

Guidelines for Mediating Multi-Party Disputes

When addressing conflictive issues, mediators are often confronted with multi-party disputes, conflicts involving more than two opposing parties. Special considerations should be kept in mind:

1. **Spend extra time in [pre-negotiation](#) and needs assessment.** This helps gain a sincere commitment to the process from all participants. It also clarifies how the issues are perceived from the various vantage points of the parties, minimizing surprise factors at the point of discussion.
2. **Use opening statements by participants as an opportunity for each person to share initial positions and be understood.** An extra "restating ground rule" may be appropriate, where participants are asked to restate the previous person's viewpoint before presenting their own. Don't rush past initial statements, despite pressure to get on with business.
3. **Actively seek common ground early, not to minimize areas of difference, but to clarify them.** By identifying issues that can be resolved in light of these areas of agreement, support can be built for continued dialogue.
4. **Recognize that several levels of negotiation need to occur.** Cross-group discussion is the primary focus of substantive negotiation, but within-group communication is important to psychological and procedural needs in conflict. Try to allow time for dialogue within smaller groups, while keeping large group discussions focused on the explicit tasks of the group.
5. **Whenever possible, have subgroups form that break down old coalitions.** This may offer participants the chance to shift from adversarial to solution-oriented relationships. If the group has multiple meetings, they provide excellent opportunities to establish task forces, project teams and information gathering groups, which rearrange traditional alliances.
6. **Be sensitive to the tension between being (social cohesiveness) and doing (task effectiveness) within the group.** Managing this inevitable tension requires great skill on the part of the mediator. Disputants often have a profound experience in "knowing the enemy." This is valuable for its own sake, aside from substantive progress, and could translate into goodwill that is valuable in other settings. The mediator needs to constantly check with the group to be sure that any urge to be solution-oriented is a focus they continue to share, and help members realistically comprehend consequences of their decisions.
7. **Be especially sensitive to the role of moderates and extremists within the meeting.** [Moderates](#) are defined here as those who demonstrate flexibility in negotiation. This includes a willingness to consider a variety of options and a desire to attend to others' needs in negotiation. [Extremists](#) in this context are those who rigidly hold on to a minority position. They narrowly define the agenda and often sabotage efforts by others (even in their own camp) to negotiate. In such multi-party disputes, it is critical to empower the moderates to "find their voices," and be sure their views are clearly expressed. Extremists tend to dominate such discussions, fearing that their concerns will lose if they don't argue forcefully: They need to be able to express their concerns and have them acknowledged, but this must occur within a context that allows all views to be represented with integrity at the table.
8. **Continue to be vigilant regarding your neutrality throughout the process.** Major issues raised by ad hoc subgroups should be brought back to the larger group for resolution. Watch for possibly biased responses to extremists within the group; since they may be exhibiting attitudes you do not share, biases may lurk just beneath the surface of the meeting and emerge in subtle language or non-verbal behaviors. You may find it beneficial to "de-brief" during such experiences with a colleague as a reality check for your neutrality in the dispute.

[Return to Common Problems, Multi-party disputes.](#)

(adapted from Harry Webne-Behrman, **The Practice of Facilitation**, Quantum Books, 1998. Used with permission of the author. All rights reserved.)