

Impartiality – the Holy Grail

Tania Coke explores the role of mediation in improving relationships, understanding and problem-solving

There is a story from India of nine blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time. Reaching out to touch the elephant, they each discover a different part of the elephant's body and are soon embroiled in violent disagreement. In this story, the nine men are unable to acknowledge one another's perspectives. Each is convinced that he alone knows the truth.

When communication breaks down in the workplace, it often comes about in a similar way: we cling to our stated views and refuse to acknowledge the views of others. Before we know it, we are locked in a downward spiral of destructive tit-for-tat, which can sour relationships irreversibly. But imagine in the story that a tenth person got involved, whose role was simply to understand all nine viewpoints, without drawing conclusions as to who was right, nor making suggestions as to what should be done to solve the impasse. What this person brings is *impartiality*. And it is this – the Holy Grail of communication – which offers the possibility of transcending the conflict and bringing a fuller picture of the truth for everyone involved.

It is for this reason that many companies turn to an impartial mediator when serious conflict erupts. Clearly, it is not possible to hire a mediator for every communication break-down. But it might be possible to teach everyone in the workplace how to adopt an impartial stance – to don the mediator's hat, even temporarily – in the midst of disagreement. This article explores what that might mean, what benefits it would bring and how it might come to be.

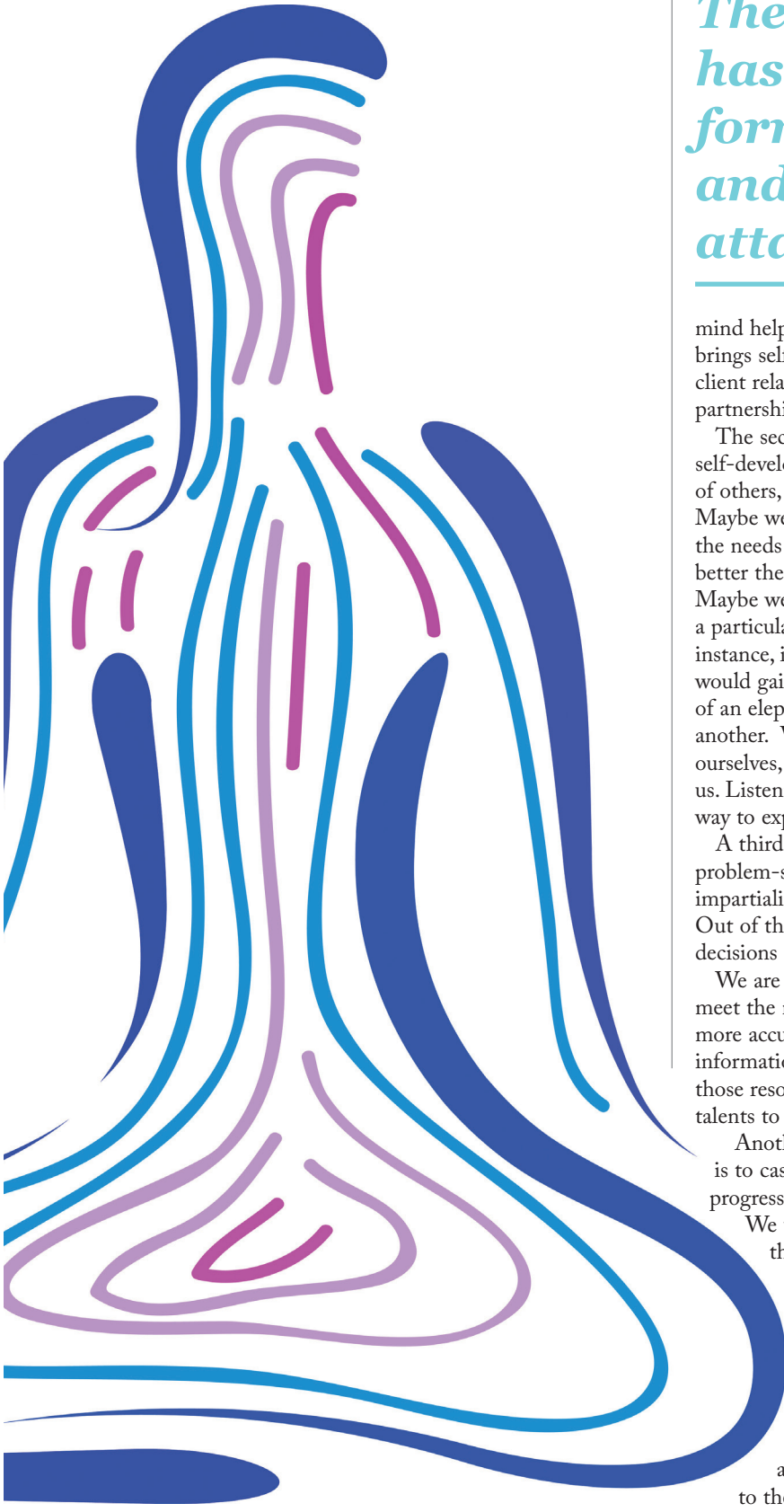
Defining impartiality

To be impartial in the midst of disagreement means to put aside the urge to judge, decide or resolve, in order to focus on simply understanding the viewpoints of all involved. It means listening to and acknowledging each person's viewpoint with equal consideration. It means allowing the multiple perspectives to coexist without rushing to resolve or reconcile the differences.

It is not possible or desirable to be impartial all of the time. At some point, a decision must be made, a solution must be found. But before we reach the decision-making stage, there is room for an open exchange of views: taking the time to understand the views of all involved, without worrying about who is right or what must be done. Then, as a second stage, once a deeper level of understanding has been achieved, can genuine decision-making and problem-solving take place.

Why impartiality matters

What would be the benefits of adopting this impartial stance in workplace communications? The first benefit lies in improved relationships. When we dismiss the views of another without first making the effort to understand their views, the relationship is likely to suffer. The other person might feel disrespected, hurt or angry and put up barriers to the relationship. By stopping to listen to their viewpoint, and acknowledging what they say even if we disagree, they might instead open up to deeper communication and relationship. Listening with an open



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mind helps us to get on better with others, which brings self-evident benefits in terms of team work, client relationships, customer service and business partnerships of every kind.

The second benefit is in terms of learning and self-development. By deeply listening to the views of others, we can expand our own understanding. Maybe we will reach a better understanding of the needs of others. Maybe we will understand better the effect of our behaviour on others. Maybe we will reach a better understanding of a particular subject. In the elephant story, for instance, it is easy to see how each of the nine would gain a broader understanding of the nature of an elephant if they were able to listen to one another. We all have a limited understanding of ourselves, of other people, and of the world around us. Listening carefully to the views of others is one way to expand that understanding.

A third benefit of impartiality concerns problem-solving. We have already seen how impartiality can lead to better understanding. Out of that greater understanding, far better decisions and solutions can be expected.

We are more likely to find solutions which meet the needs of more people and are based on more accurate information. We each have limited information and resources, but by combining those resources, we have a wider pool of ideas and talents to draw on.

Another way to make the case for impartiality is to cast a backward glance in time. Human progress is a history of proving ourselves wrong.

We used to think the sun went around the earth. Until Copernicus proved us wrong. We used to think that man was genetically distinct from all other life forms. Until Darwin proved us wrong. We used to think that time and space were absolute. Until Einstein proved us wrong. In the light of these paradigm-shifting discoveries, there is a case to be made for listening carefully to the views of others, however dubious they



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might seem, and deferring the impulse to judge for just a little longer than might be comfortable.

But is it really possible?

So far we have defined impartiality in terms of the ability and willingness to listen deeply to the views of others and temporarily suspend the urge to fix or solve. And we have seen the benefits that this impartiality can bring. But the question remains: is it humanly possible to do this, even on a temporary basis? And if it is, why have we not been doing it for the last several millennia?

We cannot ignore the immense hurdles to impartiality. First, listening impartially to others takes time. It is quicker to dismiss their views and adhere to one's own – at least in the short run (although further down the line, it might become evident that making more effort to listen to others at the outset would have saved time in the long run). Secondly, we are psychologically wired to be partial. It is part of our survival toolkit, dating from the year dot. We are conditioned to judge things as dangerous or not, and to do so quickly. If a man is running towards you wielding an axe above his head, you don't ask him to explain his intentions. You make a split-second decision and act upon it. If your child is stepping out onto a busy road, you don't stop to invite her to express her reasons for doing so. The survival instinct has conditioned us into forming snap decisions and taking action to attack or defend, without first inviting an exchange of viewpoints.

In most workplace situations, it isn't a man coming towards you wielding an axe, it is your boss or your colleague expressing an opinion that clashes with your own. But the scent of danger causes the survival instinct to kick in and we leap into attack or defence mode. The words are scarcely out of our mouths when we realise that we have over-reacted, but it is too late, and we now have to defend the actions we took in self-defence. Meanwhile, the same instincts have been set in motion in the other person and we now have an escalation of attack and defence: the dreaded downward spiral of tit-for-tat described above.

We can train them

Before we give up and surrender ourselves to our survival instincts, we can pause to consider that instincts do evolve. It may take time, but we can train them – at least to a certain extent.

The first stage is building awareness. We need to understand the nature of our instincts, and the mechanisms at play within ourselves. We can do this by asking ourselves questions, such as: What are my predominant biases, prejudices and unchecked assumptions? Where do these prejudices come from in my life, and are they still useful to me? These include not only the negative prejudices but the positive ones also, which are often harder to spot. If I am prejudiced towards a person who has had a similar experience to me, this may prevent me from giving full attention to people who are different to me. A good way to spot these prejudices is to learn to recognise the mental and physical symptoms that accompany them. A sense of outrage at hearing one person, or an overriding urge to protect another, may be signs that my impartiality is at risk. By paying attention to these symptoms, it becomes easier to catch the unconscious biases when they kick in.

Armed with this greater awareness, we can start the process of mental re-wiring, experimenting with different ways to react. For instance, when I catch myself in the act of dismissing another person's view because they are rich/poor/successful/unsuccessful etc., I can carve out a window of time in which to coach myself into a different way of responding. Instead of overriding the person's opinion and imposing my own, I can ask them to say more about what they think or feel. Or if I think it would be better not to interact with them in my current state, I can ask to continue the conversation at another time.

Promote an open exchange of views

Adopting the impartial stance requires a number of concrete skills. One fundamental skill is how to ask questions that promote an open exchange of views. Too often our questions close down the avenues of communication, rather than opening them up. Our questioning can force the conversation in a certain direction and deny others the opportunity to express themselves fully. We may think we are being helpful by asking questions, when in fact the speaker feels backed into a corner. Not only choice of question but choice of wording plays an important role. Seemingly innocent words such



as “but” and “really” can unintentionally reveal disapproval, as in the question: “But do you really think...?” Beyond wording, we also need to pay attention to the way we ask questions. Tone of voice and body language are crucial to conveying an impartial stance.

Alongside questioning, the skills of reflecting back and summarising are also important in fostering an open exchange of viewpoints. Both skills involve playing back to the speaker what they have expressed, as objectively as possible. Doing so serves to demonstrate an interest in their opinions and helps to catch any misunderstandings at an early stage. Here again, the challenge is objectivity. We inevitably filter the speaker’s message according to our own biases. We typically pick out the points that seem most important to us, thus disregarding the other person’s perspective. Another common pitfall is to filter out the thorny issues and summarise only the areas of agreement, through fear of provoking confrontation. Smoothing over the differences defeats the purpose of having an open exchange. If we are to hope for the full benefits of impartiality outlined above, we need to be fearless in acknowledging and exploring our differences.

There is plenty of help available for those willing to take on the important task of listening with impartiality. There is a wide range of training and coaching offerings that can help build the mental muscle and practical skills required to be impartial. In particular, all good conflict management training courses offer the opportunity to engage in role-plays and exercises to build self-awareness, unlearn bad habits and replace them with more constructive ways to communicate.

Conclusion

Through impartiality we can transform workplace disagreements into opportunities for improved relationships, deeper understanding of ourselves and others, and better problem-solving. But as we have seen, it is impossible and impractical to remain impartial all of the time. At some point, we all need to come down on one side of the fence or the other. There is a right time and a wrong time to don the mediator’s hat. The ideal is to extend the period of open exchange that precedes decision-making for just long enough to reap the three-fold rewards of improved relationship, learning and problem-solving. That in itself is no mean feat, requiring self-awareness and skill, not to mention the courage and persistence of a crusader. But it need not be a lonely crusade. And every inch of progress promises golden rewards for the people and the organisations involved. **TJ**

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