
Kluwer Mediation Blog

The magic power of “right, so?”

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The monologue situation

We have all met the person in our mediations. The one that comes to the table and monopolizes the dialogue, which actually stops being a dialogue and turns into a long, ineffective monologue. And it goes on and on, with no end in sight, bringing up all sorts of information that might or, more often, might not have any connection with the issues on the agenda. They ramble on, complaining about everything and everyone, telling us how the world is all against them, the life unfair, the persons around them vicious and cunning, with themselves being the only ones true and fair, hard-working and law-abiding, in a sea of ungrateful, mischievous, dishonest and immoral people. After a while, they lose focus, and everyone else at the table feels embarrassed and looks to you, the mediator, for putting them out of pain. Been there?

If you have been there, you would know it is not a desirable situation. Mediation is about listening with respect and compassion, being non-judgmental, and offering the space for the parties to share their stories safely and without interruption. But you don't want to get involved in a word fight with a mediation participant, you don't want to be and to come across as unfair and biased, or that you lost patience – you of all people, the one parties expect to be cool and follow their story to the end of the earth. But now, you are called upon to step in and stop that person derailing the session.

Possible options for intervention

So, what are your options? There are a few, depending on whether this is a joint session or not, but we're not going to make this post so much about that – perhaps in a future one. Each option carries a risk that you should assess. You can look for signs of repetition as cues that the story is over, but some acknowledgements need to happen. So, one option is to step in, interrupt the teller when they stop to draw their breath and reflect on something they've said, acknowledge an emotion or table a summary of what they've said and check for confirmation. In short, you nicely ask them to get back to the point or leave the floor to the others. Other undesirable options or techniques are to interrupt and ask the teller to go back to the point or to directly ask another participant to step in and tell their own story. Before saying anything, you may need to be self-aware of what your body language is already “saying”. Of course, *repetitio est mater studiorum*, but the truth is that any technique can backfire, as the person you have cut off might feel embittered, put on the spot and become either more vocal and aggressive or withdrawn and uncooperative. Neither is going to make your job easier.

The “right, so?” technique

Therefore, we propose you consider trying something else: the magic power of the “right, so?”. How does this work? You wait patiently until the teller makes a short break in their exposition and, with a measured tone and a candid face, you say: “right, so?” and nothing else. You have to fight the temptation of adding anything else, as it might ruin the entire effect. Very importantly, body language should be fully synced with your words. You leave the silence to work for you. It might sound sarcastic or rude, but it is not. Most of the time, it is doing miracles.

The “right, so?” intervention may lead to different paths, many of which easily allow you to lead the dialogue back on track without antagonizing the teller. Usually, they just stare in puzzlement at you and have nothing to say, realizing they exceeded their time limit and the patience of the other participants. This is the best-case scenario. The worst is that they think you didn’t understand their point of view, that you didn’t follow them on their intricate narrative, and come back with “so, what?” or “what do you mean?” questions. That offers you the chance to do what you do best – summarize what they said and then ask the others to offer their story as well. By summarizing, you show the teller you’ve got what they said and also were able to put it in a shorter and more meaningful way than they actually did it. It makes them feel heard without giving them the sensation of being cut off and silenced.

Again, the key of the “right, so?” magic power is to combine the words with the right tone and facial expression, together with the silence that follows – never add anything after saying “right, so?”.

A word of caution

We want to share a word of caution about the imperfect use of this technique. If followed by a smile that shouldn’t be there, with a less than a candid tone of voice, body language or facial expression, you may come across as insensitive, sarcastic or rude, which can harm the process way more than a person monopolizing the dialogue. But, if the message decoded is in the lines of, for example, “*can we now focus on the future*” or “*we’ve heard your perspective, perhaps it is now the time for other perspectives*”, then you’re on the right track.

The great thing about this technique is that it can offer the exact amount of energy that makes the parties say to themselves things like, “*well, there’s nothing I can do about the past; perhaps it is time to let go and focus on what can be done now*”. It can be a catalyst of conscience for the facilitation of apologies. It can also lead to other proposals, breaking deadlocks and taking the parties from the “*right and wrong arena*” to the “*collaborative field*” where parties let go of the past, see the light and start focusing on the future.

So, what was your experience if you’ve seen this in your mediations? If not, what are your thoughts about its potential benefits and risks?

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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of five stylized human figures, with a magnifying glass positioned over the central figure. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green, and a circular arc in blue, green, and red.

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