*hole" in front of us is more complex than the single label that we are attributing to them right now. What I have found to be more effective is to separate identity from behaviour. Consider these two sentences.

1. "He is aggressive in this negotiation."
2. "He is engaging in aggressive negotiating behaviors."

Again, these sentences might look like they are communicating the same thing. However, the first sentence is often perceived as being quite final. The party is aggressive (identity) and there isn't very much we can do about it. However, most people perceive the second sentence as having movement. The party is simply engaging in aggressive behaviors, presumably for a purpose, and if we can figure out what that purpose is, we can address that purpose.

Let me be clear. This separation of identity from behavior is not something we verbalize to our counterpart. It is an internal mental shift that will hopefully provide us the mental space, flexibility and movement to think outside that particular box. So, instead of referring to our counterpart as an a\*\*hole, thinking of them engaging in a\*\*holic behaviours as something purposeful or strategic can help us strategize better ourselves.

There is another benefit to this mental shift. In our field, we often hear the phrases “perception is projection” or “non-verbal leakage” or “the self-fulfilling prophecy”. Put simply, what we believe about others may cause us to look for confirming data or disregard contrary data. This is of course, confirmation bias. In addition however, our beliefs will unconsciously lead us to engage in behaviors that may bring about what it is that we believe. While not directly on point, the video “[THE LAB: DECOY – A portrait session with a twist](#)” illustrates how what we believe about someone affects how we portray them. Making this mental shift allows us to minimize the confirmation bias and reduce the possibility of creating our own hells.

Thank you for reading these random musings and I hope that the two suggested mental shifts will prove helpful in finding ways to overcome challenging situations, whether in negotiation, mediation or life.

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