

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Cooperation and Competition (Revisited): Tit for Tat

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Friday, December 24th, 2021

A mediation ended without amicable agreement. The parties had reached that understanding only. It had taken several sessions over several weeks, with plenty of recrimination about the past that further damaged already damaged relationships. At least there was clarity. The consequences were clear too. It was not the preferred solution.

What did this do with me, the mediator? I know that the outcome is in the hands of the parties. I know I am not responsible. It wasn't the fact that no agreement was reached that left me feeling upset. It was the reproaches and bitterness I had witnessed and felt. A downward spiral of escalation that had gone beyond the point of no return. It left me feeling vulnerable too.

I had decided to spend part of the afternoon in a museum in the town where the mediation had taken place, visiting an art exhibition that I was particularly looking forward to. Early that morning I had tried to buy a ticket online, but the system had not been working, so I decided to go along and see if I could get a ticket at the door.

There were a few people waiting outside in the drizzle, and a museum member of staff informing them that they could not enter unless they had an advance ticket. Who also had the task of checking Corona vaccination or test status and taking contact details of those permitted to enter. A potential visitor standing by me was getting quite angry. I quietly explained that I had tried to buy an online ticket, but it had not been possible, and might I enter to get a ticket inside? The staffer permitted me and the angry man next to me to go in, but the man stayed angry.

At the ticket desk I was informed that the system had crashed and I might get a ticket later. How much later? In two or three hours. Maybe. Was there any way it could be earlier? No. (And no apology.) I decided to give up, it being an unlucky day. There were a number of people standing around, muttering angrily under their breath.

On the way out I passed by another member of staff, and looked at her and smiled behind my mask. Could she see that smile? It's a bit frustrating, I said, I tried to get a ticket this morning online. But you probably have enough stress, standing here, I said, it isn't your fault. Have you come far, she asked, and specially to see the exhibition? Yes, I said. But never mind, I said. There may be tickets later, she said. I know, I said, thank you, but that will be too late. Unless we find another solution, she said, as I was walking away. Another solution, I repeated. Yes, she said. Come with me. We walked a few yards into the lobby to a booth. She took a ticket out from under the counter there and gave it to me. Wow, I said, thank you. How do I pay for this? I can't take any money, she said. Enjoy your visit. I looked at her name badge, and thanked her warmly by name.

Now, I got something that afternoon that most people wanting tickets did not get. They left, were turned away. I jumped the queue. Perhaps I should not have. But I never intended to. There was no strategy here, except just wanting to leave the museum feeling good about it, to smile (under my mask) and exchange a polite word as I left. To leave on good terms in terms of the relationship. That was all.

There is a wonderful phrase in German for what happened (one which is far prettier than “what goes around comes around”). *Wie man in den Wald hineinruft, so schallt es heraus*. The way you call out into the forest will be the way you are answered. You will be echoed. Game theory called this tit for tat. Start cooperating. If the other side cooperates back, cooperate again. But compete if the other side competes back. Offer cooperation again, but if they won’t play with you, compete back. Creating mutual gain only works mutually. Otherwise protect your back.

It did me good, after the competitive lose-lose mediation I had just mediated, to feel what it feels like when people cooperate, and what surprises that can bring. I will never know, but I hope that the museum staff member who gave me a ticket felt warm and connected to me, as I did to her, just for the moment.

The paintings were beautiful.

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