

## Conflict mediators who use a dose of hostility can be surprisingly effective



When might adding negativity to an already hostile situation lead to reconciliation — not escalation — of conflict? Imagine two siblings locked in a heated argument. Parents of quarrelling siblings often find themselves shouting a curious phrase to quash these conflicts: “I don’t care who started it — both of you go to your rooms!” At first blush, this strategy may sound less effective in defusing sibling tensions as compared to a calmer, more neutral approach. Yet as anyone with children (or siblings) knows, parents’ stern treatment of both parties can have an unusual effect. Siblings who moments before were in conflict may find one another more reasonable in contrast to their tyrannical parents, and might even end up playing nicely together after being banished.

Disputants embroiled in thorny disputes often turn to third-party mediators in hopes of resolution. Typically, mediators build rapport and resolve conflicts by being neutral and understanding towards both sides’ grievances. Although neutrality and empathy are recommended practices for mediators, [our recent research](#) suggests that these behaviours may not necessarily be the most effective in resolving conflicts. Just as stern parents help their children reach agreement, hostile third parties can bring adversaries together during conflicts.

We studied the unexpected benefits of adding hostility across a variety of different disputes. In a series of experiments, disputants had the opportunity to resolve their dispute with a mediator. Importantly, disputants were randomly assigned to interact with one of three different types of mediators: a hostile mediator, nice, or neutral mediator. “Hostile” mediators were abrasive, curt, and used sarcasm. In contrast, “nice” mediators expressed themselves with a friendly tone and asked questions politely. “Neutral” mediators, on the other hand, had an unexpressive emotional style. Across different types of conflicts, we consistently found that negotiators were more willing and able to reach an agreement with their counterpart in the presence of a hostile mediator than in the presence of a nice or neutral mediator.

Why does adding hostility from third-party mediators increase both disputants’ willingness and ability to reach agreements? In many conflicts, hostility and anger from disputants can lead to spiteful behaviours, aggressive demands, and even retaliation. For example, Madan Pillutla, from London Business School, [found](#) that people who experience anger after receiving unfair offers are more likely to reject them, even if the rejection would make both parties worse off. These findings demonstrate that when people experience hostility from their opponents, they can reciprocate with spiteful acts. However, when hostility comes from a third party, that added hostility turns the mediator into a common enemy that unites the parties in dispute. Furthermore, negotiators might see themselves as more reasonable in contrast to a hostile mediator.

What are some caveats to these findings? The first is that not all forms of hostility from third parties are effective. In fact, when the hostility is directed more at one party than the other, negotiators no longer perceive the mediator as a common enemy and consequently are not more willing to reach agreement. Additionally, there is a fine line between being tough at strategic moments and being unreasonably hostile throughout the mediation process. Our studies suggest that mediators are effective when they are tough at critical moments in which negotiators cannot see each other's perspectives. However, mediators who are overly hostile and unreasonable throughout the negotiation may drive a deeper wedge between negotiators and ruin the long-term relationship that is needed for mediators to resolve complicated disputes.

Additionally, our findings suggest that disputants may have the wrong intuition when it comes to hiring the most effective mediator. When asked to predict the outcome of conflicts mediated by a nice, neutral, or hostile mediator, people overwhelmingly thought the nice mediator would have the highest success rate in resolving conflict. "Niceness" appears to be a prized dimension on which negotiators select their mediators. In reality, our data show that negotiators are not more willing to reach agreement in the presence of nice mediators relative to neutral ones, and are in fact less effective at reaching deals relative to tough mediators. In other words, rather than selecting mediators based on niceness, negotiators may be better off looking for mediators who can be strategically tough.

How might mediators strategically use hostility in practice? Former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, a Noble laureate conflict mediator, is well-known for his use of hostility towards negotiators. When asked to describe Ahtisaari's unconventional style of mediation, a former negotiator [recounted](#), "It's easy to see when he's mad... He listens to you attentively with a sour expression, then he just bursts and throws his pencil on the table." Ahtisaari's [strategy](#) demonstrates that stern treatment of both parties can have an unusual effect: adversaries who moments before were in conflict may find themselves more united against a hostile mediator – and might even end up finding room for agreement.



#### Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [The Surprising Effectiveness of Hostile Mediators](#), *Management Science*, [Volume 63, Issue 6](#), 2017
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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