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# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## The Power of Congruence

Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Saturday, May 22nd, 2021

Congruence is one of the superpowers the universe makes available to us.

When we behave congruently – so that everything we do is in harmony with everything we say – we are at our most persuasive, compelling and trustworthy.

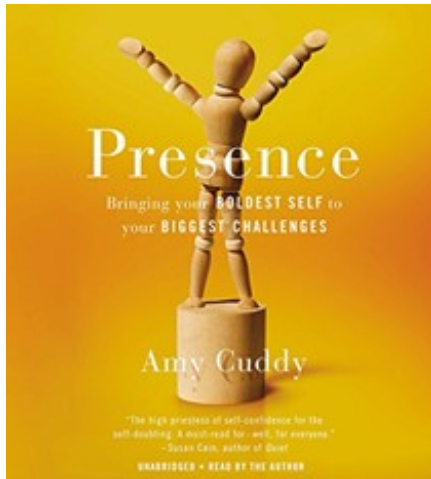
Congruence is seductive. We are scanning for it constantly and we are reassured when we experience it.

### What the research tells us

There is considerable research which supports the notion that, in dispute resolution processes, congruent behaviour **between** parties and congruence in their **goals** is most likely to produce a good outcome supported by enduring relationships. In **intraorganisational** negotiation the research reveals similar outcomes where there is congruence between the negotiator and the constituents whom the negotiator represents.

In the face of such a rich body of research it is remarkable that research into the impact of intra-personal congruence is rare. In fact at first glance, the commentary and research available seem to espouse apparently inauthentic and seemingly manipulative behaviour – the antitheses of congruence.

Take the extraordinarily popular **TED** talk by Amy Cuddy. Recorded in 2012 – ‘Fake it Till You Make It’ has now notched up well over a million views. Here Cuddy encourages her audience to alter their body language deliberately in order to present the appearance of confidence while concealing their inner fears.



Cuddy delved deeper in her bestseller *'Presence'*, and *'Fake it Till You Make It'* became *'Fake it Until You Become It'* and *'The Body Shapes the Mind'*.

This behavioural work has been described in other literature as *'Power Posing'* and criticised in academic and research circles.

However a deeper dive into other elements of her work produces persuasive research about intra-personal congruence that had seemed to be missing.

She explored authenticity and its relationship to trust, discovering that when people communicate congruently, harmoniously and synchronously, they are identified as trustworthy and authentic. This supports my assertion at the beginning of this post that when we behave congruently, we are at our most persuasive, compelling and trustworthy.

### **Why is congruence worth so much attention? Let's examine a case study.**

The failure of congruence has serious consequences. It triggers memories of other times when we have been misled and disappointed. Our brains are hardwired to protect ourselves from the disappointment that accompanies incongruence. We mistrust; back off; leave.

Whether our goal is to build our brand as the leader of a business or of a government, or to be seen in mediation as a trustworthy neutral, congruence is a key element.

Federal politics in Australia has just given us a chilling example of what happens when congruence is missing from our most important messaging.

This year a series of high-profile missteps exposing a significant culture of misogynistic behaviour, by and within government, provoked an outpouring of rage from women. Thousands marched across the country – in events named March4Justice – with central concerns about gendered violence.

The Prime Minister and his government smelt danger and, fearing electoral loss, made many public statements about respect for women and their value. There were big speeches and lots of chest-beating about how things would be different and better.

Parliament was sitting. The media was present including the marvellous Alex Ellinghausen, photographer for the Sydney Morning Herald.

He took this photo.



It captures what is perhaps the best example of incongruence we will ever see.

The photo shows the Deputy Leader of the Opposition standing to address the House.

As she does so, our Prime Minister turns in his chair, so he is facing away from her, and engages with his device. His senior ministers around him do the same. The Twittersphere erupted and the message from Australian women was that they were angrier than ever.

Amy Cuddy's quote sums it up well:

“Politicians are very experienced – maybe too experienced – at using body language to signal power and competence. But what these politicians are much more likely to struggle with, or just neglect to do altogether, is communicate warmth and trustworthiness.”

There is a price for that neglect and it may need to be paid at the ballot box.

### **The message for mediators**

We mediators are accustomed to reading the room. As we grow in experience, we build repertoire and enhance our skills. We recognise that we are likely to be affected by unconscious bias and other influences and we take steps to reflect on what might be influencing us so as to protect our impartiality. Congruence in our words and actions builds trust and encourages parties to see mediation as a safe space.

However there is a congruence trap for us also if we are not vigilant. We know that significant stress and pressure can produce behaviour that is not congruent. Clever barristers exploit this in cross-examination – to make judges and juries mistrustful of defendants pushed beyond their ability so that they behave erratically and inconsistently and appear untrustworthy.

We need to protect our own congruence whilst recognising that parties can't always do the same. We need to be aware of the assumptions we might be making about parties' behaviour as they react in unexpected and seemingly incongruent ways to unbearable stress, surprise, fear or disappointment.

Vigilance is valuable.

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The graphic features a dark 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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