

John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

Better Conversations, Better Outcomes

Session 10: Separating People from the Problem

“The way in which she candidly acknowledged my points was really helpful.”

That observation was a turning point in the mediation. Prior to that the parties had been speaking past each other. Neither had really listened to or heard what the other was saying. Each had repeatedly asserted a position and seemed to ignore the other party. Some of the language had seemed dismissive and one party had taken offence. This led to a comment which the other had felt was derogatory and undermined her professionalism. Things were going backwards.

My intervention was to remind each privately of the importance of separating the person from the problem. I wish I had learned this years ago and indeed I wish I could remember it now when the going gets tough. It is so easy to personalise a dispute or disagreement, to mix up the people with the problem, or confuse the individual with the underlying issues.

We all know how we react if we feel personally attacked or diminished in some way. The natural thing is to fight back, to protect ourselves, our dignity, our identity, our argument, our point of view. The trouble is that we can then become defensive and locked into one way of thinking. Saving face tends to be a priority. “I can’t back down.”

Surprise, surprise, this is what happens to others too, if the boot is on the other foot. Little things can become big things. A chance remark, not intended to offend, sets off a chain reaction. I recall a workplace mediation in which a manager had made what was, to him, an innocuous comment to an employee at the end of a working day about a forthcoming project. The employee went home, thought about it, placed it in the context of other events and by next day felt that his job was threatened. Long story short, here we were, three years later with a large claim based on the employee’s psychological condition being such that he would be unable to return to his job. The words which the manager had used became completely mixed up with personal issues, with disastrous results – and no way to deal with the fallout.

To reduce the risk of these things happening, we need be thoughtful about how we can separate people from the problem. The cause of the difficulty is often our desire to make clear the strength of our views and then we use words and a tone that come across as personal. The other side of that coin is that we sometimes don’t talk about things that really need to be addressed for fear of undermining a relationship.

We need to find ways to be rigorous and robust about the issues and at the same time respectful and courteous towards the person we are dealing with (however we may think they are behaving). So, we need to select our words carefully, be measured and thoughtful



in our tone, and attentive to our body language. The verbal, the vocal and the visual as we often refer to them.

Avoiding accusation, judgements, assumptions, implied criticism, a dismissive manner, but instead focussing on the facts, describing how we feel and the impact on us, setting out what we would like to see happen and why that is important for us. Come to think of it, the techniques I discussed in earlier podcasts, including AARREE, HPDREE, asking good questions and listening are just what we need.

I had suggested all of this to the person whose candid acknowledgment made all the difference in the mediation story with which I started this podcast. “That’s not necessary” she had said. “We know each other well enough. We can be robust with each other”. Yes, you can be robust about the issues, I had responded, but your approach so far has come across as dismissive of your colleague as a person. You need to acknowledge that she has a different point of view, show that you respect her as a person and adopt a measured tone. Then you can be clear about the problem you are trying to address. The “how” matters as much as the “what”. It worked.