



Lifting the Heavy Weight of Mediation

By Anna Shields, Director and Co-founder, Consensio

I've recently discovered a new podcast entitled 'Heavyweight', and I'm hooked! The show is hosted by Jonathan Goldstein and the premise is simple. In each episode, Jonathan helps his guest (and in some cases himself) deal with an issue from their past that remains unresolved.

Season 1 kicks off in a personal way, with Jonathan's Dad Buzz and his Uncle Sheldon, both in their eighties, who have been estranged for decades. Next up is one of my favourite episodes, where Jonathan's friend Gregor is haunted by a moment over 20 years ago when he lent his poor musician friend a box set of CDs. This friend turns out to be Moby, and the songs were those sampled on his breakthrough multi-million selling album 'Play'. Gregor just wants his CDs back!

The show is at turns funny, sad, heart-warming and, in many episodes, transformational. Jonathan takes his guests on road trips, facilitates tricky reunions and witnesses difficult conversations. He never describes himself as a mediator, preferring the term interlocuter - a person who takes part in a dialogue or conversation. However, each time I listen to an episode, I am reminded of the burden of my workplace mediation parties, and the heavy weight that is so often lifted through the process. What is it about mediation that helps release the burden of conflict?

Firstly, I believe there is a great power in being given the opportunity to communicate face-to-face. When someone or something upsets us, we quickly build up a picture of what we think happened, and try to make sense of it, sometimes with the help of well-meaning friends and family. Communication often shuts down on one or both sides, and we are left alone to deal with painful thoughts and feelings. As the issues remain unresolved, we often form fixed ideas and close ourselves off to the possibility of change.

In 'Heavyweight', Jonathan describes his role in this way: to "mince, wheedle, mealy-mouth, cajole and back-pedal my way

into the past like a therapist with a time machine." This is a far cry from how I think of myself as a workplace mediator! However, I think the sentiment is similar. We are both there to create a space for individuals to come together, to listen and be listened to.

Secondly, this opportunity to talk, to hear the other person and to share memories, builds empathy and understanding. Jonathan's guests have held onto hurt and pain for many years, which also holds true in the workplace conflict situations I have been witnessing in my mediation practice for over a decade.

In episode 17, a guest called Skye recounts her memories of falling out with her best friends in middle school 30 years ago when they graffitied her home one night. Her son, now entering middle school himself, can't understand why his Mum never asked her friends why they did it. With Jonathan's assistance, Skye eventually meets up with one of her school friends and gains new insights not only from her old friend, but also from her own child.

Finally, through this process of communication and building empathy, we are able to look to the future. The individuals from the podcast and those who engage in workplace mediation, face the ghosts of their pasts in order to find clarity and move on. The decision to have these courageous conversations is not easy. Jonathan and mediators such as myself create an opportunity for these conversations to happen, but it is the brave individuals who take a leap into the unknown who do all the hard work that can lead to conflict transformation.

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