

What Makes a Great Mediator?

By Brendan Schutte

Good mediators come in all shapes and sizes, from all types of backgrounds, and with different styles and ways of working. We know what makes a good mediator: calmness, active listening skills, a reliable framework, robust process management, and a willingness and intent to help the participants achieve a lasting resolution.

But here are three extra traits that make a great mediator – patience, stamina for listening and curiosity.

These may seem obvious but actually such traits are rare in today's fast-moving, KPI-driven work environments with large workloads and little time to spare. Stepping out of this rush and into a mindful space is what great mediators do – they make time to listen and are not emotionally triggered by hearing 'ridiculous' viewpoints. Embedded in patience is a tolerance of 'the other'.

Patience is about continuing to mediate despite encountering difficulties, and includes an element of resilience – very helpful when participants become stuck in impasse. It is about persevering and trusting in the process. Patient mediators, to use the words of Douglas Adams, "don't panic".

Anyone can listen. For a while. Particularly to something you like. Great listening requires something more – an engagement, where the listener is able to consciously paraphrase and get into the mindset of the speaker. It is not simply prompting with 'non-verbal encouragers'.

Where emotions are near the surface it may mean that verbalising the conflict is difficult and logic or reasoning may be largely absent. The patient mediator with a stamina for listening can work with this, continuing to listen without irritation even when there is little coherence or consistency to what is said.

Having stamina for listening means that the mediator doesn't 'switch off' after a few hours, but is at all times alert to what the participants say. Noticing even half-hearted apologies or expressions of acknowledgement, which can then be amplified, can have an immediate impact on the relationship, but the mediator must be alert to these and not miss them due to listening fatigue.



“ I make the most of all that comes and the least of all that goes. ”

Sara Teasdale (US poet, 1884-1933)

The third trait is curiosity. A 'nosey' mediator is a good mediator. Being interested, continually wondering what is going on, and asking searching questions which get below the surface of the conflict are all part of this 'curiosity with intent'. It is not about being intrusive, it is about getting to the core of the problem and not accepting superficial engagement.

Curiosity prevents easy judgements being made and this boosts impartiality, an essential element in any attempt at resolving grievances.

One of the greatest scientists the world has known, Albert Einstein said, "I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious."

Finding resolution means doing something different to that which brought on the conflict in the first place – being patient and curious, and listening tenaciously.