



What is in a 'conflict' story?- John E Hind, Mediator.Coach.Trainer

In the [Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting](#) (MIAM) when a client tells me their 'back story' about their experiences it always provides me with a wealth of relevant information to help me with preparing myself to support my clients in mediation to communicate and resolve things together.

When I am assessing the situation and the person for suitability for mediation some of the things I focus on, initially anyway, is their level of 'motivation' and commitment (reasons for wanting to mediate) and, of course, their 'capacity' or, put another way, the human 'resources' they have available to them to meet the demands which mediation is likely to place on them.

I refer to some of these resources or 'competencies' below, such as an ability to actively listen, demonstrate empathic curiosity, share ideas and perspectives, self-regulate emotions and engage in reciprocal behaviour as they seek to construct outcomes in mediation which need satisfy everyone.

I refer to this as the commitment and capacity stage of my mediation assessment.

Each person's story about their circumstances and the other person often tells me a great deal about, among other things:

1. The degree of responsibility they are taking and perhaps willing to take for the ending of the relationship, the current situation they find themselves in and resolving things together, in mediation.
2. This degree of responsibility is often closely connected with the degree of self-reflection, self-awareness and 'external awareness' (the extent to which they are aware of the impact that their behaviour has had or is having on the other person) which may go some way to explaining to them why the other person is and has been behaving towards them in a particular way. Understanding this can be very important for the success of mediation.
3. The extent of a person's empathy (understanding) of the other person and how they have and are experiencing the situation is also very important as well as the quality of the 'relationship a person has with themselves' (self-empathy, self-worth, self-belief, confidence) is often crucial to an understanding of their behaviour under stress and in conflict.

A person's story nearly always has an emotional content driving and defining the narrative.

The narrative might be one of shared responsibility and the need to find a fair outcome or, more problematically, one of blame, self-justification, self-righteousness and entitlement which are, of course, some of the classic defensive behaviour strategies along with

controlling behaviours, designed to protect the ego state (sense of self-worth, self-esteem) which may be extremely fragile in the current situation, for a wide range of very understandable reasons.

So what? Why is all this useful to know as I consider my client's suitability for mediation?

As a mediator, it is essential that I 'develop a sense' from each person of their motivation (what is motivating them toward mediation- why mediation?) and capacity for collaborative problem-solving communication with each other and the likely barriers/block to this BEFORE they 'enter the fray' of mediation.

Without sufficient motivation and capacity to communicate in a way required by mediation they are likely to find it very hard, if not impossible, to graduate to the next stage of being able to openly, honestly and constructively explore options together in mediation, making joint decisions together and reaching mediated outcomes TOGETHER.

A person's story (laced with motivation and capacity indicators) will heavily inform the strategies and skills that begin to form in my mediator's brain, influencing my approach to helping and supporting my mediation clients to communicate together so that they are able to solve problems together and construct solutions together, taking into account a full range of values, interests and needs, from a range of different perspectives (not just their own!)

The strategies and skills I choose and use need to motivate, empower and enable my clients to work at their maximum 'conflict resolution competency' in situations in which they might be feeling disempowered (anxious, lacking in confidence, angry, frustrated, uninformed, untrusting, confused and so on) so that each person is able to adopt an appropriate Mindset, 'Heartset' approach to mediation, often needing to shift from a fairly rigid, fixed, positional and polarised mindset and approach to one which is more open minded, empathically curious, willing to give the benefit of the doubt and able to resist the natural instinct to react to every perceived judgement or criticism.

This all comes back to my clients' stories, what these tell me about them and their situation (and them about each other) and my ability, as a mediator, to use these to support my clients in mediation.

What I need most from my clients during this early assessment and preparation stage of the mediation process is complete honesty and openness with what they tell me. I will find it difficult, if not impossible, to help them otherwise.

I remind them that in all but exceptional circumstances, usually involving 'safety issues', what they tell me is confidential so that they feel safe and secure to share their thoughts and feelings on a range of topics.

Only then will I know what I am working with and properly able to prepare myself to help and support them with what they are likely to need from me and each other to be successful in mediation.

It all starts with the story.