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Good Partners Make Good Co-Mediators

How Don Quixote and Sancho Panza Found Resolution With Their Windmills

By Dusty and Vicki Rhoades

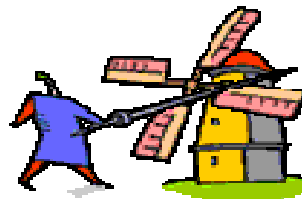
Don Quixote and Sancho Panza were masters of good teamwork. There are a lot of windmills that knock us around in the heat of conflict, and having a good partner (co-mediator) makes the quest easier and far more fun. There are many lessons to be learned from our two friends from La Mancha.

Lesson #1: Make ready for the quest, Sancho – the Impossible Dream awaits!

(Pre-Brief and Plan)

Don Quixote and Sancho understood that one of the most important things in working together is to show up—to be there on time and mentally prepared to plan a quest. Pre-briefing is key to ensuring compatible practice and being able to work well together. We all have different skills so it's wise to balance our strengths and weaknesses. Don Quixote was more bold and quick to charge into the heat of the battle, offering early reflections. Sancho was comfortable standing back, looking at the big picture and summarizing the situation. Their combined skills helped them

follow the same path toward positive results. Whether we see a four-armed giant or a



whirling windmill, we will work well together if we understand ourselves, our roles and share the same goal. As Sancho would say, *“There’s room for both your horse and my donkey on the path, Sire, as long as we’re headed for the same destination.”*

Lesson #2: Hold on, Sire; I’m coming

(Trust Each Other and the Process)

Don Quixote and Sancho knew that trusting your partner and the process is critical while helping adversaries work through their issues. Good partners leave room for each other to participate and model collaborative behavior. It’s never helpful for one of the co-mediators to dominate the discussion. Seeing the mediators share responsibility and cooperate in the process will encourage the parties to engage more constructively.

Patience is essential—both partners need to know when it’s best to wait for the conflict to develop at its own pace. We prosper by trusting the process to help the adversaries find their path. Our heroes also understood that their individual experiences colored their perspective and each needed the other to stay true to their mission. We all have our personal passions and old wounds that can come back to haunt us. Even experienced mediators may sometimes get off track and succumb to directive tendencies, rather than helping the participants find their own best solutions. A gentle reminder is often all that’s needed to help a partner get back on track. Sancho could be gentle but firm when reminding his Knight that he was tilting at the wrong windmill. When Don Quixote was caught up by the four-armed giant, Sancho was there to pull him to safety.

Lesson #3: Let’s celebrate our success, Sancho, but check our armor for dents and scratches!

(Debriefing and Evaluation)

Don Quixote and Sancho were careful to go over not only what went well but also what they could do better in future conflict. They knew

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Good Partners cont.

the importance of honest feedback—being open to constructive coaching and learning from each other’s experience to improve their skills. Rather than taking offense, they trusted each other’s good intentions and realized that working as a team magnified their strengths and diminished their weaknesses.

Leave them be, Sire—that’s enough for now!

(Closing Thoughts)

Even the best of partnerships are sometimes frustrating and difficult, but they can also be fun and rewarding. Don Quixote and Sancho found that the secret to a successful partnership came from respecting each other’s perspective, being gentle with each other, and working from a sense of trust, safety and collaboration. They shared a common vision for promoting the self-determination of parties in conflict. Few four-armed

giants can resist such peaceful intentions!

Dusty and Vicki Rhoades are partners in mediation and life. Dusty’s background is that of a Naval Aviator and engineering manager. He is currently Vice-President of the Test and Technology Operating Unit of Wyle Aerospace Group in Lexington Park, Maryland. Vicki serves as a volunteer in numerous peace-making capacities in Southern Maryland.

"It appeared that they were very different from one another and that those serious personality differences were at the root of the issue."



Coaches can help employees and managers learn techniques to improve communication.

Conflict Coaching and It’s Application to Both Parties in a Conflict Relationship

By Ed Modell

According to my research on the Internet, the relatively new field of “conflict coaching” dates back to 1996 at Temple University. At that time, the University’s ADR organization recognized that its mediation services were underutilized by the campus community and coaching proved to be a service especially suited to conflict cases where only one party was seeking the organization’s assistance.

Generally, conflict coaching involves a coach working with one client to help the client learn techniques for communicating effectively in conflict situations and to prepare for difficult conversations with others. This type of coaching also is used to help people prepare for mediations or negotiations.

As an Ombudsman, most of my work involves coaching visitors who are seeking ways to resolve varying degrees of conflict with their co-workers or supervisors. My normal approach is to use my coaching training skills to ask powerful questions of the visitor to determine how they would be most effective in speaking directly with the other person in the conflict and how they might best achieve their desired outcome. The visitor then goes back and has the difficult conversation they had dreaded. In most instances they let me know that their situation has improved.

In one instance, I had both parties in a conflicted working relationship come to me within a few days of each other seeking my help. It appeared, from my discussion with each of them, that they were very different

from one another and it seemed that those serious personality differences were at the root of the issue.

Naturally, my immediate reaction was to set up a mediation session so that they could reach some form of agreement and move on with their work. However, my instincts told me that was not the right approach because this conflict had been building over the two-year period that they had been working together and I did not think that one, two or even three mediation sessions would bring about a positive result.

With that in mind, I decided that the most constructive approach I could take was to play the role of neutral coach to both parties.

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Conflict Coaching cont.



With the consent of each party, I told the other party that they had been in to see me and that I wanted to bring them together to discuss a way I might possibly help them and their working relationship. They both agreed to the meeting.

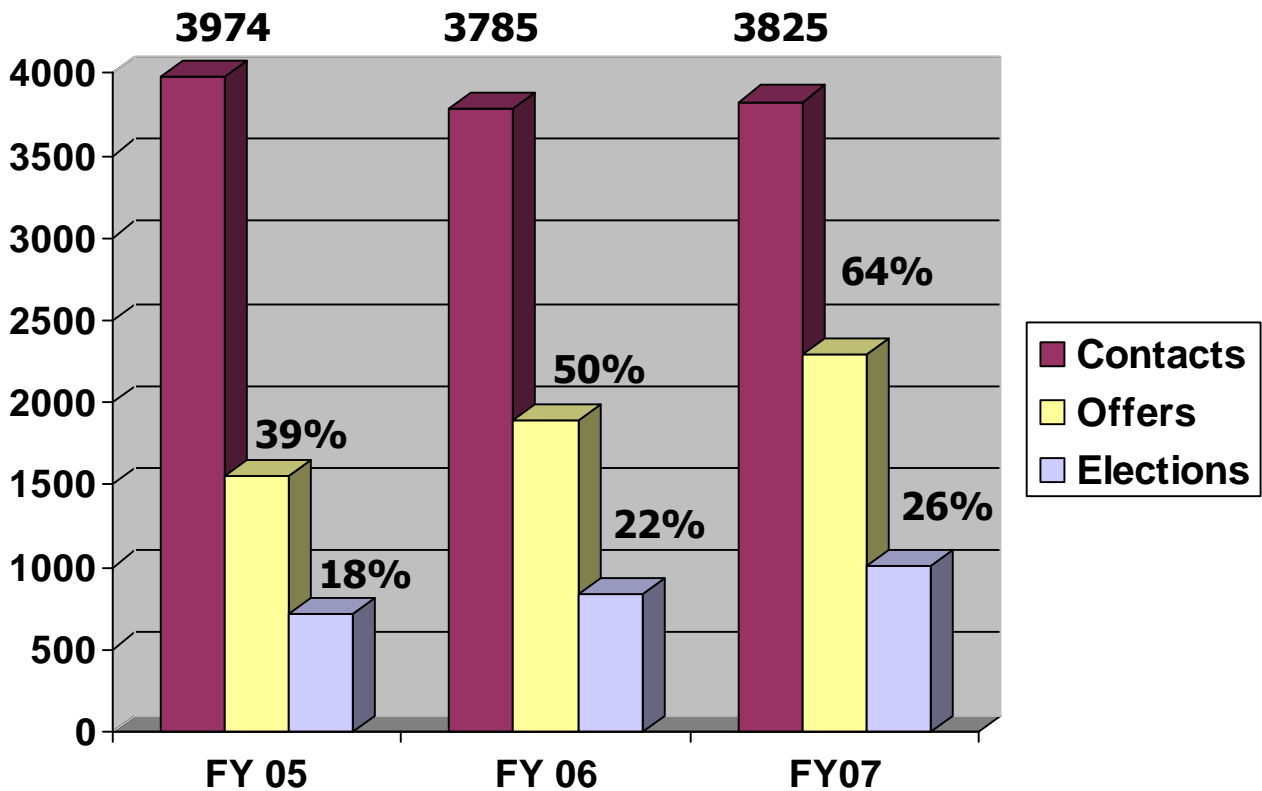
At the first meeting of the three of us, I said that I felt this problem had been developing for a long time and I did not expect it to be resolved in a meeting or two. I offered to be there as a coach to each of them so they could come to me each time a difficult situation arose and we could talk about how to approach it differently from how they had done it in the past. I made clear to them that in my role as a coach to both of them, I would not take sides, nor would I make any judgments about who was right or wrong in any situation that developed. I also suggested, and they agreed, that the three of us would meet periodically to check in on whether their working relationship was improving or what needed

to be done differently.

This has been an ongoing process and the situation has been improving, although slowly. Perhaps most important is that I have the trust of both parties that I have their best interest at heart. In the best tradition of a coach, I have also been a cheerleader to each of them, encouraging them to think of ways to improve the working relationship and then taking action to do it. I feel fortunate that the role of Employee Ombudsman gives me the flexibility to create constructive approaches to conflict such as this that go outside the box.

Ed Modell is the Maryland Judiciary Employee Ombudsman.

ADR During the Informal EEO Process





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*Mediation: A Solution to
Workplace Disputes*

Mediation is the primary ADR process used at the Department of Veterans Affairs to address disputes either prior to or during administrative processes such as the EEO complaint process and negotiated grievance procedure. The Workplace ADR staff can assist Administrations in designing, implementing, and improving programs at their facilities, regions, and networks, to include assisting with obtaining mediators, marketing, and training. We hope you find this newsletter useful. For more information, visit our website at the address below.



Conflict Management Key to Employee Satisfaction

Fedweek.com

The way agencies handle conflicts within the workplace may have a greater impact on employee satisfaction than whether or not employees even experience conflict, Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has said.

Data from a 2005 merit principles survey showed that job satisfaction and intent to leave an agency varied according to experiences of workplace conflict and perceptions of how well agencies dealt with it.

The occurrence of conflict, in and of itself, has little long-term effect on job satisfaction or retention, MSPB said.

Instead, it is how constructively the agency handles conflict that is more important to employee satisfaction and retention.

MSPB said employees who report that their agencies manage conflict well are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and less likely to leave than those who responded that their agency does not constructively manage conflict regardless of whether they personally experienced conflict of some kind.

The opposite was true regarding perceptions of ineffective conflict management. MSPB suggested focusing on effective conflict resolution as a way to retain employees, in addition to more commonly focusing on areas such as salaries, work-life programs, and recognition programs.



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