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Understanding Precedes Resolution.

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Miscommunication or Misinterpretation?

One of the first lessons many mediators learn is that what is said is not always what is received.

We've all heard some version of that before.

Rather than repeating the same lesson, I'd like to suggest a subtle distinction that has changed the way I think about conflict.

Perhaps many communication problems are not actually miscommunications.

Perhaps they are misinterpretations.

The communication itself may have been perfectly clear, yet the meaning assigned to it by the listener was different.

A person says one thing.

Another person sincerely hears something else.

Sometimes important details were omitted. Sometimes cultural differences shape understanding. Sometimes past experiences influence perception. And sometimes two people can hear the exact same words and still walk away with completely different conclusions.

As mediators—and as people—we can reduce these misunderstandings by practicing a few simple habits.

1. Reflect back what you understood.

Don't simply repeat someone's words.

Instead, explain the message back in your own words.

This gives the speaker an opportunity to say:

"Yes, that's exactly what I meant."

Or,

"Not quite. Let me clarify."

Understanding is strengthened when we confirm meaning, not merely repeat language.

2. Ask for clarification.

Complex vocabulary doesn't always produce clearer communication.

Sometimes the most effective questions are the simplest:

- * "Can you clarify that?"

- * "Can you give me an example?"

- * "I'm not sure I understood what you meant."

There is wisdom in admitting we don't yet understand.

3. Choose the right moment to ask.

Timing matters.

We've all been in conversations where someone says, "Hold your questions until the end."

More often than not, someone else asks the very question we were about to ask, or the conversation naturally provides the answer.

Not every uncertainty requires immediate interruption.

Sometimes patience produces clarity.

Conflict is not always created by what was said.

More often, it grows from the meaning we assign to what we believe we heard.

As mediators, our responsibility is not merely to help people communicate.

It is to help people understand.

Because understanding still precedes resolution.

In Practice

Before reacting to someone's words, pause to confirm that you understood their intended meaning. Reflect back what you heard in your own words, invite clarification when something is unclear, and recognize that timing can influence understanding just as much as the words themselves. These simple practices help shift conversations from assumption to understanding, reducing the likelihood that conflict will grow from misunderstanding rather than genuine disagreement.

Reflection Questions

- How often do I assume I understand someone's meaning without first confirming it?
- Can I recall a time when a conflict resulted more from my interpretation than from what was actually said?
- What communication habit—reflecting, clarifying, or waiting for the right moment—would most improve my difficult conversations?
- How might my relationships change if I focused first on understanding another person's intended meaning before responding?

Key Takeaway

Many conflicts do not arise because communication failed, but because meaning was interpreted differently by the listener. By confirming understanding, asking thoughtful clarifying questions, and allowing conversations to unfold before reaching conclusions, we create opportunities to replace assumption with clarity. In mediation and everyday life alike, genuine understanding is built not merely through speaking, but through ensuring that meaning is accurately received.

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