

Transformative mediation

This brief overview describes the approach to conflict intervention that was first articulated by Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger in *The Promise of Mediation* (2nd Ed 2002 Jossey Bass).

The transformative approach to mediation practice takes a social and communicative view of human conflict.

Conflict represents a crisis in human interaction. Specifically, the occurrence of conflict tends to destabilise the parties' experience of both self and other, so that the parties interact in ways that are both more vulnerable and more self-absorbed than they did before the conflict. Further, these negative dynamics often feed into each other on all sides as the parties interact, in a vicious circle that intensifies each party's sense of weakness and self-absorption. As a result, the interaction between the parties quickly degenerates and assumes a mutually destructive, alienating, and dehumanising character.

For most people, according to transformative theory, being caught in this kind of destructive interaction is the most significant negative impact of conflict.

However, the transformative model posits that, people have the capacity to change the quality of their interactions to reflect relative personal strength or self-confidence (the empowerment shift) and relative openness or responsiveness to the other (the recognition shift).

As these positive dynamics feed into each other, the interaction can regenerate and assume a constructive, connecting, and humanising character. The model assumes that the transformation of the interaction itself is what matters most to parties in conflict.

Therefore, the theory defines the mediator's goal as helping the parties to identify opportunities for empowerment and recognition shifts as they arise in the parties' conversation, to choose whether and how to act upon these opportunities, and thus to change their interaction from destructive to constructive (Bush & Pope, 2002).

As parties talk together and listen to each other, they build new understandings of themselves and their situation, critically examine the possibilities, and make their own decisions. Those decisions can include settlement agreements, but no one is coerced into any decision or agreement. The outcomes are entirely in the parties' own hands and subject to their own choices.

Effective mediator practice is focused on supporting empowerment and recognition shifts, by allowing and encouraging party deliberation and decision-making, and inter-party perspective-taking, in various ways.

A transformative mediator identifies opportunities for empowerment and recognition as they appear in the parties' own conversations, and responding in ways that provide an opening for parties to choose what, if anything, to do with them.

The transformative framework is based on and reflects relational ideology, in which human beings are assumed to be fundamentally social—formed in and through their relations with other human beings, essentially connected to others, and motivated by a desire for both personal autonomy and constructive social interaction.

References

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