

Resolution Reflections: On Forgiveness

by Jay Uhler

Forgiveness is praised by many as a concept, yet resisted in practice. Forgiveness is essential for conflicts to be resolved emotionally, healed. Lack of forgiveness fertilizes conflict.

As mediators, it can be useful for us to look at the experience of forgiveness to see if it is relevant for what we do. It can be very relevant to who we are because our attitudes and our energy create the crucible for conflict resolution.

The seeds of forgiveness are planted by the mediator when he approaches the conflict in a non-judgmental manner and with respect for all the parties to the dispute. When we understand that the actions of the individuals, no matter how ineffective, abrasive and dysfunctional, are their attempt to cope with an upsetting situation in their life, we can be compassionate toward them. We may need to set limits on their actions in order to maintain safety in the room, yet when we have compassion, we will be more gracious in the way that we present the limits.

So what needs to take place for forgiveness to occur? Some say that forgiveness can only happen when the offender repents for their offense. Others add, and makes retribution. As any mediator knows, these may not, often do not, happen.

So why even consider forgiveness as relevant to mediation? Because in mediation, if there is to be true resolution, it means building relationships and forgiveness builds relationships. Conflicts between different parties, at work, between couples or in families, affect other members of the parties that are not directly involved in the conflict. Forgiveness can be a significant factor in healing the breaches that exist between people.

Two thoughts to consider. First, forgiveness can occur with or without apology or repentance of another party. Forgiveness is not only for the benefit of the offender, it benefits the person doing the forgiving.

Bitterness eats a person alive. It causes emotional and physical illness in the person who holds onto grudges. It takes self-love to let go of grievances and it is the only healthy option. Forgiveness, letting go of the negative emotional attachment to the person(s) who have hurt you is by far the better alternative.

Second, forgiveness by one person can shift the energy and the dynamics in a conflict. When one person changes their stance from hostility and judgment to openness, acceptance and receptivity, it shifts the emotional environment. It creates the possibility that the other member(s) to the conflict will alter their attitude and actions, opening themselves to creative resolution.

When our desire as mediators is to support people to move from conflict to peace and we bring an attitude of acceptance and forgiveness to the table, it increases the likelihood that peace will occur.

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