

# Article

## When No One Wants to Mediate, Call the Mediator!

A Pre-COVID-19 Case Study Takes on New Significance in a Post-pandemic World

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### 1 Introduction

The management board of an international corporation was living through troubled times. Their meetings had become fraught with personal and professional difficulties and open conflict was being played out in view of stakeholders and employees alike. It seemed as if their ship was floundering, the crew was in revolt and there was even a whiff of mutiny in the air. Those onboard (the staff) feared for their future, as the vessel rocked and swayed through turbulent seas. They were surely headed for the rocks and certain doom, unless the tide could turn. The captain (the CEO) had confidently plotted his course but the crew (the board members) had other ideas. They were all at each other's throats, trust was broken and conflicting agendas were the order of the day. They were, literally, at sea. How could this situation be brought back from the brink, enabling them to sail to calmer waters? In the meantime, there was nothing for it but to ready the lifeboats, batten down the hatches and weather the storm. It was clear that no one wanted to involve a mediator in the board's business. (They thought this would look soft and might appear as a failure on their part to resolve their own issues.)

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### 2 Call the Mediator!

Where the issue of policymaking is concerned, using mediation skills (as distinct from mediating conflict) may help to unearth personal differences and bring individual paradigms to the surface in a manner that might not otherwise have been possible. Board members working together on a mission may each have their own perception as to how best to attain that mission (sometimes without ever realising that their view is not aligned with that of their fellow board members). It follows, therefore, that even without differences having emerged or without any conflict having arisen, individual board members may, in their own heads, be rolling out entirely different scripts to those of their colleagues, yet believing they are on the same page and pursuing the same mission. This can result in dissonance, and the more the group struggles for harmony, the more at odds with each other they become. Unlocking hidden potential in a way that enables people to work together in concert, without unnecessary tension (whether perceived or actual, conscious or unconscious), can be empowering for a board and beneficial for an organisation.

The CEO in question was well aware that there was much unexplored potential in the dynamic of the board and wanted to harness it. He insisted that the mediator at least be given a hearing. 'What have we got to lose? It might even bring us some new thinking!' he said. The CEO also believed (correctly, as it transpired) that the board's creative energy could be channelled more effectively if it were to be freed up from the negative influence of the destructive conflict that was engulfing it.

And so, a skilled mediator was invited to the boardroom to address the board.

### 3 The Reality in the Boardroom

Twelve people sat around the table in the boardroom, and the mediator was welcomed by the CEO. The mediator spoke to the board about ‘The *ABC* of ETHICS – exploring *Attitudes, Behaviours and Culture* to set the tone from the top’. Material for this address was easily gleaned from the many publications, reports and online material that was readily available in the public domain. It included an overview of the corporation’s ethical framework and the measures in place for enforcement; an overview of internal and external control standards; key elements of risk management strategy and a brief exposé on the appreciation of systems thinking which requires considering the interactions between all parts of the system (human, social, technical, information, political, economic and organisational). The presentation also reflected the expressed ethos and values of the corporation, posing the question, ‘Is there a gap between image and reality?’

If truth be told, the mediator could probably have made a presentation to the board on any thought-provoking subject and it would most likely have had the same effect (as intended by the mediator). The board was not in a listening mode and impatience with the mediator, and with each other, soon began to bubble to the surface. Although listening politely at first, it was clear that neither members’ hearts nor minds were receptive to what was being said. However, the mediator’s intervention was going exactly according to plan and fireworks were starting to go off.

As the presentation progressed, cracks of dissent became clearly visible. Although the presentation was simply mirroring back to those seated around the table what they were purporting to espouse as corporate ethos, the board seemed disinterested and defensive. It did not take long for in-fighting to break out among the members. Witnessing this heated display at first hand gave the mediator exactly what was needed in order to catch a glimpse of what lay beneath and gave valuable clues as to where potential avenues of exploration might be lurking. However, not just yet – the scene had first to play out in its entirety and the conflict genie had to be coaxed completely out of its bottle. And so, the mediator waited, watched and listened, carefully harnessing the energy flow in the room to best effect.

The mediator used the following elements of professional skill in order to

- sense the resonance of the individuals and the vibration the group;
- discern channels of individual and collective transmission;
- open up and explore frequencies of communication;

- notice interactions and observe responses;
- fathom the depths of silence and inference;
- discern visible and hidden expressions;
- echo back content for clarification;
- detect individual agendas;
- gain understanding as an independent, neutral and impartial observer;
- identify gaps;
- explore expectations and
- suspend judgment and hold open space.

When the arguments subsided and the board eventually paused for breath, the silence in the room was deafening. The resonance of angry words, accusatory stares, defensive grimaces and tight lips heralded the inevitable arrival of a worrying impasse. No one was prepared to take the risk of venturing into the dark chasm that had just opened up before them. A deceptively tranquil space, previously laden with posturing and pretence, had been shattered, giving way to a bulldozed terrain, pop-parked with craters, spewing out toxic lava. Remnants of burning sulphur from scorched egos hung heavily in the air. Reality was starting to set in.

Then the CEO, surveying the post-traumatic debris, looked straight at the mediator. The mediator could feel twelve pairs of eyes staring, as if waiting for a response to an as yet unasked question. Slowly, the question was articulated, ‘What can we do to rescue the situation?’

### 4 The Mediator’s Plan Unfolds

The mediator knew that the presentation had exposed the true hidden reality, opening up a chasm of disaccord that lay smouldering just below the surface. This was exactly as intended.

‘I have a proposal,’ the mediator suggested. ‘Give me one week and agree here and now that each one of you will speak with me in confidence on a one-to-one basis outside of the boardroom. I will prepare a collective perspective for you to consider.’

Looking around the room, no one objected. ‘You have one week,’ said the CEO.

### 5 Beyond the Boardroom

The mediator’s objective at the boardroom had been to experience the turbulence of the hidden conflict at first hand, and in real time, by making a presentation that was sure to provoke a strong reaction. This open reaction had to be provoked in order to be observed at first hand by the mediator. The board’s response to the presentation and the dialogue that ensued enabled the mediator to view the extent to which there was either congruence or dissonance driving behaviour and intent. The mediator was not engaged in an intellectual exercise

with the board – the purpose of the exercise was simply to literally sound them out and tune into their vibration. Once the vibration of the board had been detected, this enabled the mediator to decipher the extent to which it needed fine-tuning. This encounter gave a much better sense of what concerns and differences had lain hidden and hitherto unexpressed. Experiencing the outcome at first hand enabled the mediator to set the scene for possible next steps.

Based on a wide range of issues that the mediator considered would best offer an appropriate lens through which to ascertain individual perspective, the mediator then drew up a short list of questions, simply refocusing the prevailing vibration by asking questions like, What are you sensing are the main problems or opportunities? How far are you willing to open up to possibility? What emerges when judgment is suspended? What kind of energy has yet to come to awareness and make to bring about a shift? What might the resonance of success sound like?

During the following week, bilateral discussions, written and online exchanges, enabled the mediator to gain a deeper sense of the underlying issues within a carefully designed framework. Where views were deeply entrenched, the narration of a third-party perspective, like a middle voice, aided expression in independent, neutral and impartial language. This was a first step in weaving individual stories into echoes of a collective narrative.

These one-to-one exchanges became the basis of formulating a broader collective perspective. The lapse of intervening time also allowed the board members genuine time for reflection. Shifting over and back from individual space, to shared space, to collective space and sketching out a possible scope for creating unified space, the mediator was able to gather all key elements and to begin to put the pieces together into a cohesive whole. The mediator became a space holder, a trusted interlocutor, a navigator of emerging future. Board members were not judged and were completely free to express themselves. The independent narration of collective perspective that was slowly emerging offered a kaleidoscope of options for further consideration, without attributing individual views.

## 6 'I' Becomes 'WE'

Once all of the individual interviews had taken place, the mediator assimilated the document and sent it in draft form to the board members. Collective perspective was beginning to emerge through the process of echoing what had been shared individually and in confidence. The document was reviewed by each individual board member, who was free to amend or add to it. All views were completely anonymised. Only each individual person concerned, and the mediator, knew what specific comments and views were attributed to each individual. The completed document represented a collective per-

spective, portraying arguments for and against specific courses of action. It also allowed board members scope to change their minds from previously expressed views or to voice uncertainty as to avenues of action that they had previously espoused but which they no longer wished to be associated with. Suddenly, everything was open for discussion and all eventualities could be put on the table.

Anonymising the collective expression of views offered surprising outcomes. Presented without individual attribution, resonating creative intent and maximising flexibility, it had the effect of shifting the balance away from differences, negative emotions, people, fear and uncertainty and towards potential convergence. It is said that a picture paints a thousand words but the mediator used less than a thousand words to paint one emerging picture.

Slowly but surely, individual differences gave way to a creative flow of immense potential. The mediator was an essential partner in the process, a receptacle of views and a formulator of the collective perspective. Empowered reflection, non-judgmental exploration, free expression, assisted comprehension and empowerment of heightened awareness manifested in abundance. The result portrayed a reflective blueprint of the board's own thinking in a manner they could not have reached alone. The skills used by the mediator were listening, observing, understanding, tuning into different frequencies, echoing, sounding, detecting, registering, recording, amplifying, reflecting, portraying, envisioning and writing.

## 7 What Just Happened?

Essentially, the mediator entered into a one-to-one encounter with the board and experienced the collective energy of the group at first hand and in real time. Once the mediator had tuned into the wavelength of the group, and fine-tuned individual frequencies, the potential to open up a broader bandwidth opened up, thereby increasing their capacity to communicate more effectively. Carefully selecting questions and echoing responses by way of comprehensive narrative, the mediator undertook the role of editor in an emerging inter-dimensional network of the board's expressed and silent communication. The purpose was to give voice to free and complete expression in a way that enabled board members to speak without fear, explore existing and emerging perspectives, raise awareness and become architects of harmonious working together, thus opening up new frontiers and expanding the horizons of their communication. The desired outcome for the mediator was to

- enable the board to tune into its own echo and vibration, thereby informing enlightened perspective, empowering new thinking and facilitating harmonious expression;

- act as a conflict navigator, guiding the board to voluntarily transcend individual and organisational pitfalls and move into a safe space, thereby empowering self-determination;
- bring into sharper focus the underlying issues that were blocking progress;
- open up a restorative/regenerative space wherein understanding could manifest by anonymising individual expression and enabling reflection recovery understanding to become possible;
- address emotional aspects from a distance and in narrative form;
- decipher and enable the emergence of an optimum equilibrium between diverging factions and
- offer a blueprint for building consensus.

The approach adopted by the mediator allowed for shifting the vibration of conflict from dissonance to resonance through bilateral engagement and enabled reflective expression in writing, with a view to heightening awareness, concentrating group focus and empowering the emergence of a collective perspective.

This approach is also useful where parties in dispute are no longer speaking to one another. It opens up the possibility for views to be expressed via a third party in a way that can free up thinking and positions to the extent that they are willing to engage with and confide in a trusted intermediary, without going into formal mediation. It is, therefore, a useful instrument to avoid an organisation being hijacked by individual paradigms on its values and mission.

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## 8 In Conclusion

This is an example of how deploying the skills of a mediator as a reflective practitioner opened up scope for formulating an enhanced collective perspective by a board, without resorting to formal mediation. This pre-COVID-19 case study takes on new significance as some organisations favour recalibration over mediation in a post-pandemic world. All that is required to bring another perspective to a group dynamic is to follow seven simple steps that can be undertaken in any setting, either in person or online:

1. Group invites mediator to connect; mediator responds.
2. Group and mediator engage; mediator observes group dynamic in real time.
3. Mediator offers to connect with each individual outside of group setting.
4. Individuals connect bilaterally with mediator; mediator interviews each individual.
5. Mediator uses anonymised interview material to compile reflected collective perspective.
6. Mediator presents draft collective perspective to group for fine-tuning.
7. Group uses enhanced collective perspective as a blueprint to guide next steps.

This case study demonstrates the effectiveness of a professional intervention using mediation skills to enhance creative expression. Taking time to recalibrate individual perspectives and channel them into collective vision is a worthwhile exercise to undertake in any setting, not least when faced with the uncertainty of a post-pandemic world.