



HARRINGTON MEDIATION

Learning Library

Understanding Precedes Resolution.

robertharringtonjr.com

Publication Information

Article: Collaboration Before Compromise	HM-Article #003
Originally Published: 6/7/26	

Collaboration Before Compromise

One of the words that people often misunderstand in mediation is the word compromise.

For many people, compromise feels like defeat.

It feels like giving up something they wanted.

In reality, compromise does require each participant to give something.

By definition, compromise is a settlement in which each party makes concessions to reach a mutually acceptable agreement.

The important distinction is that compromise is not where mediation begins.

It begins with collaboration.

Although both words are verbs, they describe two different parts of the mediation process.

Collaboration is the conversation.

Compromise is the action that follows.

During collaboration, participants have an opportunity to explain what they want, why they want it, and what matters most to them.

This is why mediators often distinguish between a person's position and their interest.

A position is what someone says they want.

An interest is the reason beneath that position.

The more thoroughly those interests are explored, the easier compromise often becomes.

Why?

Because participants frequently discover they have more in common than they originally believed.

The compromise they feared at the beginning may not be nearly as significant once they understand one another.

Instead of feeling like they are surrendering everything, they recognize they are simply giving a little in order to gain something more valuable.

Each participant gives something.

Each participant concedes something.

Each participant lets go of something.

But each participant also gains something that could not have been achieved without collaboration.

This is why I often say:

Understanding Precedes Resolution.

The quality of the collaboration directly influences the quality of the compromise.

When understanding increases, compromise becomes less about losing and more about intentionally choosing what matters most.

Successful mediation is not about one participant winning and the other losing.

It is about both participants making thoughtful concessions so that both leave with an agreement they helped create.

Because sometimes the strongest agreements are not those where one person gets everything they wanted...

They are the agreements where both people willingly gave a little so that everyone could move forward.



In Practice

When conversations become focused on winning or defending positions, progress often slows. Instead of asking only *“What do I want?”*, participants can ask *“Why is this important to me?”* and *“What is most important to the other person?”* Exploring these underlying interests creates opportunities for collaboration before decisions are made. When people feel heard and better understand one another’s priorities, compromise becomes a thoughtful choice rather than a reluctant sacrifice.

Reflection Questions

- When I find myself in conflict, do I focus more on defending my position or explaining the interests behind it?
- Have I ever viewed compromise as losing rather than as a collaborative decision to move forward?
- What might I discover if I spent more time understanding another person’s priorities before proposing solutions?
- How could greater collaboration change the quality of agreements in my personal or professional relationships?

Key Takeaway

Compromise is most effective when it grows out of genuine collaboration. By first exploring the interests, concerns, and priorities that underlie each person’s position, participants often discover that meaningful agreement requires less sacrifice than they initially imagined. Lasting resolutions are built not on one person winning, but on both participants making informed, intentional concessions after achieving greater understanding.

Understanding Precedes Resolution.

Robert Harrington Jr.

Transformative Mediator
Founder, Harrington Mediation

Disclaimer

This article is provided for educational purposes only and is intended to encourage thoughtful reflection about communication, conflict, and mediation. It is not legal advice, psychological counseling, or mental health treatment.

Harrington Mediation
robertharringtonjr.com

© 2026 Harrington Mediation. All Rights Reserved.
HM-Article #001