

In Mediation Does Leadership Matter?

A professional group I belong to recently presented a workshop on negotiation. As part of the workshop a panel discussion was convened to discuss the subject of leadership as it pertained to negotiation. The discussion entered an area where the panel members discussed contrasting experiences, and from there the subject migrated for a while into the area of mediation. Most of the people on the panel had varying levels of experience in the field of mediation, and none were novices on that particular subject. While the panel's purpose was primarily to discuss leadership in the context of building and executing successful negotiations on a more consistent basis, the question was raised as to whether leadership mattered when a person's role changed from being an actor in the process to being the facilitator.

Unsurprisingly, this part of the discussion brought out clear distinctions among the various panel members. While there were differences of opinion when discussing leadership in the context of negotiation, it was more nuanced, or a matter of degree. However, in the area of mediation, the question of leadership brought clear/sharp differences of opinion about whether leadership as a concept had a role in mediation. It was then I realized that the panelists were defining leadership from a traditional top down point of view, and were dismissing it as inappropriate in a mediation setting.

That they were approaching the subject from that perspective is not unusual as most people see leaders being in charge and directing the people below them toward a desired outcome. Yet, leadership is more complicated and involves more than giving orders or directing people toward a goal. In his book, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, John Maxwell writes about the Law of Addition. In that part of his book Mr. Maxwell discusses adding value. A key element in that part of the chapter is "knowing and relating to what others value". It is there that I believe the panel missed the boat so to speak because a mediator is at his or her best when the parties in a dispute can understand and relate to what the other party views as important. Getting each side to listen to the other's point of view is a major hurdle that, once crossed, changes the dynamic of the mediation.

Getting to that point does not require that the mediator act as the leader. He or she gets there by constructing the open ended questions that engage the parties in the act of listening. Active listening is an essential skill for any mediator, but it is not a characteristic found among disputants. Using that skill to encourage them to listen the other's point of view helps the parties identify areas where each side can add value and enhance the outcome or outcomes they want. It does not mean the mediator takes on a leadership role. Sometimes it requires borrowing leadership tools and techniques and putting them out there for the parties to use in creating their desired outcomes.

Thought for the day: An idea has no value until it is acted upon. The quality of the action may yield little or it may yield much, but it will always be more than if no action is taken at all.

Do you have questions about how to grow your business? Contact Jerry Cooper at jerry_cooper@att.net, or at 832-452-8537.