

ARTICLE



The Meanings of Silence during Conflict

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Submitted: January 2011

Accepted: April 2011

Published: May 2011



Abstract

This article focuses on the types and meanings of silence experienced during conflict. Silence is a form of communication that is cultural and context specific. Certain types of silence are constructive whilst other forms of silence can cause severe harm. This article explores the different types of silence experienced during a conflict. More specifically, this article examines the impacts of different types of silence on the mediation process.



Keywords

silence, conflict, mediation, emotional intelligence

INTRODUCTION

This article examines different types of silence experienced during a conflict. Silence is present in many conversations and, depending on the context, silence will have different effects and impacts on the nature of the conversation. Being able to better understand how silence impacts conflicts (both violent and non-violent), provides mediators with a better comprehension as to how to adjust the mediation process, where appropriate. Silence in the context of this article can mean two things. It can first mean a form of non-verbal communication in which neither of the parties speaks. Silence can also mean the ability of one party to stop a particular discussion. That is, one party is able to silence an issue, to avoid the matter being brought up and discussed.

This article presents problematic and constructive uses of silence and explores how silence is used in different contexts. From this, methods of incorporating constructive use of silence into mediation as well as techniques to remove destructive forms of silence from mediation are presented.

Here, conflict is described as behaviour that negatively impacts another individual or group. (Starks, 2006) Using this definition, conflict can be non-violent or violent, it can

involve two or more parties, and it can entail a difference of opinion on, among other things, power, rights, interests, values or processes. The nature of a conflict may be immediate, as when two or more parties actually experience a conflict. It may also be intergenerational, when there is a conflict in one generation and the children become parties to the negative effects or outcomes of the conflict.

While the emphasis is on communication between two or more Western parties, a short discussion of the meaning of silence in non-Western cultures is also provided. The import and account of silence focuses on Western interpretations of silence. The author acknowledges that other cultures place different significance, meaning and interpretation on silence.

DEFINING SILENCE

Silence refers to the moments during a conversation in which verbal communication has ceased. The parties in the conversation may feel they have nothing left to say, cannot offer a response, require time to formulate a response or fully comprehend emotions. Silence can be a manifestation of power, the action of one party refusing to discuss one or



more topics another party wishes to consider. Silence can also be an opportunity for the parties to reflect on what has been said and to consider ways forward. The absence of verbal communication however, does not automatically mean that communication is not occurring. The temporary cessation of conversation has different impacts on the flow of communication. It may deepen one's comprehension of another's point of view or it may severely impede the ability of another party to fully express their opinion, thoughts and emotions.

Muldoon (1996) suggested that silence is more than the absence of noise. The context in which the silence occurs also has an impact on how it is experienced and interpreted. For Muldoon, there are different types of silence, including 'deep silence', 'true silence', and 'open silence'. Depending on the specific kind of silence being experienced by the individual, the meaning drawn from the silence varies greatly.

Madonik (2001) observed that silence is part of para-language as silence contains meaning. The specific context in which silence is experienced will influence the overall conversation as well as the interpretation of the communication. Poyatos (2002) argued that stillness and silence are communication systems within themselves. Both stillness and silence occur within the broader context of social interaction.

While Muldoon postulated the qualities of silence, Poyatos further argued that silence has multiple possible meanings, rather than a singular essential meaning. More specifically, the larger series of communication interactions between individuals of the same culture creates patterns of silence and stillness. When individuals from different cultures communicate, they may and do use silence in different ways to mean different things. Due to a difference in communication systems between the parties, what they believe they are communicating with their silence is not necessarily how that silence is being interpreted.

Three areas have been identified in which silence arises during mediation. It may be an indication of fear, a cultural communication pattern, or concern. Silence in the context of fear may indicate a significant power imbalance between the parties or it may mean that the subject matter is culturally sensitive: fear about a culturally sensitive matter or unease about discussing a particular subject. There are differences in perceptions (positive and negative) of silence in cultural communication patterns. Silence over a specific issue may denote that the parties are not yet comfortable discussing a specific topic, may not have the communication tools to adequately address a topic or they may experience a power imbalance that impedes a more thorough exploration of the subject. One or more of the parties may also be unduly exercising their power to remove or negate a specific subject from being addressed or put on the agenda.

PROBLEMATIC USES OF SILENCE

Problematic uses of silence are those that damage the relationship between the parties. Use of silence that involves harm to conflicting parties, may indicate an unexpressed mass trauma that needs to be addressed or may be evidence of uses (or abuses) of power. The specific dynamics of a particular power relationship may put additional strain on the parties, causing further disempowerment and subsequent harm to one or more of the parties.

Silence in the case of mass trauma

Wajnryb (2001, p.82) suggested that silence is often a means of communicating that which can not be communicated. In her book, Wajnryb recounted the story of a Holocaust survivor who returned to her village after the war. The survivor's family had been taken to the concentration camps and killed. In this situation, the survivor could not find adequate words to convey what it meant to have had all of her family killed. Wajnryb commented, "After sifting through a few other verbal options, she is reduced to silence, as the only appropriate response to such a catastrophe".

In some circumstances, the trauma resulting from an event is not easily expressed. In an effort to come to some resolution, discussion of the event may be restricted or denied. This type of silence can be crippling for the individuals and groups that experience the event in person. This negative silence can also have extremely detrimental effects on indirect parties, such as the children of survivors. An example of negative silence is that around the physical, emotional, psychological and sexual abuse of First Nations (aboriginal) children in residential schools in Canada. Silence was used by the more powerful party to deny the experience and the retelling of the experiences of an individual or a group. In denying the ability and the space to share, bring to light and explain experiences, the conflict is aggravated, the social isolation worsened and the emotional chasm between the parties deepened (Woolner, 2009).

In situations in which there is a significant power imbalance between the parties, more time can be created to allow the disadvantaged or less powerful party to fully express and articulate their point of view, interests and concerns.

Silence in the context of power

There are many other ways in which silence can be detrimental, not only as a means of ignoring a particular dispute or issue, but also as a means of disempowering and otherwise reducing the quality of the interaction and of the overall relationship. Silence can be used as a tool of aggression, during a specific interaction and also as a tool



in a larger strategy of aggression aimed at an individual or a group (Lusternberger and Williams, 2009).

The reasons for silence in the context of a conflict may relate to issues of power. A conflict becomes destructive when the quality of the relationship between the parties is diminished or otherwise harmed. Types of relational harm include violence, cessation of the relationship, bullying and detrimental changes to the organisation or context in which the relationship occurs. (Conflict Research Consortium, 1998).

The party with the most power may be preventing opportunities to discuss an item or an event. This may further disempower the other party, leading to a situation in which a mutually satisfactory resolution to the conflict may not be possible. In situations in which there is violence or other forms of abuse (such as domestic violence), silence negates the situation of those abused and oppressed and legitimates the actions of those committing repression (Cobb, 1997; Burns, 2008). Silence is, in this case, the ability to not bring up a point or an event. In not discussing an event, it is being silenced and subsequently, the aggrieved party can not recount the totality of events from their point of view. In this instance, the influence or power of one party over the process determines the topics discussed, the length of time spent on each topic and the offers of resolution. If one party is significantly more powerful, they may consistently offer potential resolutions that ignore or exclude a particular point or grievance of the counter-party. This further silences the issue, increasing the power imbalance and prolonging the silence. Other tactics that may be used by the more powerful party include ignoring requests for discussion, continued refusal to answer direct questions, and intentionally delaying actions agreed-upon. While some of these behaviours can and do occur out of genuine time and resource constraints, the consistent and often systematic under-resourcing of a particular relationship increases the silence over the power dynamics and subsequently reduces meaningful opportunities for all parties to the conflict to reach a durable win-win resolution.

Silence in the form of not providing sufficient information can have destructive effects on an individual, a series of relationships or an organisation. For example, a bullied co-worker is intentionally denied access to information and computer programmes that are necessary for their job. Silence, when used to control and deny information to others, will reduce trust levels between the parties. Silence can oblige individuals to try to fill in the missing pieces of information, giving rise to inaccurate perceptions, misunderstandings, and rumours. Rumours can in turn lead back to the source of the silence, the individual or the party that does not divulge more or all available information, causing more distrust by the counter-parties and other interested parties, leading to further restriction of access to accurate, timely and truthful information.

Not only does silence in the context of power have the ability to determine what is being discussed, the depth in which it is discussed and the possible resolution options, but also the time for the discussion. The resolution process may include opportunities to discuss items that the more powerful party may not be interested in discussing, and the amount and quality of the time spent on these matters, or resources in general, may not be made available. While the issue at hand is not necessarily silence itself, the manner in which the issue is addressed, can be a form of silence. Also, the speed at which an item is discussed will influence the power dynamics of mediation. The more powerful party may not be inclined to spend much time on the matter, so the totality of the issue is not fully explored and some key aspects may in effect be silenced.

CONSTRUCTIVE USES OF SILENCE

Constructive uses of silences are silences that enhance and strengthen communication between the parties. Constructive uses of silence create comfortable spaces within the discussion and the overall relationship to reflect, empathise and gain greater insight into one's own emotions, thoughts and actions, as well as the counter-parties' emotions, thoughts and actions.

Silence is part of non-verbal communication. In Western cultures, there is a strong cultural preference to avoid silence during conversations. Informal conventions around social etiquette put strong social pressure on people to keep a conversation going and to fill in the silences.

In other cultures, silence does not have the same social meaning. In communication styles of other cultures, such as First Nations in Canada, silence is not something to be filled. It is an accepted, normal part of any verbal communication and the participants in the conversation do not feel pressured or rushed to fill the silence. In Chinese and Japanese cultures, silence has a positive connotation. Often in non-aboriginal North American cultures, any silence in conversations is considered an embarrassment. (Madonik, 2001)

The meaning of silence depends on the context in which it occurs. The mediator and the parties to the discussion may have agreed to include stages of silent reflection. Silence can be a time for the participants to take a break from the conversation. This may facilitate a pause from the intensity of the mediation process, allowing time for the participants to engage in self-reflection or change their thoughts to a completely different subject matter (Front, 2008).

Silence can be a turning point within a conversation. Such turning points can have positive and negative aspects, depending on how the participants use the silence. One of



the key factors in how participants use the silence is their level of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). If the participants evaluate the mood of the counter-party/ies as hurt or hostile, they may use the silence to formulate a response that will reduce tension or clarify previous statements so as to reduce the harm done. However, if one or more of the parties does not have a sufficient level of emotional intelligence, silence can be used to inflict more injury (consciously or unconsciously) onto the other party and may inject more hostility in the communication and the overall relationship.

Silence in the context of mediation

Silence can be an opportunity for mediators to allow the participants time to reflect. It can provide opportunities, during a specific session or in the overall process, for parties to consider options presented and discussed. Silence can also maintain a party's prominence in the resolution process. Instead of the mediator or facilitator feeling compelled to fill the void in verbal communication, silence can also put the onus on the disputing parties to seek out and discuss possible resolutions. In removing the mediator or the facilitator from this particular part of the discussion, the parties to the conflict may be more inclined to offer more or new information, or different options.

Silence can also indicate that there is an emotion, motivation or intent that is not being fully addressed or discussed during the process. The silence of one party, or the unwillingness to fully explore a specific issue, is a good opportunity to caucus, bring to light a specific topic and possibly provide opportunities to renegotiate the overall mediation process (Krivis, 2007).

There may be circumstances in which elevated levels of risk or threat overwhelm the individual. Although some may choose aggression as a response, many opt for silence. Eckersley (2002, p.32) incorporating Macy's work, on the human need for hope, states that "numbing the psyche takes a heavy toll, including an impoverishment of emotional and sensory life". Thus, in the case of mediation, silence may be an indication that one or more of the parties has lost confidence (hope) in the process or in a reasonable solution being reached.

Silence, emotional intelligence and mediation

Emotional intelligence in the context of both conflict and mediation has an introspective and a communicative dimension. The parties to a conflict can pause, maintain silence, and contemplate their own as well as their counter-party's perspective. Salovey et al. have argued that emotional intelligence can help an individual "generate or emulate

vivid emotions to facilitate judgements and memories concerning feelings" and that emotional intelligence includes the "ability to interpret complex feeling such as emotional blends and contradictory feeling states" (Salovey, Detweiler-Bedell, Detweiler-Bedell and Mayer, 2008, p. 535). Where appropriate, silence can provide and facilitate opportunities for individual reflection. In a conversation, silence can provide a space in which the parties reflect and gain greater comprehension of the counter-party's comments. Upon further discussion, they may decide on a further process in which one or more of the parties works on one or more of the four branches of emotional intelligence defined Salovey and Grewal (2005).

The first branch pertains to the *perception of emotions* and refers to the degree of accuracy in perception and correctly identifying emotion in oral communication, cultural objects and facial expressions. The second branch of emotional intelligence concerns the *use of emotions*. Salovey and Grewal argued that this branch relates to channelling emotions to enhance cognition, thinking and problem solving. The third is the *comprehension of emotions*. It requires the individual to "comprehend emotion language and to appreciate complicated relationships among emotions". The fourth branch pertains to the *managing of emotions*, the ability and degree to which an individual is aware of and monitors their own emotions. This requires that the individual is cognizant of the fact that their emotions in relation to a person or event do change over time. It is also related to the ability of an individual to manage the emotions of another, meaning that an individual can harness their own emotions and facilitate an emotional response in others. Salovey and Grewal provide the example of a politician harnessing their anger towards a situation and using that anger during a speech to solicit engagement and action by the audience (Salovey & Grewal, 2005, p.p. 281-282).

Altering the mediation process to include a further process can involve coaching, receipt of training, time and/or space for reflection, as well as the inclusion of an advocate for any of the parties during the mediation. Each of these actions or a combination of these process modifications can help one or more of the parties increase their emotional intelligence.

If the mediator determines that the silence experienced between the parties is negative or destructive, they can work with one or all of the parties to increase their levels of emotional intelligence. One party may be incorrectly interpreting the intent and the essence of the communication and take offence. Conversely, a party may be inadvertently communicating an honest message with a possible mutually agreeable solution in an aggressive or otherwise hostile manner. Given the method of presentation, the message is not well received and the receiver is injured by the message. Using Salovey and Grewal's four branches of emotional intelligence (perception, use, com-



prehension and managing of emotion), relevant observations can be made and appropriate questions can be asked. The parties may take additional time to discuss how they interpret emotions in themselves as well as in the counter-parties. This exercise sheds more light on previous communications and events, enhancing the overall mediation experience. It can also improve the quality of dialogue between the participants who are making progress, as they gain increased awareness of their own emotions, of how those emotions are received by the counter-parties and how their behaviours influence the overall interaction within the mediation.

In terms of the process, there are several ways in which silence can be accommodated. The mediator must first appreciate the needs of the specific parties to the conflict. There may be an inherent power imbalance, a particularly sensitive topic is to be discussed, or the parties to the conflict may be from different cultural backgrounds in which the role of silence in communication is significantly different. There may also be several issues that need to be discussed and resolved, as well as a situation in which there is incomplete or inaccurate information.

Periods of silence can be built into the process, allowing for predetermined and agreed periods of reflection. The mediator can make it known at the beginning of each session that periods of silence will not be interrupted, and only the parties at the table will have the power to break the silence.

Another method of adapting the process to better meet the needs of the participants, specifically related to the use of silence, can be by slowing down the overall process itself. Instead of having one session with the expectation that it will address and resolve all issues, the process itself can be divided into different sittings. This will create time between sessions, allowing the participants time to reflect and evaluate where they are during the process. The time in between sessions can be a period of non-contact between the parties, in effect creating silence.

Process specific aspects of intergenerational conflicts

In the context of addressing intergenerational silence of Germany families on the Holocaust and World War II, Schwan (2001, p.132) argued that the following items need to be addressed:

1. Recognising the facts
2. Understanding the moral significance
3. Emotional participation
4. Emotional conflict
5. Integration of knowledge, meaning and conflicting emotional reactions into a moral system

In many ways, Schwan's suggestions are directly pertinent to mediation and the specific mediation process. In order for more information to be shared between the participants in mediation, they must recognize the facts. There may be some dispute about the nature of the facts, and the mediation process may first need to focus on having the parties discuss the facts and determine which are relevant, and assess why they are important to the matter at hand. In so doing, the participants are negotiating and assigning a moral significance to the facts considered as well as those not considered. As more information comes to light during the discussions between the participants, the parties to the conflict can, when inclined, become more emotionally and constructively engaged in finding a mutually acceptable resolution. As a consequence of these negotiations, the participants may find and implement a solution, and this resolution may be carried forward to other facets of the participants' lives, thereby cementing this resolution into their own personal moral system.

Active listening

A facilitator's or a mediator's active listening skills are exercised when determining what kind of silence is being experienced. Salem (2003) defined active listening as listening that builds trust between the parties as well as creating opportunities for the participants to fully disclose their emotions in a trusting environment. In other words, active listening allows the parties to feel comfortable when divulging their experiences and emotions in a constructive and non-abusive way. Salem (2003) suggested that active listening requires the parties to not interrupt one another, to demonstrate empathy to the counterparty and to reflect and appreciate the meaning of what the speakers are saying. Wold (2004) defined empathetic or active listening as focusing on understanding the other person. In other words, the listener is actively and intently paying attention to the context of the story as opposed to just the facts involved in the story.

In order to determine how silence can impact the mediation process, the mediator must first determine what kind of silence is being experienced. If the silence is simply a cultural method of communication in which time to reflect is needed or, if the silence is a wounded silence, during which one or more of the parties have withdrawn from the process. Then the facilitator or mediator can act appropriately. For example, if the mediator determines the silence to be a cultural method of communication, the mediator may respect the silence. If the mediator determines the silence to be harmful to one of the parties, explicitly stating this observation to all the parties, they may prompt a discussion on the topic or increase self-awareness of the parties, as sometimes the more powerful party imposing the silence may not be aware of the harm being done to the other party.



CONCLUSION

This article argues that silence can and does occur in different types of conflicts, including, but not limited to, two party personal conflicts and intergenerational conflicts. Silence occurs in many settings, sometimes having positive outcomes, when it allows the parties time to reflect, to reconsider and to phrase their responses more appropriately.

This article also explores the destructive uses of silences. Silence can be a tool used by a more powerful party to deny recognition of an experience or event. Silence can be used to gain and manipulate information, denying other interested parties opportunities to more meaningfully contribute to the interaction. For example, in workplace settings, management may intentionally or unintentionally use silence to keep information away from employees. In restricting access to information, the quality of the relationship is diminished as trust and opportunities for more substantive engagement by employees in the organisation are diminished.

However, when emotional intelligence is actively used by the parties to a conflict, as well as by the mediator, silence can provide significant opportunities to gain insights and empathy with the counter-parties. Through these moments of greater clarity and depth of understanding, the parties can explore and discuss more meaningful and appropriate options for a mutually acceptable resolution.

As there are many forms of silence, with many different meanings, silence does not always need to be addressed quietly.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The inspiration for this article came from CIAN's module II August 2009 course. The author would like to thank Dr. Evan Hoffman Hoffman (CIAN), and the reviewer of this journal for their constructive and insightful feedback. ■

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Recommended citation

GENDRON, R. (2011). "The Meanings of Silence during Conflict" [online article]. *Journal of Conflictology*. Vol. 2, Iss. 1. Campus for Peace, UOC. [Consulted: dd/mm/yy].

<<http://www.uoc.edu/ojs/index.php/journal-of-conflictology/article/view/vol2iss1-gendron/vol2iss1-gendron>>

ISSN 2013-8857



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