



Mediation Stewardship Project

Resource Catalog

Understanding Precedes Resolution

Separating Intent from Impact

Estimated Reading Time: 3–4 minutes

In This Article

By the end of this article, you will understand:

- the difference between intent and impact,
- why people can experience the same interaction differently,
- one practical way to improve understanding during difficult conversations.

Why This Matters

One of the most common sources of conflict is the difference between what a person intended to communicate and how their words or actions were experienced by someone else.

A person may believe they were being honest, helpful, or humorous, while another person experiences the same interaction as dismissive, disrespectful, or hurtful.

When conversations become focused on proving intentions instead of understanding impact, people often stop listening and begin defending themselves.

Recognizing the distinction between intent and impact can create space for greater understanding, accountability, and more productive conversations.

The Core Idea

Intent is what we mean to communicate or accomplish.

Impact is how our words or actions are experienced by another person.

These are not always the same.

Good intentions do not guarantee a positive impact, just as a negative impact does not automatically mean someone intended harm.

Understanding this distinction allows people to hold two ideas at the same time:

- A person may have acted with good intentions.
- Another person may have been genuinely affected by those actions.

Conflict literacy encourages us to explore both perspectives rather than assuming one cancels out the other.

Everyday Example

A supervisor provides brief feedback to an employee during a busy workday.

The supervisor intends to be efficient and keep the project moving.

The employee experiences the conversation as abrupt and dismissive.

Neither person's experience is necessarily false.

The supervisor's intent and the employee's impact are different aspects of the same interaction.

Recognizing both creates an opportunity for understanding instead of continued misunderstanding.

Try This Today

The next time someone tells you that your words or actions affected them, resist the urge to immediately explain your intentions.

Instead, ask yourself:

"Can I first understand how this experience affected them before explaining what I intended?"

Understanding another person's experience does not require abandoning your own perspective.

Reflection Question

Think about a time when your intentions were misunderstood—or when someone else's intentions did not match the impact you experienced.

How might that conversation have been different if both intent and impact had been explored?

Continue Exploring

Next Articles

- **Emotional Triggers in Conflict**
- **What Mediation Is—and Isn't**
- **Conflict Is Normal**

Looking for More Support?

Many conflicts persist because people become focused on defending their intentions rather than exploring one another's experiences. Mediation provides a structured process for helping people better understand both perspectives while maintaining each person's right to self-determination. You can also continue exploring practical tools within the **Mediation Stewardship Project Resource Catalog**.

Educational Use Notice

This resource is provided for educational and informational purposes only. It is not legal advice, mental-health treatment, crisis intervention, or a substitute for professional services. Every conflict is unique, and you remain responsible for determining the most appropriate course of action for your situation.