



Rebecca's Second Pre-Caucus

MEDIATOR: To start this session, I want to mention some things Nora wanted me to share with you. I haven't shared with her anything from our conversations.

REBECCA: And that's OK with her?

MEDIATOR: Yes, and she's hoping that maybe down the line, if you have something to share with her, that you'll do that. But don't worry about it right now. We'll just start with some of the things she wanted us to share. First off, I asked her the same question I asked you about positive qualities in the other person.

The mediator goes on to share with Rebecca the positive comments Nora made about her. Rebecca's expression to this point has been serious. She asks the mediator several questions about Nora's comments. She seems to be trying to decipher whether they were intended as compliments.

The mediator explains that, if there is a joint session, Nora wants to share her perspective of the incident that might have caused the conflict to flare. We pick up the conversation as Rebecca describes a few stressful encounters with Nora.

REBECCA: One time I asked her an innocent question—I certainly had no intentions of attacking her—and she began to yell at me. Again, the yelling, which I don't like. I had to tell her that it was inappropriate for her to be yelling. She doesn't do this with other people.

In another instance, I spoke to her, and again I got yelled at. There have been a number of these over the years. As a result, it makes me hesitant to approach her. I don't know what sort of reaction I'm going to get. It's never been a positive one . . . in the sense of getting some cooperation. Or, I know I've mentioned things to her. I needed some samples moved—she kind of leaves things around—and she goes into a lot of detail about her people not doing what they're supposed to do, but she won't take responsibility. Ultimately, it's her responsibility, not her people's. I could go on, but I think that's good enough.

The mediator recaps what he has heard.

REBECCA: So, yeah, it bothers me. It hurts . . . It hurts my feelings.

Having a party admit that something hurts is a positive step toward healing. The conversation continues, and the mediator picks up on something that was said earlier.

MEDIATOR: Can you describe how the conflict between the two of you, this tension, affects relationships in the lab?

REBECCA: [Drawing out the word.] *Okaaay*. I can try to answer. I'm not sure I understand exactly. I could give more examples, but I don't think that's the point. A lot of the interactions that I've had with her are negative and are related to doing my job, such as helping Ken Matsushita with the year-end report. I have a certain responsibility to the other people in the lab, and to Ken, to make a little contribution—not twenty-four seven, but to the functioning of the lab as a whole, given that we're down in personnel since our downsizing. Lots of times things get dumped on Ken's assistant, Mike Peck, and people will shout at him, "We don't have the supplies! We don't have the supplies!" I'm trying to give back a



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Having a party admit that something hurts, or is a frustration, is a positive step toward healing.

certain percentage for the good of the order. And in the situation with Nora, the fact is that I get kind of blindsided with this yelling, and her behavior towards me is *sooo* defensive. I immediately feel this . . . wall going up. What I'd like her to realize is that this isn't personal. I'm not interested in the report, nor do I feel as if I own the lab and want it cleaned up. She has some obligations to clean up what she's messed up. I don't like her yelling, and since I'm not sure what I'm going to get, I don't go out of my way to engage her. If anything, I go out of my way to avoid contact. It's very uncomfortable, very defensive. There have also been some personal insults—because I do contribute to the overall good

of the lab—implying, or rather, stating that essentially her job is so important and every second of her time is so critical that only people like me, that don't have a critical job like she does, waste time on these little things. And that's insulting. Her attitude towards me, word choices, posture, body language—she's in my face—and the yelling all add up to a situation that I'd rather avoid. So, there is no real social interaction. I don't ignore her and try and be rude. But I don't go out of my way to have any interaction with her. I guess that sums it up. I don't know how you would say all that concisely.

The mediator attempts to summarize, and Rebecca clarifies her feelings.

REBECCA: I don't like being a police officer. So, what do I do? Take it to Ken? He has enough on his plate. So, when things have to get done, I feel I'm removing part of his load. She doesn't see herself as a person who is a citizen of this lab who obeys its norms. It doesn't prevent me from doing my job. At this time, it doesn't have much of an effect on my mood, but it does bother me when these yelling episodes take place. I don't get upset just because I see her. It's not that way. So, what am I supposed to do when something isn't followed up on? Do I have to go back three or four times? Even when I do, it makes no difference. It never gets done. I'm not sure at this point how you handle a situation where there's no cooperation whatsoever. I haven't found any effective means to deal with her, obviously.

MEDIATOR: A negative situation for you.

REBECCA: Well, I imagine for her, as she gets upset.

MEDIATOR: Do you have any idea why she might be affected that way? Why Nora feels she has to yell or get in your face?

The mediator's gentle challenge comes at a time when Rebecca has been listened to extensively for more than an hour. Rebecca repeats much of what she has already expressed, but then she comes back to the mediator's question.

REBECCA: Uh, it's obvious there's something that sets her off, and it may relate to something . . . an experience in the past she's had with me . . . so that when she sees me, the guards go up, the gates close, whatever. It's something I'm not aware of. I don't have an explanation for why this type of interaction occurs . . . but it's certainly uncomfortable for both of us.

This is a key moment in the pre-caucus. Rebecca is trying very hard to see things from Nora's perspective. After some conversation, the mediator eventually asks Rebecca if there is something from this conversation that he can share with Nora to help her better understand the situation.

REBECCA: I don't know the value of doing so. Everything we have spoken about is factual. *That* she can know, but if there's something . . . I get this really strong sense she doesn't care about anything I say or do, or how my feelings have anything to do with her, so I really don't see a point with it. Just based on our interaction, it's such a shutdown. I don't see what the benefit may be to her. Although you have indicated that she's willing to discuss things, so, uh, that obviously may not be the case. If you think . . . I don't know how it would help.

Rebecca is trying to cooperate with the mediator, but she has not given herself permission to think about Nora in human terms and thus keeps focusing on the *facts of the case* rather than on the *relationship* itself. Rebecca makes it clear that she does not have much confidence that the mediator can do any good by sharing information with Nora, but she is willing to let him try. We see several hints that indicate Rebecca's need for another pre-caucus.

The mediator proposes four areas of concern that he would like to share with Nora: (1) Rebecca has a year-end report due and needs Nora's cooperation to finish it, (2) Nora communicates through yelling and other dysfunctional approaches, (3) Rebecca feels that Nora treats her differently than others in the laboratory, and (4) Rebecca feels indignant because it has been implied that Nora's job is more important—that Rebecca is helping Ken only because her own job is not that essential and she does not have enough to do. Rebecca agrees to allow the mediator to share these points with Nora.

Rebecca expands on each of these issues as the mediator speaks, correcting some of the wording and making it clear how burdensome this conflict has been. For instance, Rebecca explains that the year-end report is now seven months late and has increased her workload. Rebecca then says, "She should be ashamed. I'm angry. This is a wrong that needs to be addressed."

Expressing and exploring some of these frustrations is important. Before Rebecca can permit herself any validating thoughts about Nora, the mediator must listen intently. After expressing her frustrations and pain, Rebecca permits herself a moment of hope—to dream of what seems hardly possible.

REBECCA: It would be interesting to approach her and have a normal interchange and have something resolved. It would be unbelievable. It would be inconceivable to me! I have no history of having it any other way. [Laughing.] If it makes her aware of her behavior . . . Maybe she does this with other people. I know that Nora isn't . . . Well, she is a good person, I believe, fundamentally. I have no doubt about that. I don't consider her a mean, vicious type of person, although some of the behaviors towards me are certainly that way. If she knew that, maybe she would see that it's not a kindness. I think she does have a belief system where she tries to treat people in a decent way, and maybe she'll see it's inappropriate, just wrong, to make such comments.

You don't purposely try to put someone down. That's my belief system. I just can't understand it.

MEDIATOR: Rebecca, is there anything else you would like to add?

REBECCA: I think we've [She begins to laugh.] covered things pretty thoroughly. It's a value of mine: treat people the way you want to be treated yourself. This isn't something I try to do. It *is* me. It's a very basic part of my belief system that every person has value. I believe that caring about others is almost the most important thing on this planet. So, some of the things that have happened between the two of us have kind of violated that basic belief system of mine.

Disputants can begin to find hope and imagine what a positive interaction might look like.





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A gentle challenge is most likely to have a positive effect when the disputant feels understood.

While at some points Rebecca seems distant and lost in thought, toward the end of this discussion she lightens up. At the beginning of the pre-caucus Rebecca hardly acknowledges the positive things Nora said about her. Now Rebecca accepts that these positive qualities are not artificial, but part of her core values. It is interesting that sometimes people have to express their negative feelings in order to make room for the positive. While Rebecca is still in a lot of pain, she allows herself to hear something positive from Nora about herself, and she also shares

something positive about Nora. Perhaps, if their conflict had not been so protracted, all of this would have happened sooner.

MEDIATOR: You have mentioned a few positive attributes about Nora as we talked. Are there any more that come to mind?

REBECCA: I think she does a really good job in terms of her technical knowledge of lab equipment and computers, something I admire in her. We both use some of the same programs, but she's taken her understanding to a much higher plane. [Rebecca continues, going into some detail.]

The mediator talks about the goal of bringing Rebecca and Nora into a joint session.

REBECCA: Obviously the reason I'm here is that it's hopefully of value . . . I've said things that really are pretty nasty in some ways—you know, they're kind of negative—in relating experiences . . . in my interpretation. If we can improve the situation, heal the situation, or whatever words you want to use . . . I certainly think that's of value . . . I support that.

It seems as if the pre-caucus is over, but Rebecca brings up additional key information.

REBECCA: [Cheerfully.] I think people are a product of the interaction of their individual genetic makeup and their environment. [Seriously, but calm.] As a product of that interaction there are certain responses that a person has to situations. They exist and do influence behavior and communication styles. And all I want to do is to point out, for example, in my case, I tend to be extremely . . . more sensitive than, maybe, is called for, but I do pick up on certain nonverbal cues, tones of voice, things like that, which kind of go through and synthesize how I interpret a situation or a person. In my case, the

behaviors I elicit in Nora—the in-your-face kind of thing, yelling, negativity—the communication and interaction . . . I thought maybe bringing them out and making both aware of it . . . Maybe that cognizance is going to improve the ultimate results that we get here. And again, the objective for me would be to establish what I'd call a functional relationship, so the two of us can interact on a professional level at the lab and get done what needs to get done without all these negative overtones. It's certainly a poor pattern, a destructive pattern.

As Rebecca feels heard, she seems to consider that she might also have contributed to the negative interpersonal relationship. The mediator obtains permission to share Rebecca's additional insights with Nora.

REBECCA: I've been trying to explain my sensitivities, and then . . . recognizing the fact that she would also have her own . . . Maybe there's something that I do, unconsciously, that for some reason provokes a certain response in her. If that's the case, it would be something we would all need to be aware of—certainly me, so I can make sure not to do it.

SUMMARY

In her second pre-caucus, Rebecca feels heard and is willing to consider that there are *relationship* issues to deal with, not just *facts*. At first, Rebecca is concerned with the dysfunctional behaviors Nora brings to the relationship. Towards the end, Rebecca acknowledges she might also be contributing to the dispute. Rebecca has begun the transition to seeing Nora as a real person. Because of the protracted nature of this conflict, the mediator would have done well to engage the parties in a third set of pre-caucuses before moving into the joint session.