

Forbes

What Can You Do When Someone's Mind Is Made Up?

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 20 June 2024

With elections in full swing in the US and UK, conflict is being played out not only in the corridors of power, but also in homes, communities, and workplaces. Staunch supporters on each side extoll the virtues of their candidates, fixed in their views and unable to listen to those with a different opinion. Whichever way you plan to vote, it can feel like we live in a world where people rarely change their minds.

Workplace mediators see this 'stuckness' all the time. They witness people coming to mediation with such entrenched views that they are willing to take out grievances, start legal action, or take organizations to tribunals. In one memorable case, a senior leader told me they had been brought 'kicking and screaming' to mediation. They couldn't imagine changing their view on their colleague and came into the process hoping to punish them for their behavior. However, mediators also see the changes that can happen over the course of a mediation, and how people can shift their perspectives, even if they don't agree. Here's why people can become so inflexible, and what you can do when faced with someone whose mind is already made up.

1. The need to be right

The need to be right is ingrained from a young age. At school, children experience the benefits of being right; correct answers are rewarded on tests, and good grades are seen to lead to better opportunities later in life, such as college entrance and better jobs. Society celebrates 'winners' with medals, promotions, or even the Oval Office. It also feels good to be right, and negative consequences can be attached to being wrong, such as a 'telling off' or being seen to fail in front of others. It's natural to try to avoid these uncomfortable situations.

One consequence of insisting on being right is that creativity can be lost. Thinking can become blinkered, reducing the ability to problem-solve collaboratively. By being aware of an underlying drive to be right, you can take conscious steps to think more creatively, such as inviting other ideas or brainstorming the full range of possibilities.

2. The shame of retreat

Even if one person experiences a shift in their viewpoint, it can be challenging for the other to back down, especially in a public setting, such as the workplace. They may worry that it will reflect badly on them or make them look incompetent, which may affect their perceived status at work. There can also be a fear of being castigated or being made fun of.

To concede a previously closely-held viewpoint requires psychological safety. Psychological safety comes when trust has been built in relationships, when colleagues feel they can make mistakes or speak up without fearing the consequences. When this security is created within a team or company

culture, colleagues are more willing to make themselves vulnerable in front of others. Ultimately, this leads to higher-performing teams, positively impacting individual well-being and organizational innovation.

3. The echo chamber effect

Another reason people become fixed in their views is the inclination to listen more closely to those with a similar perspective. Generally, people are more likely to read the manifestos of their chosen political party, listen to the key points of their favorite candidates, or spend time with like-minded colleagues. Social media algorithms amplify this inclination, as they suggest content that matches a user's history to keep people using the platform for longer. This all contributes to an 'echo chamber' effect: we receive disproportionately more information that feeds our preferred narrative and less that challenges it.

To mitigate this, it is important to intentionally look for other perspectives. Confronting beliefs can be uncomfortable, but ultimately, it helps to avoid black-and-white thinking. Try reading news media that favors other political parties, or search the internet via an incognito or private window to minimize browser history tracking. Seek out conversations with those whose views differ from your own, and approach these opportunities with curiosity and openness, rather than to change the other person's mind.

4. The cognitive miser

Finally, there's a natural tendency to want to make sense of issues in the most straightforward way, rather than in ways that may take more time and effort. Termed the 'cognitive miser' in psychology, it describes how our minds like to simplify matters to enable us to make a decision and move on. So, having already decided to vote Democrat, you're less likely to be open to Trump's position, and vice versa for a Republican voter listening to Biden.

This tendency is countered by recognizing complexity. Life is rarely simple, and conflict is no different. There are no shortcuts. Accept that recognizing complexity might not be comfortable – it will likely challenge your self-view. This requires a commitment to openness and listening, and taking the time to explore other perspectives, and the background and experiences that inform them.

Where the shifts happen

In the heat of conflict – political or not – shifts are indeed possible. Mediators often meet people in deeply entrenched positions, where one person feels they don't even want to look at the other again, let alone work with them. But, by talking and listening, by asking questions of those they don't agree with, greater understanding can be achieved. In the mediation case mentioned at the start, there was a shift in the senior leader. They realized that too much time had been spent on the conflict, and they wanted to let go of the issues. By the end of the process, they reflected that what had seemed important before mediation didn't seem important now.

Elections aside, there will always be issues on which people don't want to change their minds. Whether the disagreement is over a nation's foreign policy, or a colleague's comments in a meeting, we can probably all remember instances where, like my mediation party, issues that once seemed so critical, are now almost forgotten. Therefore, it's also useful to ask ourselves these two important questions: "How much will it matter in a year's time?" and "How willing am I to reconsider my own strongly-held views?"