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Telling metaphors when negotiating

1. Introducing the mediation to the parties

The mediators works essentially asking questions, except for their opening talk, when they play a monologue with which they explain the mediation process, convincing the parties to keep a proactive behaviour during the negotiation. Some mediators neglect the importance of a good opening talk, maybe because they perceive that phase as a tedious and repetitive moment in the process.

Communicating in a specific way, in each specific situation, the mediators elicit hidden topics and focuses the attention of the parties on their hidden resources. The opening talk can help the mediator to set a well working framework for the negotiation. In this way, the opening talk is like a business card: from that first action, the parties gather informations – both consciously and unconsciously – which qualify the mediator as a professional: more or less reliable, more or less proficient, etc. With that opening talk the mediator can also put the parties in a state of predisposition to the negotiation process.

Here below I will suggest some metaphors that you can tell in your opening talks, when you need to captivate the parties and to focus them on the importance of a cooperative behaviour, instead of their natural destructive and polemical chattering.

As a mediator, remember always to be *consistent*, doing what you're saying saying what you're doing. E. g., look in the eyes John when you're talking to him or when you're talking about him. And remember to talk in *building and clear terms*, explaining how you want the parties to behave when you ask something. E. g., you would say:

During the mediation I will ask questions to John and John will answer my questions, then I will ask other questions to Jane and she will answer my questions, so that I can clearly understand what's happening.

Our nervous system adapts to the easiest behavioral patterns and makes us trust in people who guides us along the easiest paths. So when the parties listen to a simple project and, the very next moment, watch themselves sticking to it, they will follow the lead as if it is their custom.

2. Senses and feelings

The mediators work to separate the people from the problem, putting the parties in the condition to talk about the facts of the conflict and leaving behind the argumentations. In that way the parties can think about actions to take in order to transform a bad situation in a better one. To do so, the mediators let people talk about their emotions (which make them criticize the others without a building willingness) and make people think about their in-

terest in money, things, time, etc. Here is a script which you can use to stimulate people to think the conflict in a cooperative way:

The goal of this meeting is to *solve* your problem. Solving a problem means that you are taking actions that transform that problem in a better situation. To solve your problem you have to talk about *your* actions. Every time that you will claim something from somebody you will be putting in that somebody the power to choose what to do, so that you will lose control of your problem. So, Jane, any time you will claim something from John, my advice is that you to suggest some actions taken by you to solve the problem; and John, for you there's the same advice: always suggest to do something in first person if you ask something to Jane. Talking about who's right or wrong will help you to work off your emotions – and I'm here also to welcome your emotions – but if you want to gain something real you must talk about your real actions which can change the actual problem. So, John, my advice is to propose solutions as something that you can do, every time that you will talk about what Jane did to you; and Jane, as well, I suggest to propose something that you can do to change the things every time that you will talk about your rights.

3. Three men in a boat

The sea recalls many symbols linked to the conflict management: the vast ocean and its many states, from the dead calm to the storm; the horizon and the stars, as orienting points and guidelines; planning the routes to reach various destinations; obstacles like hurdles, whirlwinds and whirlpools, and sirens; fishing rods, nets, harpoons to go fishing or to catch preys in serendipity; the ability to adapt the sails to the winds; sharing a small space for long time and accepting the orders from a commander. You can merge all these things in the next script:

In our life we are bound to clear hurdles or to deal with the storms and in those moments the sea seems more salty than ever. Nevertheless we can use the sea to move ourselves faraway from bad places, toward better ones, as long as we have a boat. Now let's pretend that we are on board ship and that each one of us has his task. Your task is to select the destinations and when and what to fish, mine is to tell you if it would be possible to do it and how you can do it. Altogether we will make an inventory of the storeroom, so that we can set the limits of the voyage. We should avoid the beautiful but dangerous or impossible destinations as we should avoid the tempting sirens. If you don't know it, sharing a boat is a difficult thing because there is a little space, everybody has to work hard and the time seems much longer than

usual, so it's normal to lose control of your emotions, but sailormen know that they would be fool to fight one another because, if they don't work as a good team, the boat will sink. As long as you will cooperate, doing what I tell you to do, I would be helpful to you. So, let's start our voyage: first of all, tell me from where we are moving and where you want to get to.

4. Renzo's capons

When there is rage and when people fight verbally, when they steal each other's talking-turn and when they raise their voices, you can help them telling a metaphor wrote by Alessandro Manzoni in chapter 3 from *The Betrothed*:

Remember the Renzo's capons! In *The Betrothed* Renzo brings four capons, hung head down, shaken all along the way and bound to die to get cooked. In that situation, the animals pecked each other, «as it happens too many times to the companions in misfortune». If you think that this squabble will solve your problems, please insist in doing it, otherwise let's get back to our focus: John needs...

Then the mediator recaps the needings of everybody and their propositions, negotiating them. If there will be other quarrels, the mediator could tell to the parties: «Remember Renzo's capons!»

5. Transactional analysis

You can talk about Eric Berne's relational roles if you want to help each party to start the negotiation with a clear mind about itself.

Role	Parent		Adult		Child
Motive	values		interests		needings
Object	family	←	bills	→	toy

Table 1. Example of relations in transactional analysis.

Here's a script which you can use to integrate Berne's analysis as a metaphor of the conflict management:

Psychologists say that we relate one another acting like a Parent, like a Child or like an Adult. The Parent, who is like a leader and a judge, lives sticking to the values and to the rules, to the moral, to the culture, even neglecting its personal outcome. The Child follows its desires and its instinct. The Adult tries to understand what's possible to gain for real in each situation without worsen the actual status, avoiding the dangers. In front of a shop window, the Child would strive to gain a toy, maybe arguing to get it. The Parent could make the Child happy or shut it up, buying the toy, or the Parent could answer a solid «No» just to remember the Child who has the power in the family. The Adult would explain to the Child that it's impossible to buy the toy because it is necessary to pay the bills of the electric company, which makes its toys at home work. So, the Adult tries to produce wellness and safety in the long run; the Parent and the Child look for an instant pleasure, risking to break the family and the toys. Now, which one of the three roles do you think that you should act during this negotiation: the Child, the Parent or the Adult?

6. The overhaul

The mediators know that a person will face a conflict in a building mentality when it perceive the objective possibility to change the problematic situation; that person will consider the changing options if that same person is listening to the other one's propositions; but a person listens to the propositions and suggest its own propositions when it perceives the existence of a problem and when it perceive the effects that that same problem will have on its life. People who don't even try to negotiate or to meet the other party show that they are not perceiving the existence or the importance of a conflictual problem.

Hence you can use the metaphor of the car to make people understand that there's happening some real problem and you can do that during your opening talk or even during the first phone call:

This situation makes me think about when we are driving our car. There we know that we have to respect some rules, like braking with timing, speeding up not to much while bending, fueling the tank periodically, and so on; we have to pace the traffic and to follow the road if we want to protect ourselves and our car; and we should drive a car in good conditions. When on your dashboard a light turns on (for example, signaling that the water is boiling), you can ignore that alert or you can

check up the car. If you ignore the light, you are risking that the car will brake down during an important trip. If you roll up your sleeves and check the car, you are safeguarding yourselves and the others. Nevertheless it's annoying to have a puncture on the way, but we do our best to change the tire and carry on our trip. Today we are here because you realized that a light turned on on your dashboard and I can help you to check the damage and to know how you can fix it. Now, Jane, who did that light turn on?