



Brexit: how will people work together post-referendum?

Macarena Mata, MAY 11, 2016

When discussing controversial issues it's important to listen, explore and analyse the different perspectives

You can't see the news without hearing about **Brexit**. Whatever the result, a large number of politicians will have to move forward and work together, despite the obvious antipathy and backbiting that has already started. Similarly, the polarising views of both camps mean that voters are engaging in difficult conversations with each other.



So how does one recover? How do we learn to listen to each other's differing positions so that we can engage in dialogue? What is the role of empathy? How can we build bridges to help understand each other?

Four skills will be needed: non-judgemental listening (impartiality), acknowledging the other person, empathy, and encouraging self-responsibility (self-determination)

Non-judgemental listening

Mediators are impartial. When we listen our brain tries to make sense of the situation, and offers us mental images that come from our experience. It is an internal dialogue that is essential. However, it can also prevent us from being present and neutral. When we listen to someone we need to put aside that internal monologue. Instead, we need to feel curious and expand our own views.

Non-judgemental listening also entails not taking things personally. For example, the 'losing side' in the aftermath of the referendum may say 'I can't believe people made such a big mistake!' However, the mediated approach would be to listen and try to understand where they are coming from.

Acknowledging and valuing the other person

Feeling acknowledged and valued are two key human needs. When we find ourselves in a **conflict situation** wanting to be right is generally the expression of these deeper needs. Therefore agreeing with the other person's views is not as important as communicating that we value them as people and that we acknowledge their feelings.

Mediators can't agree with anyone's views as they would lose their impartiality, but we are still able to gain the respect of the mediation parties. Generally, reflecting back the feeling or behaviour we observe signals to the other person that we are acknowledging them without

judgement. For example, if someone is angrily arguing that we shouldn't remain in the EU, you could say: 'It seems that what X says makes you angry. Could you explain how that's affecting you?'

Empathy and what's under the surface

Understanding others' needs is fundamental, and is one of the roles of the mediators. Someone's position in relation to Brexit might be 'immigrants will leave us without jobs'. Rather than being immediately judgemental one could ask what they mean by this. The response may be that 'there isn't much work in my town and jobs need to be created'. Further exploration might reveal that their deeper needs are to feel a valued member of their community.

Encouraging self-responsibility and self-determination

As workplace mediators we don't tell people what to do, but respect that every person is an expert on their own life and they have the right to determine their future. This helps people take responsibility for their decisions and actions. Mediators ask questions that challenge the issue being discussed, not the person. These could be 'what would you like to see happening?' or 'what would improve this situation?'

When we are discussing complex and potentially controversial issues such as Brexit it is important to listen, explore and analyse the different perspectives. The aim of the dialogue might not be to agree with the other person or to force them to agree with you, but to search for greater understanding or different possibilities.

The bigger picture is always bigger than any of us alone can imagine. We all have a piece of the puzzle that, if brought together, could benefit everyone. Using the principles of mediation after 23 June could make this more possible.

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