

## MEDIATION WHEN VALUE SYSTEMS DIFFER

BY JP VENTER

### 1. Introduction

In mediation parties endeavour to reach some common ground and to resolve their disputes or conflict. One assumes that by getting parties together around the same table, that the battle is half won already. Surely if they can share viewpoints they can start exploring how their positions might overlap, or gaining greater understanding of the different positions might enable some movement. But how would you feel if you were a party to a dispute and you knew that the worldview of the person sharing the table with you is so different from yours, you might as well have been sitting in two different rooms! That is the implication of the work Dr Clare Graves, an American psychology professor. Is it still possible to find practical common ground under such circumstances?

In this article, I explore the challenge of mediating and finding agreement between parties when there is a big variance in world views and values.

### 2. Value systems. What are they and how do they develop?

According to the models developed by Clare W. Graves, people develop world views based on the problems of living they experience. For instance, if people have trouble in surviving from day to day, they will tend to develop a world view that will enable them to cope and survive in a world that they experience as threatening to their existence. On the other hand, if a person experiences an environment where his needs are mostly met when he adheres to the rules and norms of society, he will tend to develop a world view that will allow him to cope with the demands of rules and norms. These world views are called value systems, or simply values, as they define what the person would see as important. According to this it is possible for people to have such contrasting world views that they are practically living in two completely different worlds! That would mean that even though people are geographically in the same area, they might as well have lived in two different countries as they do not experience their worlds the same at all. For example, when South Africa went through its major political change in 1994, some people expected a war and were stocking up on supplies, while others could not imagine that and expected a mostly peaceful outcome.

### 3. Value systems discussed in this article

Graves identified twelve value systems. Each value system addresses a set of existence problems and the other the world view that would address these problems. He called this model the Psychological Map – that is the map of the set of value systems. Only two of the value systems are discussed in this article. These value systems have each got a certain colour identifying it on the map. For simplicity sake, we will use these colours as names for the values. Value System 1 is the RED value system, and Value System 2 the BLUE Value System.

RED VALUE SYSTEM:

The problems of living/existence challenges of this value System:

A world filled with hostility, aggression and threats to existence

The world view developed to deal with these problems:

Seek to do what must be done for personal benefit and survival regardless of others and societal rules and norms.

#### BLUE VALUE SYSTEM:

##### The problems of living/existence challenges of this value System:

A world that requires order and stability and avoidance of chaos

##### The world view developed to deal with these problems:

Seek to live in ways prescribed by higher authority, rules, regulations, standards and norms.

If views are so different as the definitions of these two values indicate, there is a lot of potential for conflict and misunderstanding. How should mediators act in order to prevent some pitfalls under these circumstances.

## 4. Mediation when value systems differ

In my own practice, I have found certain difficulties when having to mediate in commercial settings that comprise various value systems. For instance, I was once confronted with conflict that arose due to a drop in performance of an employee in a construction-related company. He was seen as a high-potential person who could possibly move up to supervisory ranks, and then his performance dropped. As his work relationships deteriorated significantly, I was requested to mediate. Privately I wondered if management was not perhaps too controlling and demanding of a person who would be able to do better if allowed more independence. It later surfaced, however, that this was not the case at all. The relationship improved somewhat after the mediation as the animosity was aired, clear performance standards were set and objective control mechanisms were put in place. I was confident that the problem might have been solved. I patted myself on the back and watched the situation with interest. However, I was disappointed when the employee's performance did not sufficiently improve, despite all the efforts. I was also somewhat surprised that management did not fully use the levers that the mediation agreements had placed in their hands and that no formal warnings had been issued. Then one of the owners discovered the reason for the poor performance by pure coincidence: Their employee was awarded a "promising young entrepreneur" award! This became news on the internet and the owner saw it per chance while browsing the Web. So deviously, the employee was secretly building his own company, lying about his whereabouts and cheating with resources while still maintaining his employment and riding on the back of his employers!

I felt an utter fool. However, a review of the mediation process and the agreements made revealed no fault in what had been done. No mediation guarantees that the reasons behind any behaviour will be revealed. In my mind, this is especially so if there is some unknown and devious misconduct behind the actions of a person – the person will try to keep it secret.

And management, acting out of the perception that the employee was trying to honour the agreements, made a mistake by not being sufficiently strict. They were actually trying to be less authoritarian. I later realised that they were endeavouring to follow their interpretation of the "spirit" of the mediation.

All in all, the employee was operating from a RED value system while management made the mistake of thinking that everyone involved was operating from a BLUE value system.

## 5. Suggestions for catering for different value systems

Is it possible to cater for value systems that are so different? Fact of the matter is – we have no choice. The differences covered in this article are actually very common differences found in the South African labour market and probably in many other South African settings. I will separate the suggestions I have for the two discussed value systems, and then consider the problem of at times having to do it simultaneously, such as during joint sessions. Ultimately, one must cater for both value systems in the process as a whole, up to the point where agreements have been implemented.

Catering for the BLUE value system:

This is not really a problematic system, as the process of mediation and the set of rules and methods have, in my opinion, all been designed mostly from a BLUE world view. In general, do the following:

- Use tools that are printed and handed out.
- During individual sessions, stress your own adherence to principles and norms.
- Use words like what “should” and “ought” to be done.
- Cover all aspects in sufficient detail.
- Do not be inconsistent.

Catering for the RED value system:

This value system is somewhat trickier as participants will break the rules if they can get away with it.

- Do not expect the printed word to be trusted or to be given much attention – repeat all important aspects verbally.
- Display body language that confirms a firm stance and an expectation that agreed behaviour will indeed be adhered to.
- Expect to be manipulated and taken advantage of – do not overreact and get into verbal altercations but remain calm and firm.
- Do not expect to be trusted; explain why it is in your own interest to be even-handed and not to take sides (Thus you provide the RED value system with a believable self-interest reason why you would be even handed – that will be understood).
- Be careful not to be “conned” into half-hearted agreements that leave loopholes for non-performance.
- Stress the benefit to them of doing the mediation as well as of sticking to the agreements made.
- Explain the consequences of poor behaviour during mediation as well as of disregarding agreements.

Catering for both RED and BLUE value systems:

- Find a balance in the amount of paperwork and printed tools. BLUE participants would prefer thorough printed details, while RED participants would tend to want shorter and to-the-point versions of tools and agreements.

- While the suggestions above might seem to indicate that BLUE value system participants will be the easier participant and RED the more difficult, in reality, this might not be so. People with a BLUE world view might be very pedantic and demand high attention to low-priority details, even when the issues have, in essence, already been settled. For instance, how payments will be made or which accounts will be used – which might be better handled by the legal representatives outside of the main mediation.
- It is also important to protect the RED value system participant from agreeing to settlements without fully realising the consequences. The RED value system participant might focus on only whether they have “won” sufficient benefit, and once that is reached, settle quickly without giving enough attention to the full implications. For instance, the RED participant might agree to paying a certain amount with interest – without giving enough attention to how much the interest will be in total.
- Encourage participants to follow through and implement every aspect and use every tool provided in the agreement (Management in the case study could have solved the problem if they stuck to their guns).
- Overall, normal good mediation practice should be followed. If anything, the value system analysis showed how important it is to stick to good practice despite pressure to deviate from it. The exploitive value system discussed would mean that some participants would try to manipulate the process or push the mediator to take shortcuts.

## 6. Summary and Conclusions

This article was written from a practitioner’s perspective for other practitioners in the South African mediation field. The problem of finding agreement between parties who hold very different world views was explored. In the case discussed, management operated from a value system of rules and fairness, while an employee operated from an exploitive value system. Management misinterpreted the mediation process by assuming that their lenience was adhering to the spirit of the mediation. In the article, the writer made some suggestions on how to deal with and cater for the specific value systems discussed. Although these suggestions would improve the chances of successful mediation, in essence, nothing of the main process of mediation needed to change to accommodate the value systems. On the contrary, the case discussed illustrated that an unwavering and disciplined implementation of the agreements reached could have saved the day.

Suggested further reading:

[Clare Graves Website: Dedicated to the Work of Dr Clare W. Graves ...](#)  
[www.clarewgraves.com/](http://www.clarewgraves.com/)

[An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values by Shalom H Schwartz \(2012\) Online publication: www: scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent](#)

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