



Speaking from the Soul in Mediation

I've recently become aware in myself of two very different voices. One I call my social voice. It is a respectable, adult voice, which justifies things on the basis of logic and social convention. It favours long words and buzz words and doesn't mind a bit of jargon. The other voice, I call my personal voice. It is simpler and more emotional. It rarely feels the need to justify itself. When it does, it says "because I want to" or "that's how I feel".

My social voice lends me a persona which can be helpful in impressing people or asserting my credentials. But when I want to speak from the soul, it's the personal voice that I need. It helps me to express myself more honestly. It helps me to connect more deeply with others. It makes me feel more alive, more authentic, more me. But it takes courage to use this voice. At the first hint of mockery or cynicism, it clams up. I go silent, or the social voice takes over.

I've been thinking about which voice I need as a workplace mediator. I know that the way I talk and listen as a mediator will influence, however subtly, the way the parties talk and listen. If I start the meeting using mediation jargon and legal terminology, it will set a certain tone for the conversation. If I speak in the first person, using words that are simple and down-to-earth, it will invite a different type of conversation.

For me, the power of mediation is that it helps people in conflict to reconnect at a personal level. Conflict makes us depersonalise and often demonise the person we're in conflict with. We lose sight of their humanity and lose touch with our own. Mediation is an opportunity to rediscover the other person as a fellow human being, who is suffering, just like me, and who does things they regret, just like me,

and who battles with their pride, just like me. For that to happen, we need to strip away the masks, the formalities and anything that puts up a barrier between two people and their souls. As mediators, we can help people do that through the words we choose and the way we say them.

But it takes courage to drop the mediator's mask and sit there, with the parties, as just another human being. All sorts of fears creep in. What if the parties think I'm unprofessional? Will they take me seriously? How can I justify my value as a mediator if I don't play the part? But that's my social voice speaking. And it's precisely the one that separates me from my self and from others. One thing I can do is to remind myself, whilst mediating, that I also suffer conflict, do things I regret, and battle with my pride. I also could do with the help of a mediator from time to time. Another thing I can do is to pay more attention to the way I express myself in day-to-day life. Am I speaking from the head or am I speaking from the soul? With greater awareness I can make better choices and help to bring about more honest, courageous conversations, in mediation and beyond.

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