

TAKING A 'NARRATIVE' APPROACH TO MEDIATION BY MICHELE GOUSIE GEREMIA, BSW, MS, SPHR

When I come across something that energizes me and takes me somewhere I have not been before, I have an irresistible urge to share.

Today, I feel compelled to tell someone about one of my favorite mediation books, "**Narrative Mediation: A New Approach to Conflict Resolution**" by John Winslade and Gerald Monk.

While I share this book from the perspective of a mediator, it has value for therapists and counselors, Human Resource Managers, and anyone involved in conflict resolution.

The "narrative" approach takes the perspective that, as human beings, we organize our experiences in the form of stories. If we stop and think about it, we can relate to this sense of "organization". From the time we are little, we are told and we build in to our lives, stories about who we are, the kind of people we are, These stories shape us.

As we deal with conflicts in our lives, we build on these stories and they not only direct our thoughts and actions, they also lead us to interpret the thoughts and actions of others with whom we are in conflict.

As mediators, we must deal with "the story" that people bring to us. Because, in truth, there is always more than one story.

Because each party has his/her own story, doesn't make each person's story less valid. Ultimately, differing stories by the parties is the BIG OPENING that mediators are looking for that will provide for the possibility of resolution. I say "possibility" of resolution, because while resolution is what the parties are looking for when they come to mediation, and, of course, the mediator would love for the parties to reach a resolution that works, resolution is not the ultimate goal in "narrative mediation."

A narrative approach opens up a world where we challenge the stories we have created, open ourselves to better stories that show people, ourselves and others, as bigger, more loving, more giving than we had perceived in our original story



The key is getting from the original stories to that new story that will create the opportunity for resolution. Without the new story, there is little possibility of a lasting, win-win resolution.

How do we open up a space when confronted with a story that appears to have no openings for change? Where accusations and anger are so much a part of the story, very often appearing to be the whole story.

All mediation begins with building trust—trust between the parties and the mediator. It is important that the mediator hear the stories and the pain that each party brings to the table. The mediator must also be able to hear the stories and pain without taking the side of one party or the other. This is the mediator's first opportunity to exhibit to the parties that each story is important and has been heard AND that there are two different stories that have been presented.

At this point, the mediator is in a position to identify the key aspects of each parties' story, so that both parties hear what matters most to the other party. The mediator may be able, then, to talk about the major problem as

if it is external to the parties, something that has happened to them that came about. that has caused them to feel the way they do.

Once the mediator has externalized the problem, he/she may be able to lead the parties in a discussion of the effects the "problem" has had on each of them. This discussion enables the parties to get away from talking about each other's inadequacies and failings and focus on their feelings.

When the parties are able to relate to their own pain and the pain of the other party, and understand how the problem has caused both to suffer, the mediator may ask the parties if they would like to change the direction of the conflict, if they would like to turn the situation from continued deterioration to building trust.

Building trust involves constructing a new story of working together, of participation and engagement in the process of trying to discover a resolution.



In my conversations with other mediators, I often hear that while the mediation process in general is effective and often leads to solutions to problems, many mediators do not see real lasting change in the attitudes of the parties; that parties are just as judgmental when they leave as when they came.

I think that this sometimes appears to be the case. In actuality, I believe that we may not see the changes that take place in people because they are with us for so short a period of time. I also believe that people change in small increments. And that through participating in the process of mediation and through the mediators narrative approach, people move through their lives changed for the better.

This narrative mediation approach is just one perspective that enables mediators to work effectively with people in conflict.