



Mediation Musings: Assumption, Evolution, Nurture

Sara Barnes

Quick Conclusion

The gate was open. The goats were out. “Ellen!” I yelled. My sister was here all week, and I was sure this was her doing. “Ellen, you left the gate open!” Ellen emerged with her planting outfit, dirt on her knees and hands, her tools sticking out of her apron. “I was sure I closed it.”

We rounded up the goats, luring them with goat candy, and got them into the pen again. I went to close the gate. The clasp wasn’t there. The rope was frayed and broken. The clasp and broken rope were still attached to the fence. I had fashioned the rope and clasp over a year ago; it had broken, most likely with the goats’ help. My assumption that Ellen was at fault was wholly incorrect.

Have you done this? Is someone reading this and saying no? If so I want to meet you. I think it is universal to hear a story like this and say, *Yeah that’s me, I am a little too quick to come to a conclusion. Often have to backtrack when I find out the real deal.* It’s common. We are human.

We Evolved This Way

Humans have lived through a lot over the millennia. We are still here because we can make quick judgments. Especially when fear, anger, or perceived threat are the ingredients, we humans can sum things up, take action, keep ourselves and our clan safe, and carry on. Considering we don’t have wings, claws, fangs, or natural body armor, it’s pretty remarkable that we have prevailed for this long. In many respects it’s because of our amazing brain. The brain that can jump into action in a zillionth of a second and save the day. Humans. The *super species*. Cue the cape and the exciting soundtrack.

The evolutionary plateau we have reached thus far doesn’t always work, however, in modern society. We take a snapshot of something and jump to conclusions about what we are seeing. Moving more slowly to make a judgment is often the wiser choice these days. Had I walked over to the gate first, so that I could be sure about what I was seeing before I accused my sister, I would have found that the fault was my own. Calling on my sister for help would not have had the accusatory tone. Instead, she would have come to my aid, I’m sure, without feeling defensive or wrongly accused.

Assumptions = Conflicts

When we analyze conflicts, we look for assumptions. It is rare for a conflict to become challenging without some assumptions taking place on both sides. Sometimes in mediation cases, during the beginning section when parties tell the story separately, assumptions are quickly undone. As people listen, consider each other’s perspectives, and apply the new information, conflicts begin to simmer down. Taking fuel off the fire, as each assumption is debunked or revised, helps to reveal what is at the core of the conflict. When mediators detect assumptions, they can help the participants move forward to and then address any persisting disputes through negotiation and agreement creation.

Mediators, conflict coaches, and other conflict resolvers create something like what I call an “assumption detector.” You can, too. Take any belief about a conflict or a person with whom you have a conflict, and apply the assumption detector magic ray. *Zap*—Is this belief based on a quick judgment made with too little detection? *Bing, bing, bing*. Congratulations, you have found an assumption. *Zap*—Is this fact really a too-quickly-formed opinion? *Bing, bing, bing*. Another assumption uncovered. *Zap*—Did you take one look and decide they were a bad person? *Bing*. You get the idea.

Nurture Not Nature

I’ve been a teacher my whole adult life. I’ve heard folks say that teachers are born, not made. I disagree; the skills, attitudes, and approaches can be learned. They say the same thing about mediators. I disagree here, too. The skills, attitudes, and approaches can be learned to resolve conflicts, hold a neutral space, put yourself in another’s position, and stay open enough to find common ground.

When we do mediation teaching with children in elementary, middle, and high school, we provide them with a conflict story. “What could be happening here?” We practice seeing the story from many points of view. “Could you be biased?” we ask. We teach how to put our biases to the side. “Do you think either of the people are making assumptions?” we say. The children can see very quickly the role that assumptions are playing in fueling the conflict.

We all should have learned these ideas when we were young. True. Yet—I have seen with my own eyes that people can learn these skills throughout their lives. With a strong intention and a willingness to self-reflect, people at every age learn to find and deflate assumptions. You, too, can design your own personal assumption detector and use it freely. *Zap. Bing*. Fetch your cape.

Some more learning here about assumptions and conflict resolution:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/hidden-brain/id1028908750?i=1000579969643>

[Conflict Assumptions - Mediate.com](#)

[2 smart principles for resolving everyday disagreements \(tammylenski.com\)](#)