



U **Unraveling**
Dynamics in Mediation:
The systemic approach
for sustainable results



Unraveling Dynamics in Mediation: The systemic approach for sustainable results

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In dealing with conflicts as a mediator, the main goal is to resolve the conflict for both parties in the most optimal way. Most of the time this works out fine. There are times, however, when you just cannot seem to get a handle on it. You believe you have resolved the situation, just to see the conflict flare up again. Apparently, there is more to it than meets the eye.

It is necessary to reveal the undercurrent that affects the interaction between people in relationships and conflicts and to see things from a systemic perspective in order to achieve sustainable solutions. Therefore, this article provides a brief explanation of what we can gain from the systemic approach in mediation.

Why systems?

Every human being is part of multiple systems. A system is a group of people who belong together for some reason, and the network of relationships and interactions among those people. There are family systems, which you come into by birth. And there are organisational or task systems. These have a clear origin, are created for a particular task or purpose. Both types of systems know a certain order of positions and have written and unwritten rules about how to deal with current, previous and future members. How do you join? And what do you have to do to stay in it?

Upper current and undercurrent

When working with people, it is important to know of the distinction between what happens in the upper current - that which you can notice or observe directly - and the undercurrent - that which is not noticeable, but plays a key role in interactions. The undercurrent deals with subconscious driving forces from the systems of which we are a part. Systems have another important characteristic: they want to continue to exist and therefore have a self-regulating capacity in the undercurrent. That self-regulating capacity often determines the dynamics in a system, that is, the process of interactions between members of that system. Thus, the undercurrent determines what happens in the upper current.

Looking from a systemic perspective

When analysing and resolving conflicts, we tend to focus on the upper current. But if we do not take into account the influence from the undercurrent, a solution found may turn out to be only a temporary symptom relief. It is therefore important to be aware of the influence of systems in the undercurrent, if you want to achieve sustainable results. To do this, you can learn to look at people, relationships and conflicts from a systemic perspective. This means that you look at people in the context of the systems they belong to. And that you realise that patterns in the interactions can come from being a solution to a problem in a system. If you don't uncover such a pattern and cannot recognise its meaning, the pattern may continue to play a role, thereby perpetuating the conflict.

Multiple systems together

At the mediation table several systems suddenly come together. Each of these systems brings a certain dynamic to the table, and those dynamics affect what happens in the undercurrent. As a mediator, it pays to be aware of this. In order to explore what determines the undercurrent, it is necessary to unravel the systems and what is going on in them. In order to do that, **it is helpful to distinguish the dynamics of each individual's family system on three levels:**

1. Family dynamics on an individual level: one's own blueprint.
2. Dynamics between clients: collusion in the relationship.
3. Dynamics between clients and mediator.

1. Family dynamics on an individual level

In the family in which we are raised, we receive all sorts of things from the many generations before us. Not only DNA has been passed on to us by our ancestors, but also a particular set of norms and values, (religious) beliefs and memories of pleasant and painful events. Once you realise your place in the order of the generations in your family system, you will find a whole row of people from previous generations in a triangular form behind you. Your parents, your grandparents and behind them their parents and so on. Even if you do not know them all, traces of who they were and what they experienced are in your system. Often, we know more of what our parents learned from their past and how that shaped them.

Place is decisive for own dynamics

Through our parents and the place we had in our family of origin, we learn how to face the world. That place had a decisive influence on our ability to develop certain qualities more than others. You could call them your core quality or gift. Other skills or competences that were less welcome or not stimulated in the situation you were in do not get much attention in your development. You could call them your challenge or task. From the dynamics of your system of origin a pattern of your gift and challenge emerges.

Filling an empty space

For example, you may have begun to feel responsible because after your parents' divorce there was a gap in the family that you have come to fill. On the other hand, you find it hard to let things go, or to receive care by others. Or you have found that it is better to do what others want you to do than to live out of your own free will. Choosing what is good for you will be your task. You did a good job at this as a child and though it was never a conscious decision, at the time it was the best you could do to keep your system functioning. The power of the system to keep you in your place in that pattern is so impressive that it takes great effort to start behaving in a different way.

Blueprint

How you look at the world and how you initially react to it is largely determined by the position you have taken in your system of origin, and by the pattern of the gift and the challenge you developed there. Even the kind of work you do or the partner you choose, typically fit that pattern of origin. It is like a kind of blueprint for your life. Knowing what it looks like and how it affects your vision and behaviour is therefore very valuable. You can, for example, explore this with a table constellation in which you use figures or symbols to place the members of your family of origin in relation to each other in order to get a picture of the dynamics. What was your place in the family of origin? What did you learn to do

very well there? And do you still do this now, for example in your work or in your own family?

It is worth noting that it is advisable to look at the blueprint of the conflicting parties not only in love relationships and family conflicts, but in any other type of conflict as well. When going into conflict with another person, you most likely encounter your own challenge and learning landscape, thus it is essential seeing how each blueprint meets the other's.

2. Dynamics between clients

In many love affairs, you unconsciously choose a partner who has the opposite combination of gifts and challenges to you, or precisely the same. You either complete each other and therefore complement one another, or you actually recognise each other in the same set of qualities and challenges. How one pattern fits the other is called collusion. It is a kind of unconscious and unwritten prenuptial agreement, be it on a deeper level. It seems as if one partner then is fulfilling the task of the other and vice versa.

Practice material

The great thing about relationships is that a partner represents excellent practice material to work on your own task(s). This is especially true in a case where the other embodies what you yourself are not yet so good at. That way, you can learn from a nearby example. Except that your task, or learning point, often concerns a subject that you have avoided for a reason. There is a blockage or limiting belief, or there is a feeling of pain lurking underneath. People tend not to seek out that pain if it is not necessary. And so, it can easily happen that you outsource to the other person what you are not good at or do not like to do. For example, one person provides peace of mind and a safe home base for the other, and the other provides the adventure and setting up a successful business.

Relationship as a bridge

A relationship is like a bridge between two pillars: each of the partners with their own pattern. Each sits on one side of the bridge that is the relationship. Together you maintain it as the connection between you. You can both walk halfway across the bridge and meet each other in the middle. You can also use the bridge to learn to walk to the other side, explore that other pillar and make it your own. That's how you work on your challenge. In fact, if you refrain from doing so, the bridge turns out to be not so sturdy in times of turmoil. When major life events occur - such as the birth of a child, a move to another city or country, or the death of one of the parents - you tend to each fall back on your own pillar and continue doing what you were doing before.

In several types of conflict

It is important to know that not only in love relationships or family conflict, but in any type of conflict, you can meet your challenge as an unresolved inner conflict. "Conflicts are inner conflicts manifesting outwardly", according to holistic lawyer Bill van Zyverden. In the conflict with the other, you encounter your own learning landscape. If one is willing to see that, you can also choose a different reaction to the situation.

Insight into one's own contribution

As a mediator, you can help clients gain insight into their collusion in the relationship. Once you have discovered what each person's pattern or blueprint is from the place of their family of origin, you can then explore how those blueprints fit together and how the clients have or have not maintained the pattern together during the relationship. Understanding that collusion and the dynamics between them helps to see how it contributed to the conflict or breakup. It can also help to accept the end of a relationship or provide a lead to its recovery.

3. Dynamics between clients and mediator

And the influence from the mediator's system? In mediation, in addition to that of clients, another systemic influence comes to the table, namely that of you as a mediator. What do you bring from your system of origin and how does that determine what you find easy to do in your work? Before you start working systemically with clients, it is important to explore how you have been shaped by your system. With what beliefs and motivations did you start doing this work? Many mediators tend to position themselves between other parties, because that is what they are used to from home (between their parents, their brothers or sisters). From that central position they are then accustomed to sensing what is needed for preventing or resolving a conflict.

Your place in the mediation

The pattern that you know from home because of the place you naturally occupy, you easily encounter again at the mediation table. This may mean that in the mediation you can leave your place as a mediator and come between the parties or become a party to the conflict yourself. Your clients come to you with certain expectations. They might appeal to you to solve an issue for them without wanting, daring or being able to take too much ownership themselves. If you, by your pattern, are inclined to respond to such an appeal, it may be that you are easily drawn into that dynamic. In that case it is advisable to take a time-out and examine what is happening to you that causes you to be triggered into something from your own system. You are then no more or less effective in your role as mediator.

Balance between parties

To take care of your multi-directed partiality, it is important to know your own instinctive movement toward different types of people. This way you know whether you have a tendency, for example, to give a dominant person a lot of space, or to want to stand up for the underdog. This tendency can in fact unconsciously influence your partiality, thus harming the balance between the parties. How you react to certain emotions shown by clients can also be related to what they trigger in you from your past. It may be that victimisation triggers you by an accumulated allergy to such behaviour from an always needy sister.

Mirror from outside

To remain effective as a mediator, it is therefore good to become aware of your own dynamics from the family of origin and the triggers that can draw you into the mediation system. Seeing and recognising your own patterns does require an outside impulse or mirror. Reading an article or book that makes you think. Or a moving question from a trainer, coach or peer reviewer. Explore within yourself. It takes courage, but it will be worth your while.

