

Kluwer Mediation Blog

The Politics Of Being Pollyanna

Geoff Sharp (Brick Court Chambers / Clifton Chambers) · Friday, November 2nd, 2018

Pollyanna/p?l??an?/

noun/an excessively cheerful or optimistic person.

“what I am saying makes me sound like some ageing Pollyanna who just wants to pretend that all is sweetness and light”

Every mediator has been called *a Pollyanna* at some time or other, usually when encouraging those in conflict that resolution is just around the corner – and often in that darkest hour just before the dawn, when the spectre of impasse stalks their every move.

Some mediators choose to take it as a compliment, others see it as a criticism.

Still others see it as a fundamental attribute, an ethical obligation even; where great mediators, in the face of the gritty reality of conflict, are quick to smile, disposed to listen, and don't write off what seems impossible.

Instead, they double down, they keep the process alive – even when resolution remains elusive, *even to them* – buried deep somewhere in the basement of the conflict.

But, I'm uneasy. How can mediators be authentic and transparent – two qualities that have become increasingly important to me as I travel this road – yet be optimistic when they are not?

Sure, no one ever thanked a mediator (after the usual 3pm 'this is going nowhere so we might as well pack up' cry) for immediately heading out the door.

Or, is perhaps the more honest response to eschew optimism and go to the edge with the parties and look out into the abyss? At which point *they* decide to hold hands and jump – or step back, perhaps with a touch more realism than before, bringing resolution that wee bit closer?

Well, I don't think so. Anecdotal data suggests too many will jump prematurely, even though I'm the first to admit false impasse is forever helpful as a reality check.

Rather, the parties rely on (and pay) the mediator for his or her *optimism*, and funnily enough also for their *realism*, which ironically may often take the form of *pessimism* (for instance, about prospects of success outside the mediation room).

Creighton University's Bernie Mayer;

.... speaking of core values, I've often said we have an ethical obligation to be optimistic, though we also have an ethical obligation to be realistic. Our job is to effectively hold the tension between being both optimistic and realistic. I believe that if you want to help people engage conflict effectively, you have to be both things.

Beautiful.... holding a tension between the optimistic and the realistic, because by being optimistic we can impact on reality.... almost mediation poetry.

Most mediators have optimistic DNA somewhere in their bones and, as my friend [Joel Lee](#) said to me over a coffee in downtown Singapore this morning, 'all have a fundamental obligation to inoculate disputants with hope – as to be hopeful allows us to see the possibilities, thereby changing reality'.

But often, parties in conflict don't want to show optimism themselves, even if they sense it. Strategically they can't. So it is helpful, even essential, to have a cheerleader to proclaim it for them.

Military historian, John Keegan identifies the necessity for leaders to mask their own doubts and radiate optimism in his brilliant book "*The Mask of Command*" in which he looks at the meaning of leadership.

And its been that way for years. Leaders (and their followers) need optimism, *and even if leaders don't believe, they must have an ability to instill belief in others* – probably Churchill's greatest strength in one of history's darkest hours when he mobilized an entire country.

After all, who else could say 'We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds... we shall never surrender' and turn around to one of his generals expressing confidence that the Battle of Britain would be won, and respond 'You and I will be dead in three months' time.'

And we can see it unfolding as I write this. Goodness knows what UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, really thinks about the prospects of a successful exit from Europe as she climbs into bed in the wee small hours – but she will and must get up the next morning proclaiming a successful deal is well within UK's grasp.

To me, this all adds up to mediators holding tight the optimism for the room, even when all around them let it go, and being there at the end to clean the whiteboard and turn off the lights.

I'm certain of that.


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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a magnifying glass over a group of stylized human figures, representing a search or investigation process. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with a horizontal line above the main heading.

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