

## Learning in the Run 20: Meta-goals for Reconciliation

What are the goals of a reconciliation facilitator when mediating an interpersonal conflict?

**The Request.** A manager of the environmental restoration section of a State Department of Environmental Conservation asked for help in reconciling a relationship between a supervisor in her section and the supervisor's direct report, an environmental engineer. The deliverable agreed on was: A written joint report from the supervisor and the engineer detailing the issues, agreements, success measures and progress checks. The manager wanted both participants to give and receive feedback about how their behaviors were impacting each other and others in the section and the coping mechanisms each are using or will use. The manager agreed to act as a final decision maker if that was needed. The manager was unequivocally frank with the two participants that a failure to create a working relationship with the help of a professional coach would be taken as an unwillingness to engage.

**Larger Context.** The relationship between the two parties had deteriorated over several years. Others in the section have left, perhaps, in part, because of the supervisor's style. The supervisor had applied for the manager's job, but was not selected. The supervisor had not been able to problem solve staff's dissenting views, had failed to ask for expertise and input on staff projects, and appeared disengaged at staff meetings. For example, the Supervisor and the Engineer had disagreed about the level of detail required for project specifications and objectives. The staff engineer had gone over the supervisor's head to the manager to complain without going to the supervisor first. Thus, they began to avoid one another. In the past, the two parties had been through some formal mediation with an HR specialist in which feedback was exchanged.

**Consulting Intervention.** After joint meetings with the manager-sponsor, each of the parties was coached in private sessions. Finally, the parties participated in several facilitated dialogue sessions. Although the facilitation followed a typical process of collaborative problem solving, we also adopted a set of meta-goals for the facilitation that we believed would lead to a greater likelihood of reconciliation. These were:

1. Work towards an open and frank conversation. We attempted to model transparency of our feelings, thoughts, observations and wants, when it fit with the conversation. We helped the participants to focus on their here and now experience in the dialogue with each other rather than only discussing the past. We used questions to encourage concreteness and behavioral observations (e.g., "I'm noticing...") to encourage immediate awareness.
2. Move trust of the facilitator, to trust of each other. We helped each party to see the perspective of the other party through our eyes as a neutral third-party. We translated what we were hearing in words that the other party could hear and understand.
3. Point out common ground. We paid particular attention to where that was already agreement. particularly where the parties aligned on superordinate goals or values. We made their alignment on superordinate goals, values and a desire for a better working relationship explicit and asked for validation from the participants.
4. Maintain optimal tension and power balance. We reinforced via paraphrasing and gestures the open expression of feelings to increase the interest and urgency in building a better relationship. To decrease tension, we would draw the attention, eye-contact and conversation to ourselves. Ensuring equal air time was one way we managed power balance.

**Last Line.** If reconciliation is the goal of an interpersonal dialogue, then facilitators might attend to the "meta-goals" of creating more openness, moving trust to the parties themselves, signaling common ground and maintaining optimal tension and power balance.

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