

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## I thought I had said goodbye to Disney's FROZEN but...

Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Tuesday, October 22nd, 2024



As you read this, put your hand up if you are a parent, grandparent, uncle, aunt or anyone who regularly spends time in the company of young children.

If you fall into this category (and it probably covers most of you who are reading this) you are almost certain to have experienced the phenomenon of Disney's Frozen, the 2013 animated musical movie.

Translated into 41 languages, it has been virtually impossible to avoid. It even has a dedicated Wiki which runs to 400 pages.

In a sad reflection of my grandma duties, I can recite most of the lyrics of the main song called (as if to mirror my deepest wish) "Let it Go!"

### Where am I going with this?

If I haven't lost you already, I hope you will stay to read my explanation of why a really annoying movie – and, having watched it endless times, I am permitted to say that while my grandchildren are out of earshot – has a lesson for those of us working in conflict resolution.

### What is the connection?

Let me begin at the beginning.

Since the worst of Covid, as many workers are returning to offices that are not their bedrooms, my mediation and coaching practice has involved a number of senior professionals who have experienced something in the workplace that has caused serious and lasting distress.

Very often the dysfunction in the working relationship is so serious and so disruptive for the organisation and so unresponsive to repair that one of the parties (usually the party who has made some formal protest about the behaviour) has to leave the workplace.

This is a commonplace outcome for mediations in this space. Worsening the ongoing pain of the

aggrieved party is the likelihood that the confidentiality provisions of the settlement agreement will be designed to limit the kind of public vindication that encourages healing and promotes a return to the persona of a confident professional.

During the course of the mediation it is usual to discover, in private session, that there have been earlier interactions and attempted interventions with senior leaders in the organisation – The Head of People and Culture; the Board Chair; the CEO for example – who mainly seem to want the problem to go away. Often an external or employer-provided healthcare professional has been involved as well.

As parties share with me the impact of these earlier interactions, there is a common theme about the language they recall and its impact on them.

‘Just move on...’

‘It’s time to let it go ...’

‘Bearing a grudge like this will damage your health...’

Responses to questions about the impact of this advice usually reflected cynicism and anger.

‘I thought to myself Oh wow thanks – I never thought of that, all fixed now!’

‘Nothing hurts or bothers me more than someone saying to me “just move on” or “just forget what happened – it’s in the past. If it was that easy, don’t you think I’d be further along the road to recovery.?’

‘It makes me feel so invalidated and trapped because I’m trying and they’re making it sound so easy.’

### **The challenge of agency**

As the experiences unfolded it became clear that the reaction to ‘let it go’ was deeply connected to their need for a sense of agency – the power to do something to make up for the damage they felt had been done to them. This lack of agency to achieve the accountability that was their primary interest fuelled ongoing despair, anger and an inability to move into a different future.

### **The creative option – thanks to Frozen**

My 9-year-old granddaughter is who I want to be when I grow up – a constant challenge and learning opportunity.

As I struggled with some of these challenging conflict resolution processes I was talking to her about how unhelpful ‘Let it Go’ appeared to be – especially for people who had experienced painful events.

She corrected me gently and firmly.

‘You haven’t been listening to the words properly’, and she showed me this verse of the song:

‘It’s funny how some distance makes everything seem small

And the fears that once controlled me can't get to me at all  
It's time to see what I can do  
To test the limits and break through  
No right, no wrong, no rules for me  
I'm free'

Her explanation was that 'Let it Go' is a way of saying let your power out – take charge – be as powerful as you can be.

I got it.

This led me to brainstorming creative options differently. Using a private session to reflect on what 'Let it Go' might mean in a positive sense led to some wonderful insights into regaining agency. There were some inspiring Australian examples to draw on (and I am sure there are many international ones). A former Australian of the Year who established and crowdfunded a Foundation to support others with similar experiences. A professional building a LinkedIn support platform to enable the de-identified sharing of stories with the opportunity for contributions of support.

The creative options for 'Let it Go' have been very positive – moving the narrative from what is not possible to what can you do (safely and wisely) on your own to make your experiences and learning helpful to others.

I still don't ever want to watch Frozen again but I am grateful for the learning.

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