

Conversational Navigation in the Workplace: Where are the Street Signs?

Navigating conversations and navigating road trips - they each have their challenges. The map (or in the case of conversations, the protocol) may be difficult to read, or there may be times where the path seems arduous, an uphill battle (or downhill fall) and there may certainly be stages that seem slippery and unsafe. There may not be a clear road paved, so you may be championing a path through roughage and dangers unknown. Or everything might seem simple and smooth, yet just as you fall into a lulled sense of security a sharp turn can jolt you with fear and the need to react on pure instinct.

In most cases a map may do wonders, but there is nevertheless a time when you may need to ask directions.

In the language of difficult conversation this helpful stranger by the roadside is referred to by a number of names:

- Mediator
- Facilitator
- Coach
- Conciliator
- Dispute Resolution Practitioner

The list goes on...

However, just as some individuals do everything possible to avoid asking for directions on a road trip, there are many who feel that they 'should' be able to navigate their way through conversations without the need for external assistance. If this is possible, that is great. But not everything is within our control and sometimes we just end up lost.

A mediator (the term I will use for ease of explanation) is a trained specialist; armed with every communication and facilitation tool you can imagine, helping you and the other person forge a path to effective communication.

Many will associate the word mediator with the words 'conflict' or dispute' and it can be quite a confronting thought to describe yourself as being in either situation. But a relationship does not have to be conflicted or litigious in any extreme way for mediation to be an effective forum. Any difference or difficulty can benefit from the presence of someone who is not connected to the topic of conversation.

The idea of mediation is to empower those who are having the conversation to be able to have it in an effective and meaningful way. The goal of this might be as simple as clarifying what needs to be discussed or may involve exploration of one or many issues with a view to finding a workable outcome. The role of the mediator is to facilitate this in a way that makes the goal possible, without taking sides or making judgements. A mediator will be used to conversations 'hitting a wall', that, to those involved may seem insurmountable. The comforting thing here is that a mediator has helped people over the wall before, and they can do it again....if you are willing to try.

Increasingly mediation is being effectively used in workplace situations because, let's face it, as soon as you have more than one person in a space you face differences, difficulties, politics, miscommunications, resistance to change or a rush to get to it, and a number of other descriptors depending on your preference.

These challenges don't even have to be external in the sense that they exist as a problem between two people. One person may be facing challenges in workplace communications that stem from their own patterns, fears, history and perceptions and may want some help to better manage these. In cases like this, someone with mediation skills is often brought in as a Conflict Management Coach who can work with you on a one-on-one basis.

Expanding on this we can use mediators as Facilitators for groups, particularly where common goals need to be defined, workplace charters drafted, protocols established, structural change managed, pathways forward identified or collateral damage dealt with. I have seen some amazing pathways crafted through group dialogue and some incredible acknowledgements of people and ideas that had previously not seemed possible to those involved.

Conflict Coaching, Mediation, and Facilitation – they all have their place in an effective workspace. Companies, whether small or large, are like road trips through your career and an affective neutral third party can be just the GPS you require. Taking that first step to ask the stranger by the roadside for some directional assistance can save you time, money, and the frustration of becoming lost, all of which are draining on the individual and the workplace within which they operate.

For more information on having 'that difficult conversation' contact your GPS/Mediator/Facilitator/Conflict Coach now. Before you find yourself lost.

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