

# Telling the Story: Narrative Techniques in Conflict Management

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## Overview

In the last 25 years, much of the mediation field has been dominated by logical, problem-solving approaches to dispute resolution. In processes such as the one popularized in Fisher and Ury's *Getting to Yes*, parties in conflict identify common or conflicting needs and interests and then negotiate over various options to arrive at a solution that will meet those needs. This approach assumes that the issues are negotiable, solutions are available and that the goal is resolution.

But not all disputes lend themselves to traditional conflict resolution processes. In fact many of the conflicts in our communities over values, politics and religion may never be resolvable. Instead, they may require that neutrals are able to help the parties manage their conflict through mutual understanding, reconciliation and shared meaning. This approach to conflict begins with a focus on the parties' stories.

Social constructionist theory posits that all truths or realities (including conflict) are created through social discourse. The stories we tell both create and reinforce our perceptions of reality. Parties in conflict tend to have conflicting stories which when told and re-told serve to polarize and perpetuate the dispute. Therefore, to resolve a conflict requires that the disputants develop (or "co-author") a new story about their relationship. In this approach, conflict is less a problem to be solved as a series of meanings to be managed. In the communication, problem-solving and dispute resolution fields, the social constructionist influence is seen in a variety of trends that employ the use of storytelling:

- Transformative mediation
- Victim/offender mediation
- Narrative therapy
- Narrative mediation
- National reconciliation commissions
- Dialogue and deliberation
- Oral history projects

These trends have drawn attention to conflict management techniques that focus on helping parties tell their stories, understand each others' stories and develop a shared narrative to more effectively manage their dispute. These approaches can serve as both an aid and alternative to interest-based negotiation.

## Story Telling and Narrative Techniques

### Telling the Story

When parties to a conflict tell their story, it is an opportunity to

- Describe one's perceptions of the conflict
- Allow others to hear this perspective
- Provide the neutral with information on the commonalities and differences in the narratives

These narratives tend to feature certain biases or distortions:

- An oversimplification of the conflict
- A tendency to portray oneself as an innocent victim
- A tendency to characterize bad things that happen to the opponent as the opponent's fault
- A tendency to frame the story in absolutes: *never, always, completely*

Despite the distortions, the stories contain a variety of components useful in understanding, analyzing and ultimately synthesizing the perspectives of the parties. These components include plot, characters, motivations, values, assumptions and preferred outcomes.

#### Techniques for encouraging parties to tell their stories:

- At the beginning of a river management dispute, the parties are asked to each describe an experience they had on the river which best portrays what the river means to them.
- In a family mediation, the mediator asks each parent to imagine and then describe how he or she wants to feel about the divorce agreement when it is finished.
- In a session to address serious conflict among a staff, each staff member is invited to describe how the conflict has affected him or her personally.
- In a natural resource dispute, researchers film each member of the negotiating team before the first meeting. Each person is filmed discussing the issues in a personal setting (his or her home, workplace, front yard). Each member of the negotiating team views the film of all the members before actually meeting at the first negotiating session.

### Engaging in Dialogue

Dialogue happens when the parties (and the mediator or facilitator) enter into a conversation about each other's stories. As opposed to argument or debate, dialogue involves a sincere desire to understand the point of view of another person. When the dialogue process is facilitated, the facilitator may ask the parties to follow specific guidelines, such as

- Ask questions from a desire to understand, rather than to make a point
- Ask questions only about topics that the other party has introduced
- Ask only for information that the questioner does not already know

In some processes, such as narrative mediation, the neutral may ask questions to help deconstruct or create uncertainty in the narratives. These types of questions are meant to identify exceptions to their story, underlying assumptions, or the impact of the conflict on the relationship.

### **Techniques for helping the parties engage in dialogue**

- In a conflict over religious beliefs, each group member is given a chance to describe the experience that brought them to their view of religion. Afterward, group members are allowed to ask questions about what each has said as long as the question is based on a sincere desire to understand.
- In a victim/offender mediation, the victim is given an opportunity to ask the offender about the circumstances leading up to the crime.
- After the initial statements in a family mediation, the parties are asked if there was something that one person said that the other would like to better understand.
- To deconstruct conflict narratives in board of directors dispute, the mediator asks each party to discuss moments when they have had misgivings about the positions they have taken.

### **Creating a Shared Narrative**

Conflicts move toward resolution as the parties are able to create a shared story of the problem or issue. In some cases, an agreement or resolution may result; in other cases the result may be a shared understanding of the problem or the issues, or a vision of how to co-exist despite the ongoing conflict.

#### **Techniques for creating a shared narrative**

- In a community dispute, the facilitator analyzes input from a public meeting and then presents to a community stakeholder group a description of the problem framed in terms of the common themes from the stories. This moves the group from polarization and lack of trust to a unified view of the problem and its causes.
- In a dispute regarding a family business, the facilitator posts a large 30-year timeline on the wall. The timeline presents three parallel timeframes for the family, the company, and the external (economic, political, etc.) environment. The family members work in pairs to fill in the main events that have impacted the business. Afterward the family members reflect on their jointly-developed history and the meaning of the events.
- In a business partnership mediation, the mediator frames the problem in terms of the interests of the parties and writes the problem statement on a flip chart. The parties can then work together on the jointly-devised, problem rather than focus on personal attacks on each other.
- A team of senior managers has reached an impasse over goals for a strategic plan. The facilitator asks small groups to draw a picture of what they imagined could happen to the organization if the group were united and motivated regarding the goals. Each small group uses their picture to illustrate their story. The large group pulls key words from each story and then uses the words to form a vision statement for the group. Now aligned on the vision, the team builds agreement on the goals.
- In a family dispute, the mediator asks the parties to describe what their relationship would be like if conflict among them did not exist. The scenarios serve as a basis for building a new relationship.

## Implications for Mediation Practice

**Look for appropriate applications.** For many cases that come to mediation, delving into the parties' stories and relationships may not be appropriate or appreciated. Cases that are about finding the dollar amount for settlement or where there are no ongoing relationships are less appropriate for the type of personal disclosure and introspection required by this approach.

**Facilitate opportunities for the parties to ask questions about and reflect upon each other's stories.** In mediation, parties tend to talk to each other without truly communicating. Look for opportunities to ask questions to foster deeper understanding of the conflict and its impacts:

- *Jane, how do you see the situation differently now that you've heard John's story?*
- *John, what in Jane's story most surprised you?*
- *Jane, what would you like to ask John about his perspective of the conflict?*
- *Now that you've heard each other's perspective, what has been the biggest impact of this conflict on both of you?*

**Remember that sometimes people just need to talk.** As mediators, we are tempted to focus on solutions, decisions and agreement, often to the exclusion of understanding the true sources and meaning of the conflict. Many times the value of the conversation is the mutual understanding, reconciliation or respectful "agreement to disagree" that results from the dialogue process.

## Resources

### Print Resources

Cobb, S. "Empowerment and Mediation: A Narrative Perspective,"  
*Negotiation Journal* 9:3 (July 1993), pp. 245-255.

Herzig, M. and Chasin, L. *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project*. Watertown: Public Conversations Project, 2006.

Kellett, P. M. and Dalton, D. G. *Managing Conflict in a Negotiated World*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001.

Mayer, B. S. *Beyond Neutrality: Confronting the Crisis in Conflict Resolution*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004

Sibbet, D. *I See What you Mean: Empowering Through Visual Language*. San Francisco: Sibbet & Associates, 1981.

Winslade, J., and Monk, G. *Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.

## Online Resources

Conflict Research Consortium  
Transformative Approaches to Conflict  
Heidi Burgess and Guy Burgess  
<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/transform/>

Conflict Resolution Information Source  
Narrative Mediation  
<http://narrative-mediation.crinfo.org/>

“Narrative Mediation: An Exercise in Question Asking”  
Angela Nagao and Norman Page  
<http://www.mediate.com/articles/pageN3.cfm>

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation  
<http://www.thataway.org>

Public Conversations Project  
[www.publicconversations.org](http://www.publicconversations.org)

*Corder/Thompson & Associates is based in Austin, Texas. Judy Corder and Mary Thompson provide facilitation and dispute resolution services to a variety of public and private clients. They have designed and facilitated decision-making forums on topics that include strategic planning, partnering, team relationships, regional planning, organizational mergers, and public policy development. CTA also provides training programs in the areas of group facilitation, basic mediation, advanced mediation, and mediation ethics. For more information, visit [www.corderthompson.com](http://www.corderthompson.com).*