

The Way of the Mediator: Honor the Contrary Position and Confront Disrespect Directly

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The two business partners sat across from each other. They had agreed to engage me as a mediator to salvage a business relationship that, while once satisfying and profitable, was now acrimonious. In these situations, I obtain everyone's agreement to some basic ground rules. One of the ground rules requires that everyone remain respectful and civil during the process. Both partners and their attorneys had, in their separate pre-mediation meetings with me, agreed to the rules, so I had the power of their consent to enforce the rules if necessary.

As the process began, the partners maintained a superficial civility. Their language was appropriate, but their choice of words, tone of voice, body postures, and mannerisms all signaled utter lack of respect for each other. I let it go for about 30 minutes to see how long they would continue their game before I called them on it.

"Gentlemen," I said, "One of my basic ground rules is maintaining an attitude of mutual respect. You each agreed to that, did you not?"

They answered that, yes, they had agreed to it.

"One of the most important ways to demonstrate mutual respect is to honor the contrary position. This means that you show respect for the person, even if you loathe that person's interests or positions." I turned to one of the partners. "John, I have a sense that you are not honoring Peter's position, that you are pretty upset at having to listen to his story? I am correct?"

John was at first defensive, but then admitted to being upset. I confronted Peter as well. We then spent the next 45 minutes discussing the lack of respect that had developed between Peter and John and how it had affected their ability to work through their more difficult conflict issues. Once this issue had been brought to the surface, the process successfully concluded in four more hours of work with a re-definition of the partnership and the financial responsibilities of each partner. We would have never reached that point had the parties not acknowledged their feelings of disrespect for each other.

Mutual respect is one of the first casualties of conflict. Part of the reason lies in the well-developed social psychological phenomenon called "negative attribution theory." Simply stated, people in conflict tend to attribute the worst motives and intentions against each other. Mutual respect is also lost quickly because people are afraid of losing emotional control. They distance themselves from their emotions in conflict so as to keep control over their anger, frustration, or anxiety. As they do this, they withdraw from interaction and the withdrawal is interpreted as disrespectful. Finally, mutual respect disappears when people really decide that they do not like the other person. The steps from dislike to disrespect to hostility are short and easy to take.

As I told these two business partners, the hallmark of respect in conflict is honoring the contrary position. This can be extremely difficult for people to achieve because it means recognizing the other person as having a viewpoint. When parties in conflict are disrespectful to one another, the conflict is bound to escalate. Usually, the disrespect is founded on unresolved frustrations, anxieties about the conflict and its resolution, anger, or a deep sense of injustice. Whatever the cause, the underlying message, broadcast loud and clear through tone, mannerism, and posture, is "How dare you!" At this level of hostility, no further work towards resolution can be achieved until the disrespectful behaviors are acknowledged and addressed.

Engaging in respectful behavior is very hard for people in conflict. Several reasons suggest why disrespectful behavior seems easier than respectful behavior. First, people become so caught in the emotions of the conflict that they don't think about it. They are simply unaware that they are acting disrespectful rather than respectful. Second, they are afraid that by showing respect, they may show weakness. People in our culture have a strong fear of exploitation and are therefore biased against openness. Being respectful means being open to other ideas, which means that their ideas might be changed. This raises another fear, the fear of being wrong or, worse, the fear of having to change the way they think or act. Finally, on the darker side, people become disrespectful as a way increasing their own face at the expense of the other. Putting down or disrespecting another is a time-tested way of creating a feeling of superiority.

The best and simplest way to work on disrespect in conflict is to confront it directly. If you are in conflict with someone and sense disrespect, ask about it. "Mary, I have a sense that you are not feeling respectful of me right now. Am I right? Can you tell me what you have experienced that brings you to not respecting me?" Offering to listen is itself a respectful act that can begin to bridge the differences.

In conflict, watch out for disrespect. If you catch yourself dishonoring the other side, re-evaluate where you are at. Very little constructive work can be accomplished as long as the feelings of disrespect persist in the conflict.