

Re: Conciliation -

Working as a conciliator on a conflict



One dictionary definition of conciliation is “The action of bringing peace and harmony, the action of ending strife” - however this is a definition which over-emphasises success and does not cover the process involved. Another is that it “is the action or process of ending a disagreement, often by discussion between the groups or people involved”. A third – and perhaps most useful - is that it “is an alternative dispute resolution process whereby the parties to a dispute rely on a neutral third-party known as the conciliator, to assist them in solving their dispute.”

Mediation is usually a fairly formal, defined process with stages whereas ‘conciliation’ – including at an interpersonal or small group level – is usually a more informal process though at any level it can vary greatly in terms of what is done and over what length of time. But being ‘informal’ should not mean ‘not thought out’ because anyone trying to intervene in a conflict needs to have thought, and be thinking, very hard about what to do and how to do it. What is here is just some guidelines – a checklist - about bringing positivity to the role. The points are chronological to some extent but not fully.....all are points which need to be borne in mind all the time.

1. Set boundaries and be open about them, build trust

- ☐ If you are getting involved beyond a simple discussion with a party or parties, what are you trying to do or suggesting you do? Speak to the participants in the conflict and see whether they agree to you playing that role (even if you have been asked by others to play the role of conciliator).
- ☐ Seek to build trust in your role and between the parties. If necessary and appropriate, set out your credibility and experience - this obviously can help build trust.
- ☐ Be clear that you are not taking one side in the matter.
- ☐ Be clear what, if anything, you can share with the other side(s) from what has been said (respecting confidentiality). This process needs to be ongoing.
- ☐ Be as honest as you can without scuppering the process.
- ☐ If you feel you need to change the boundaries of your involvement, share that with the parties and get their agreement.

2. Analyse the parties involved (including yourself)

- ☐ Who is involved? What are your (plural) strengths and limitations, both culturally and personally?
- ☐ How can you use these strengths to get the parties to engage fully in a conciliation and solution-finding process?
- ☐ Do you need to do work on relationship building before engaging on the substantive issue(s)?

3. Try to ensure a level playing field

If one party is less prepared or able to engage then it can be part of the role to help them do so. The same is the case in mediation.

4. Look at how to increase communication and therefore understanding

This can be through your own reporting to the parties, exchanges of written comments and material, or even direct verbal communication.

5. If appropriate, share on stages of conflict and ways of dealing with conflicts

Some points (e.g. as in other INNATE handouts) may be of use in helping the parties think about where they are in the conflict and how to go forward but if giving or sharing something to one side give it or offer it to the other too.

If the parties are trapped in recrimination, try to ensure hearing and acknowledgement from the different sides. This is a recognised stage in mediation and is likely to be necessary in conciliation as well. People are likely to need to feel heard in their hurt/pain/anguish/anxiety in order to move forward.

6. Help those involved to focus on their collective interests

No party is likely to be happy to be enemies with another party. Are they committed to the same goal or similar values? If so you can try to use that to develop a concept of the conflict as something to be overcome rather than a pit where they are trapped.

7. Try to stop the conflict spreading

You may need to talk to the main protagonists and anyone else looking like they are going to weigh in to avoid others getting involved. A more widespread conflict is much more difficult to resolve and you can use this argument to try to get others to back off.

8. Outline the possibilities of mediation, where appropriate

If appropriate and desirable, outline the possibilities of a mediation process. If interest is expressed by the parties concerned, help find a mediator or offer to undertake that role yourself if you are capable of doing it.

9. See if you can move from shuttle diplomacy to direct discussion

If there is an opportunity to move to direct discussion between the parties, even without moving into mediation, try to facilitate that if you think the parties are at the stage where they could move forward and/or come to an agreement. But if you are facilitating an actual discussion this may be mediation by another name; alternatively the parties may decide to 'DIY' and just talk themselves.

10. Help possible positive outcomes emerge

The parties concerned may not see ways out of the conflict. You can help steer them to see possibilities. Help the parties to consider what they could offer to the others to unblock the situation.

You could even – if appropriate and at the right stage – suggest possibilities for thought and discussion; while this is somewhat different to mediation (where the mediator only facilitates participants to come up with possible solutions) you need to be very careful that the parties 'own' the process throughout. You are not an arbitrator providing a binding resolution.

Also be aware of the possible need to help parties 'save face' and not be embarrassed by an outcome or a climbdown. Obviously you want a 'win win' solution but helping someone save face may mean dressing up something which is not completely 'win win' to appear more so.

11. Stick around

A conflict which might seem insoluble may not be so a day, a week, a month, a year, or a decade (!) later. Keep an eye out for windows of opportunity. Even if it has proved intractable, at a suitable point you can ask the parties involved if they would like to have a fresh attempt at resolving the dispute.

And if there is some sort of resolution agreed, keep an eye on how it is working out and help the parties to overcome any pitfalls which emerge. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was not the end of conflict between different parties and groups in Northern Ireland. ●