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Nora's First Pre-Caucus

The third party gives Nora an introduction similar to the one provided to Rebecca in the previous chapter. Then, he invites Nora to tell him about the conflict. The mediator prompts Nora several times and asks questions to get her going.

Searching for the Problem

- NORA: [Smiling.] OK, I'm sorry to appear a little bit clueless, but I'm not sure [Laughing as she speaks.] what the issue is.
- MEDIATOR: Something about a write-up?
- NORA: [Smiling, and nodding her head.] OK, the first time I was aware of this situation was when Ken Matsushita took us all out for pizza a month ago. Rebecca suggested that the data for my part of the report was due.
- MEDIATOR: So, that was the first time you were aware that this was an issue?
- NORA: [Still smiling.] That somehow there was an issue and that I was somehow involved in it.
- MEDIATOR: Since then, have you gained a better understanding of what the issue was?
- NORA: A little bit. I have an assistant who was preparing the write-up. I honestly don't know who prepared the write-up.
- MEDIATOR: It was turned in?

NORA: I don't know if it's been turned in. I've been to the lab recently and saw some of the paperwork there. I can probably take care of it, if there's an expectation that this is something I was supposed to do . . . or even if there isn't an expectation that it's my responsibility.

MEDIATOR: Right.

NORA: But if I'm supposed to do it, then someone needs to tell me that I'm supposed to do it, because I really had no idea.

At this point in the narration, a traditionally oriented mediator might be saying, "Aha! You see. One of them is lying. If they were together, neither one would lie in front of the other." I happen to believe that each of the parties was telling the truth. But the issue of selective hearing has come into play.

Once, my oldest son and his wife left a few of their pets for my wife and me to take care of. When, during that same period, my wife left for a trip with one of our daughters, it fell on me to take care of the pets: two exotic Bengal cats and a killer fish. I was so worried about the instructions on how to care for the cats that when my wife told me I need not worry about changing the water in the fish tank during her short absence, my mind translated that as, "Don't worry about the fish." I didn't really hear her when she told me to feed the fish twice a day. Fortunately, after two days it dawned on me that the fish needed to be fed. The fish did not die, but I felt bad. Just because we transmit information does not mean someone else has the receiver turned on.

MEDIATOR: So, you are not clear . . .

NORA: Or why this even involves me. I haven't had time, and actually, I assigned one of my assistants, but had some pretty flaky help. I have more urgent things to do right now, such as dealing with samples that are in danger of spoiling. I really don't understand the dynamics of why, all of a sudden, this turned into a conflict.

MEDIATOR: So far we've focused on the write-up. Is there more to this issue, or some other underlying matter?

NORA: I . . . I'd have to suspect so, because the write-up is just one of a number of things that have become issues, not really for me, but I suppose it's more for other people. How can I say it? Sometimes it's really busy—you know, I have a lot going on—and at times it can appear untidy, because, uh, well, you know what the Bible says—that when you don't have any cows, you have clean barns.

MEDIATOR: [Laughs along with Nora.]

NORA: But, there are advantages to having cows. So, sometimes I have a lot of cows, and sometimes, when I have people working for me, I can't always control if they know they're not supposed to put something on a specific lab bench . . . But, then someone comes to me and says, "Your stuff is on that bench!" . . . OK, I'll go find them and tell them they're not allowed to put it on that bench. Even under the best of circumstances, we may have samples coming in faster than we can process them, and we may make a mess.

Here, Nora tells a story about her occasional dealings with Fred, another co-worker, and his spillovers into her space. She explains that there is usually an exchange of friendly banter with Fred, and in the end they arrive at solutions that do not involve escalation of negative feelings. Nora wants to present herself as a reasonable person, with a certain amount of patience for others, as well as a sense of humor.

NORA: I know that my stuff tends to crawl around a bit, like an octopus, and that it takes more space than it ought to. But if someone comes to me, we can try and find a solution. Likewise, with this issue regarding the write-up, making a big to-do about this strikes me as being a little excessive. [Nora is smiling again as she concludes the second half of these comments.]

MEDIATOR: A little excessive . . .

NORA: Yeah, a little excessive, especially since I had no clue that there were some expectations here. This was news to me, especially since, as soon I became aware of it, I told my assistant, “Hey, next time you’re in the lab, take care of this.” But the assistant flaked out and left me with this and a whole bunch of other things.

MEDIATOR: In addition to what you have . . .

NORA: In addition to the rest of my work, yes. [Long pause.] And . . . I guess . . . I guess I could also say that it really hasn’t occupied a great deal of my thought processes . . . and it’s not something I can deal with. And I can only deal with the things I can deal with and do something about. I recognize that someone else may be stewing about it . . . but unless they come to me, it won’t make my priority list.

MEDIATOR: It won’t make the list.

NORA: No, there are too many things that are not making the list that really are important.

MEDIATOR: Anything else?

NORA: [Long silence.] Uh . . . I don’t think so. It’s just, if something’s an issue, you know, rather than freaking out over it, why can’t we just talk about it?

The mediator summarizes what has been said so far and Nora lets him know that the summary is accurate. She also goes on to repeat some of what she has already said, before proceeding.

NORA: As far as I’m concerned, the work of others at the lab is just as important as mine. I really do believe that. Now, I can understand how some people might have a different perception, because . . . if I’m using part of the workspace that belongs to the community, then they can say, “She really doesn’t care about my work because she’s hogging the workspace.” I don’t feel that way, but we have to talk about it. Then we have to find a way to get everyone’s stuff done, even

though it may not be perfect for everybody, but we can find a way to do that.

MEDIATOR: Find a way of working it out . . .

NORA: It's not going to be perfect, but . . . [Once again, the mediator gives Nora a chance to expand and explain what she is thinking and feeling.]

The conversation seems over, and the mediator asks Nora for positive qualities about Rebecca.

Admirable Qualities of the Opposite Party

NORA: Rebecca really cares about people. She has very good, uh, people skills. In terms of really caring about people and being empathetic and sympathetic . . . I remember the time when our whole staff was asked to fill out personality profiles. Almost every single person in the lab came out task-oriented, a get-the-job-done type personality of one permutation or another. She was the only person who scored way high in relational skills. I think her way of getting stuff done was to build partnerships and camaraderie. Everyone else was more likely to take logical steps and accomplish things.

MEDIATOR: Get the job done.

NORA: Get the job done. She was the only one who scored really high on "We are going to make relationships." And I think that's really neat! I think that's really important in this lab.

The conversation turns to other topics for a while, but Nora has some things she is still feeling.

NORA: I guess one thing that people may find a positive thing, or somewhat annoying, . . . this whole thing about the write-up. I recognize that Rebecca might really be stewing about this stuff. Because I didn't meet an expectation. I have to admit that I really haven't thought about it. It's not that I don't care.

It's just that, uh, I guess one of the things I've learned in life is not to run away from conflict. It's not that I don't care about how other people feel, but I've learned not to let other people's problems, other people's feelings, other people's issues dictate whether I'm going to be functional and happy and make good decisions and good choices. I've had enough experience with really negative people in my life. Now, I have to make a decision. Am I going to let my good day and my good mood be trashed because a person comes in with negative baggage? No! I was in a good mood before you walked in the door, and I'm going to be in a good mood when you leave, because I have work to do and a life to live, and choose to be happy. It doesn't mean that I'm afraid of conflict, and it doesn't mean that I won't work with you, but if you're coming with a lot of emotional baggage and an expectation that I'm going to somehow . . . I don't know exactly how to say it . . . I'll work with you, but I'm not going to let somebody else's issues control my life. Does that make sense?

MEDIATOR: You're not going to let someone else's issues.

NORA: So, uh, that's just a choice I have to make for me. It may look like I don't care. It's not that I don't care. It's just that I have a lot that I have to get done. If I let myself go into a tailspin because someone else is ticked at me, I can't function. I'll put your issue on my list, and when I get to that point on my list, I'll do something about it. But I'm not going to let it affect dealing with all the other issues on my plate . . . I can't. I have to live.

MEDIATOR: Separating issues from emotions . . .

NORA: Yeah . . . but I'm not going to beat myself up . . . I have too many other things I could potentially beat myself up on. If I spend my life beating myself up for all my imperfections and all the expectations that other people have of me that I can't possibly meet,

I'll collapse. So, I want to be in control of what's on my list. Ultimately, I have to choose what's on my list and what I can get done in a day.

The conversation between Nora and the mediator continues in the same vein for a while. At one point, Nora tells of a specific life-changing event that taught her to be less defensive and, instead, focus more on her work. The mediator then coaches Nora on how to present her case effectively in the joint session. Just when the pre-caucus session seems over, Nora thinks of a particular situation that might have played a key role in the escalation of her conflict with Rebecca.

The Larry Incident

NORA: Let me bring up another issue from long ago. I think this is when my conflict with Rebecca really started to escalate.

Nora seems relaxed, but her smile is gone. She goes into a long and detailed explanation of how a former lab assistant, Larry, was assigned by Matsushita to work for Nora full-time. Unfortunately, both Rebecca and Nora thought they had requisitioned Larry's help. They both needed assistance in a critical way.

NORA: Rebecca came to me and said, "I had him signed up—you didn't—and I really need him." I told her, "It may be a moot point anyway, because I think Ken has assigned Larry to me full-time." I was *going* to say, "I really need him today, but because you have these things that have to get done, why don't we work it out so that maybe tomorrow—I had already blocked out the time—we can have Larry help you, even if he's been formally assigned to me." But before I could get the words out of my mouth, she wrote me off. You know, as soon as I said it was going to be a moot point anyway, because he was going to be working for me, she blew up,

stormed out of the room, refused to speak to me the rest of the day—or the next two days. Larry and I tried to find her to tell her, “Hey, if you want some time, we’ll get this done.” But she wouldn’t speak to me. She was so angry. She said, “The only person’s work you care about is your own.” I never had a chance, because she would never listen to me. I know her husband had to come and help her on Saturday, and it was a big fiasco. I would have helped her, but she left and wouldn’t speak to me any more. Ever since then, she’s just been on my case, as if I’m being a selfish person who only cares about my own work. Anyway, I think this incident really affected all those other incidents, and I’d really like to get it straightened out. It’s really bothered me that I’ve never been able to, you know, set the record straight. I just have sensed she hasn’t been, uh, as forgiving since then.

MEDIATOR: Uh-huh.

NORA: And I don’t blame her, from her standpoint, but that’s not the way I saw things, and I’ve never been able to set the record right.

MEDIATOR: It goes back to the issue of communication.

NORA: And not being able to finish my sentence on that one day.

MEDIATOR: Right.

NORA: We tried. [Smile appears again, as she lifts her hands.]

Time for a Joint Session?

After additional conversation between the mediator and Nora, we return to the question of the joint session.

MEDIATOR: We’ve met with both of you on an individual basis. The next step is to determine if it will be beneficial to bring both parties together. How do you feel about meeting with Rebecca? Are you ready for that?

NORA: Mmm.

MEDIATOR: Or, are you at a point where we should still meet individually for another session?

NORA: Well, I really like having right relationships. [A smile briefly breaks upon her face.] And I admit that because of Rebecca's emotional response to me in the past . . . uh, it makes me nervous to actually sit down with Rebecca and try to be understood. I've just had such bad luck with that on a number of occasions [Smiles about this.] that it's really made me kind of leery. I've got lots of stress in my life, and this is one I really don't want to have to deal with, but it's much more important to me to have right relationships with Rebecca . . . and I'll do whatever it takes to make sure—as far as I can—that there can be peace and communication. I really like the idea of doing this in a controlled situation. All I can do is give it my best shot, I guess, even though for me it's a very uncomfortable thing, because I don't like other people's emotional stuff dumped on me. I've gotten pretty good at shedding it but it doesn't mean I don't care. You know what I mean?

MEDIATOR: M-hm.

NORA: You know . . . but my own feelings are not nearly as important as my desire to get it right.

MEDIATOR: OK. If we . . .

NORA: But . . . but . . . OK . . . OK, I'm going to introduce a caveat. I'm going to lean on your judgment because I don't have a clue as to where she's at. And I don't know how she's going to feel. I don't want to make things worse. I'm not really concerned about making things worse for me, because I will muddle through regardless of how bad it's for me. I don't want to make the situation worse. So, if you think she's in a place where she could hear my heart, I'd love to know it.

The mediator prepares Nora for the joint session by explaining the seating arrangement, the purpose of eye contact, and other issues, as he did when meeting with Rebecca. Nora is very attentive. With the mediator, she role plays bringing up the incident involving Larry. Although she is not asked to, Nora finishes her role-play explanation to Rebecca with an apology. The word *apology* triggers a strong emotional reaction from Nora.

Nora tells of the time she was collecting samples and returned to the lab somewhat dehydrated. She drank three sodas, full of sugar and caffeine, and subsequently exploded at the receptionist, who delivered a message about some trivial matter. Nora explains how out-of-character her behavior was and how shocked she and the receptionist were by her outburst. “It was the sugar,” Nora insists.

If the situation with Larry were to take place again, Nora feels she would be just as unsure about how to handle it, despite the unfortunate consequences. Nora also speaks about how vulnerable she feels at this time in her life.

NORA: I guess what I was trying to say is that it’s hard for me, uh, because I spent so much time—and this has nothing to do with Rebecca—being forced to apologize for situations I didn’t create. And when I know I didn’t do anything wrong. I’ve had to deal with a control freak who I couldn’t ever please, and who subjected me to verbal abuse. So, I’m really sensitive about taking blame for something, taking ownership of a problem that really isn’t mine. Just for my own mental health I have to be really careful to not be the cause of everybody else’s problems. I have to retain who I am rather than what other people say I am. I guess I’ve built up some walls and defenses that are kind of fresh and new. I’m not really in a place where I’m willing to take a lot of ownership for blame I don’t feel I deserve. But I’m willing to take the blame I do deserve, like the

situation with the receptionist. Does this make sense?

The ability to offer and receive apologies is a critical interpersonal negotiation tool. Nora seems receptive to an example of an apology offered by the mediator—a situation in which he felt the need to apologize not for what he did or said, but for what happened as a result of a dispute. The mediator explains that it is possible to express regret for a situation without taking the blame for what happened.

NORA: And I'm very sorry about that. And I'm sorry for what it's led to. And I can do that. But to say that I caused all of that . . . I can't do that. Maybe in five years I can do that and it will be OK with me, but right now it's not OK with me.

NEXT STEPS

The mediator agrees to meet again with Rebecca and share some of the information gathered during Nora's pre-caucus. And to collect information to share back with Nora. In the weeks before the mediator is able to meet with Rebecca and Nora for an additional pre-caucus, the parties continue their soul-searching, which will do much to soften each of their stances.