

The Value of Listening

by Douglas Noll
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"I will not be in the same room with those people!" Mr. Twain exclaimed. He was turning red as he became more agitated. His wife sat quietly next to him. I had walked into the office thirty minutes earlier, expecting a routine mediation. Little did I know that my first two hours would be spent persuading Mr. and Mrs. Twain to meet with the other side.

Some mediators might have kept the parties separate. My experience told me the opposite: When parties are highly escalated, they must be persuaded to face each other across the table, no matter how hard the conversation might be. I was not getting paid to take the easy way out.

I listened carefully to Mr. Twain. When appropriate, I summarized back to him what he was saying and feeling. Slowly, I established an empathic connection with him. As he realized he was really being heard, his anger subsided slightly.

"You are right. Facing those people probably would be very good for me. But the thought of being across the table from them just makes me mad," he said.

We continued in dialogue for another hour until we had negotiated the terms of his participation. Mr. Twain would not be required to say anything, and he would be seated right by the door. If he felt like he was losing control, he could simply excuse himself and step out. Mrs. Twain agreed to speak for both of them. I thought I had the process under control.

I brought everyone together into the conference room. Mr. and Mrs. Hemmingway and their attorney sat on one side. Across from them sat Mr. and Mrs. Twain and their attorney. I went through my usual introduction and explained the mediation process to everyone.

I stated my ground rules and asked if everyone could agree to them. My second ground rule was that everyone agreed that they would summarize what others said if asked to do so. Everyone consented and so we started. The Twains and Hemmingways were neighbors, but did not know each other. I asked Mr. Hemmingway to share his perspective on the dispute. In a straightforward manner, he told us what the conflict was about and how it escalated. When he finished, I turned to Mrs. Twain and asked her to summarize back what Mr. Hemmingway had said.

Mrs. Twain immediately launched into her spin on Mr. Hemmingway's perspective, explaining why he was completely wrong.

I stopped her. "Mrs. Twain, you will have a chance to tell your story in a moment. First, though, do you think you can summarize back what Mr. Hemmingway has told us?"

Mrs. Twain said, "I forgot what he said."

I smiled gently and turned to Mr. Hemmingway, "Would you mind telling your story again? And Mrs. Twain, would you like a piece of paper to take notes?" She nodded.

Mr. Hemmingway told his story again. I turned back to Mrs. Twain and asked, "Can you summarize back what he just said?"

Mrs. Twain started to spin his story again. "Mrs. Twain," I said gently and with a smile, "Just summarize back what he said."

"You mean repeat back what he said?"

"Yes, just that," I said.

Mrs. Twain looked at me a little sheepishly. "I forgot again." We all laughed, including Mrs. Twain.

"Ok," I said. "We'll break it down. Mr. Hemmingway, please start again."

After about thirty seconds, I put my hand up to pause him. "Mrs. Twain, try summarizing what he just said."

She faltered a little, but got most of it. "Mr. Hemmingway, was that a fair summary of what you just said?"

"Yes, it was."

"Great. Please continue," I said.

He continued his story, pausing every 30 to 45 seconds to permit Mrs. Twain to summarize back. Slowly, Mrs. Twain began to gain confidence in her summaries. As she did so, the hostility in the room dissipated.

Three hours later, we had an agreement that everyone liked. As we closed the session, the Hemmingways invited the Twains over for margaritas the following evening. It seems that peace was restored in the neighborhood.

The key element in this assignment was the listening. First, I carefully and empathically listened to Mr. Twain. I did not argue with him or challenge his perspective; I simply summarized back what he was saying and what he was feeling. As we built trust and empathy with each other, his anger naturally reduced to the point that he could agree to participate in the process.

Second, I created a safe environment where Mrs. Twain could be allowed to listen to Mr. Hemmingway. At first, her anger prevented her from doing so. With patience and kindness, I allowed her the experience of making mistakes and learning. As she learned to listen, an empathic connection between the couples was established where none had existed before. Thus, anger, frustration, and mistrust were transformed into peace between neighbors.

We rarely have the experience of being deeply heard by others. Most of the time, others tune out while we speak. When we can listen to others, especially in deep, intractable conflicts, we learn about ourselves and our capacities for positive good. When we are listened too, we feel honest respect and appreciation. Conflict cannot exist in such an environment and harmony flourishes