

Working with Uncertainty

Introduction

Uncertainty is a feature of many of the situations in which mediators and facilitators are asked to work for several reasons. First, our work tends to be in fairly complex situations, and often uncertainty is one source of that complexity. Secondly, any situation that involves human beings involves uncertainty: we are a tricky species. Thirdly, uncertainty creates conflict – which is why we get called for in the first place.

The purpose of this note is to suggest what we can do with uncertainty when it rears its awkward head in the middle of an already difficult meeting. It is designed to be simple enough for us to remember even under stress.

Defining uncertainty

The uncertainty that arises in the meetings and mediations we run tends to have one or more of five causes:

1. Lack of *information*, lack of *agreed* information, lack of *confidence* in the information that does exist, or failure to understand it in the same way as others or its significance to others in the context. People often respond to these types of uncertainty by demanding more research, analysis and consultation.
2. Concern about the *intentions* of others, what values are involved for them, what is important for whom, and therefore what is negotiable and what is not. People often respond to this type of uncertainty by seeking or establishing clearer objectives, authority or guidance, or, again, through wider consultation.
3. The possibility of *interference* by factors beyond the control of those present, such as decisions made by others, external regulation, or events or circumstances beyond human control. People respond to these by asking for better coordination or more consultation in the case of human factors, more prevention or at least more advance warning in the case of those beyond human control.
4. Fear of an unwanted or unfavourable *outcome*, such as a decision or a solution that does not sufficiently reflect certain interests, or gives preference to one point of view over another. Fear of the outcome, even where it is under the control of participants, is probably the main reason for participants not wishing to engage in the first place.
5. Fear of the *unknown*, or having to do something new, unfamiliar or beyond current experience, and of how it will fit with the known and comfortable world. People often respond to this type of uncertainty by becoming even more rigid in their adherence to the *status quo*, which can in turn provoke others to become more radical in their demands.

Uncertainty comes in different shapes and sizes as well as types, and there are two ways of defining it that are helpful to mediators.

Degree of uncertainty

- A *simple* uncertainty is one that can be reduced *easily*, quickly and inexpensively. For example, uncertainty about the suitability of a holiday for children can be resolved by asking a travel agent; uncertainty about the weather for tomorrow's picnic may be reduced by consulting a weather forecast.
- A *complex* uncertainty is more *difficult*, slower and more expensive to reduce. Deciding whether a site is suitable for building a house may require research into the site's previous history; deciding the value of a measure to reduce climate change means some very complex research indeed.

The more complex the uncertainty, the more difficult and expensive it is to reduce, and the longer it takes, the more likely it is to go un-reduced and therefore remain as a source of conflict.

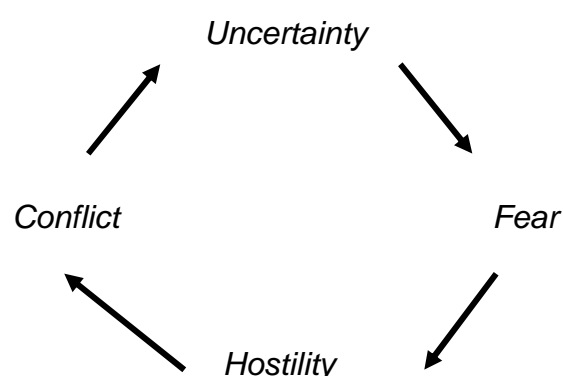
Significance of uncertainty

- A *less significant* uncertainty may not be worth the effort to reduce: picnics in the rain, after all, can also be fun.
- A *more significant* uncertainty may make any wider resolution of an issue impossible until it has been reduced: conflict over the desirability of genetically modified crops, for example, will continue until the multiple and complex uncertainties around their ultimate environmental, economic and social impacts are reduced.

This also raises the question of who decides the significance of something, and the fact that different people or groups may attribute different significance to different uncertainties.

Why uncertainty matters

Uncertainty matters because it creates conflict. Worse still, because it creates conflict *indirectly*, as part of a cycle of cause and response, it often goes unrecognized as a source of conflict. It happens like this:



Uncertainty of any type creates fear and anxiety: about the future, about 'losing', about others' values, motives, priorities and intentions. This fear is expressed as hostility towards others, and this in turn causes conflict and so more uncertainty. It can become an escalating cycle.

Our systems and particularly our leaders, whether political, legal or commercial, find uncertainty uncomfortable because it means admitting that something is beyond their control, and because our culture demands decisiveness¹.

Both these prevent leaders admitting to uncertainty even when it is obvious, and this can mean major decisions being made without proper analysis of uncertainty or efforts to reduce it.

But uncertainty matters not only because it creates conflict, but because reducing uncertainty is also potentially the first step towards resolving it – for two reasons.

1. Uncertainty, and the need to reduce it, may be the one thing that all participants have in common.
2. As with all systemic relationships, if one element changes the others must change in response. So if uncertainty is reduced, the likelihood is that the fear and anxiety, the hostility they cause, and the conflict that results, will also reduce.

They will not go away: reducing uncertainty is no miracle cure for other causes of conflict – but the experience of working together to identify significant uncertainties and agree how they should be reduced, or how they should be managed, may build some trust and relationships that will unlock other elements of the conflict.

The ability to manage uncertainty and make a virtue out of necessity is also a prime leadership skill in an increasingly inter-connected world; and arguably the inability to cope with the doubt, uncertainty and ambiguity produced by exponentially expanding sources of conflicting information is becoming a crucial deficit.

Managing uncertainty

Managing uncertainty rests on balancing its significance against the costs of reducing it. The following matrix sets out a systematic method for deciding what to do in response to uncertainty.

¹ For a useful discussion of doubt and uncertainty go to http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b00z2sl8/In_Doubt_We_Trust_Episode_1/

UNCERTAINTIES	Easy/cheap to reduce	Moderately difficult to reduce	Difficult/expensive to reduce
Not significant	Reduce or ignore	Probably ignore	Definitely ignore
Moderately significant	Probably reduce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce in proportion to significance • Agree possible impacts and plan to manage them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce in proportion to significance • Agree possible impacts and plan to manage them
Very significant	Definitely reduce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce to the full extent possible • Agree possible impacts and plan to manage them • Agree outline contingency plan in case management fails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree need to reduce before making critical decisions <p>Then</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce as far as possible <p>Or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If reduction too slow/expensive agree assumptions* and contingency plans in case assumptions are wrong

**In this context 'agreeing assumptions' means people exploring their expectations of what might happen, agreeing what is most likely, and going ahead working on that basis. Contingency plans set out what will happen if these expectations and assumptions prove to be wrong.*

There are a number of points to make in relation to using this matrix:

- The process of identifying and discussing uncertainties can be as valuable as being able to reduce them because it involves the exploration of common interests and concerns
- Likewise the agreement of possible impacts and contingency plans is a useful exercise in collaboration that may not demand concessions
- Making assumptions as an alternative to reducing uncertainty is also collaborative and can help people understand each others' values and priorities (especially where they are unconscious)
- Contingency planning is a useful reminder of the costs of not agreeing on other issues and is a gentle way to ask people what they will do if they cannot agree an outcome.