

Honesty and Empathy: Speaking the Unspeakable

Book: *Mediating Dangerously*

Author: Kenneth Cloke

Imagine yourself, a trained mediator, taking a weekend stroll through your neighborhood park. Among other pieces of playground equipment, you spot a see-saw, different from any you have ever seen. On one end of the balanced see-saw rests a bundle tagged “Honesty,” and the other end is holding up a bundle tagged “Empathy.” At the pivot point, you notice the word “Mediator.” The message is clear, but where are the technical instructions? Walking home, you consider how you might achieve the balance demonstrated on the see-saw, so the parties to the mediation can get their emotional needs met, the truth can be revealed, and the conflict can move toward resolution.

In *Mediating Dangerously* (2001), chapter three, author Kenneth Cloke presents underlying concepts and reasons for ensuring honesty and empathy in mediation, as well as the technical instructions for achieving these sometimes-elusive goals. Cloke offers a vibrant image as a metaphor for the purpose of mediation: a chain reaction, in which “the conflict is allowed to explode and implode without damaging the parties” (p. 25). He describes the implosion as an increasing self-awareness and the explosion as that which allows for identification of the dysfunction that is at the core of the conflict. The chain reaction is ignited by “deeply honest, empathetic questions that defuse or disarm the parties’ defensive mechanisms, allowing truth and positive feelings to reach their target” (p. 25).

In mediation, you are likely to hear one party say, justifying a harsh remark, “Well, I was just being honest.” Brutally honest, you think, as you watch the other party wince and become tense. The other party may speak in a manner that oozes empathy but, for its sentimentalism, lacks honesty and is therefore weak and misses its true target. Typically, empathy is in scarcer quantities among parties in mediation. It is up to the mediator to model empathy, not to excuse or overlook hurtful behaviors but to focus on the real issues and, at the same time, help each party to “grow into a part of themselves they have ignored or suppressed” (p. 26). Because empathy is in short supply within most disputes, mediators have developed a library of techniques to foster it, mostly through active listening.

Honesty has not received the same attention. Too often, and at the expense of allowing the parties to grow and transform through the conflict experience, mediators seek to settle before the scope of the issue has been suitably addressed and explored (p. 27). Cloke explains the necessity for honesty, given that each party to a conflict (p. 28-29):

- ☒ Holds a different view of the conflict, that is, who’s to blame and why;
- ☒ Sees the world from the inside out, so empathy and honesty with the other is challenged, the ability to take responsibility is swept away, and the need for support increased;
- ☒ Wears a mask, to protect feelings of self-doubt or other deep emotions; and
- ☒ Moves (intentionally) to self-protect against uncomfortable truths.

These characteristics are counter-productive to identifying and exploring the truth. It is up to the mediator to enter the conflict arena to “model empathic listening, honest questioning, and equanimity in accepting painful answers” (p. 30).

Cloke emphasizes the importance of integrity within the mediation process: “while integrity requires honesty, honesty does not always require integrity” (p. 30). Mediation is a call to the parties to remember their own integrity, to act consistently with their values and to abandon defenses against learning and growth. In so doing, they will learn to avoid similar problems in the future (p. 30).”

The mediator can encourage growth and learning and promote honesty in many ways (p. 31):

- ☒ Model honesty at all times;
- ☒ Listen to and acknowledge deeply honest expressions;
- ☒ Assist the parties as they learn to be more honest;
- ☒ Discourage any forms of judgment, and describe their behaviors in nonjudgmental terms;
- ☒ Bring covert behavior out into the open and discuss it;
- ☒ Assist in clarifying the difference between intent and effect;
- ☒ Encourage each party to explain their intents and then probe deeper;
- ☒ Encourage honest expression in ways that allow each party to save face; and
- ☒ Assist in reconnecting the parties after honest communications.

Cloke explores the intent and maintenance of masks. Certainly, they capture attention. In addition, they seem to take on a life of their own. Not only does wearing a mask transform the wearer, it tends to attract sympathetic responses from others, so that the ultimate effect is to lock it in place. In so doing, the wearer of the mask shields his or her authenticity, desires, pain, and vulnerability. People wear masks or strike poses for three primary reasons (pp. 33-34):

- ☒ External: to gain attention, support, and sympathy
- ☒ Internal: to disguise the “ugly” truth, which is the opposite of the mask or pose
- ☒ Hidden: to lead a sympathetic listener to probe, so that the mask wearer can ultimately shed the mask or pose, that is, to be found out and accepted

The last item in the above list is the most complicated and requires skill and patience on the part of the mediator. The mask or pose represents a failure to recognize the truth of their actions and the negative effects of those actions on others. As long as the masks remain in place, honest communication is impeded, and the conflict will continue unresolved. It is up to the mediator to assist the parties as they relax the poses, shed the masks, and learn ways to communicate more honestly. As the parties to the conflict experience small increases in honesty and empathy in each other, they will feel motivated to continue reaching for higher levels of honesty and empathy, with the positive result of slowly letting go of the poses and masks (p. 35).

Cloke emphasizes the consequences of wearing a mask or assuming a pose. Those who do so are lost to others and to themselves. To emerge from their nonauthentic public self, they must accept the truth of their being, without blame or judgment. As you become more aware of masks, you will observe that they abound in departmental hierarchies, professional titles, and corporate roles. In the end, they serve only to separate the wearer from personal authenticity and honesty (p. 36).

The name of the book is *Mediating Dangerously* because Cloke asserts that mediators often are called upon to ask what may be considered dangerous questions that serve to probe deeply and uncover real issues. Probing best succeeds in a slow, progressive manner, encouraging the parties to reveal honest intentions and authentic

feelings within a safe environment. The mediator may need to ask permission of the parties to ask initially difficult (dangerous), probing questions (p. 37).

How then should we characterize and create dangerous, probing questions? When mediating a conflict within which the parties have not been honest with each other, the author suggests that the mediator develop and ask questions that

- ☒ Are honest and empathic, to clarify each party's interests and desires;
- ☒ Encourage the parties' listening skills;
- ☒ Challenge the parties' poses and masks;
- ☒ Reveal elements in their stories that reflect judgment, aggression, victimization, defensiveness, demonization, and other negative behaviors and emotions;
- ☒ Replace blame and anger with softer emotions; and
- ☒ Reframe their stories to find common ground (p. 39).

Challenging and probing questions might include the following examples (p. 39):

- ☒ "What price have you paid for that behavior?"
- ☒ "What were you afraid would happen if you didn't do that?"
- ☒ "Why do you feel that way?"
- ☒ "What would it take for you to give up that behavior?"
- ☒ "How is this conversation working for you now?"

The mediator must be alert to his or her own biases. The point is, the mediator should be assisting the parties in achieving their own resolution, not one the mediator believes is best. In actuality, mediators also wear masks, and the mediation will fully succeed only if *everyone* in the mediation drops their masks and poses and lets their authentic selves emerge. The mediator is in the best position to set the tone and lead the way for honest and empathic communication. In closing, Cloke opens the door for the mediator to create new opportunities for openness:

from a place of openness and authenticity, vulnerability and honesty, empathy and introspection, it is possible to discover a different perception, gain a clearer sense of the other person, learn, and find common ground. I leave it up to you to decide which is more dangerous: vulnerability or masks, authenticity or poses, honesty or triviality, empathy or distance. The answer will depend on your willingness to explore the conflicts within yourself (p. 40).

Cloke, K. (2001). *Mediating Dangerously*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Note: *Mediating Dangerously* is in the FDR library and available for loan.

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