

Definitive Creative Impasse-Breaking Techniques in Mediation

Molly Klapper, J.D., Ph.D.
Editor



NEW YORK STATE BAR ASSOCIATION

[15.0] I. MULTI-PARTY MEDIATIONS

One of a mediator's great joys, challenges and justifications can be found in the multi-party matter. Multi-party conflicts or disputes arise in every conceivable dimension of society. Take, for example, a school board's decision in renewing a teachers' union contract. Each board member can have diverse views and interests; within the union there might be different views, interest groups and political factions; school administrators have different views and interests; and the public itself—parents, students, and taxpayers affected by the decision—consists of multiple and divergent stakeholders. Zoning board decisions, end-of-life decisions involving large families (perhaps with second marriages), plant closings, any union negotiation, environmental resource use decisions—all involve multiple parties. Indeed, moving from business into municipal, state, national or international arenas, the set of multi-party disputes casts a wide net.

The broad array of multi-party disputes produces a wide range of issues, many of which fall outside the focus of this chapter but bear mention. These include the basic problem of convening. Identifying interest groups, selecting their representatives in what would otherwise be an impossibly unwieldy discussion, and managing intraparty communication are just a few of the threshold challenges in mediating these matters. As environmental mediators know all too well, it can even be a challenge to find a common legal framework that creates a shared sense of risk. Upstream users of water in Vermont might affect the availability or condition of water in downstream states and might eventually have an impact on the environment and users of natural resources as far south as the Chesapeake Bay. Local authorities in the downstream states might have no authority to regulate upstate users. Environmental Protection Agency regulators have, at times, convened sessions of stakeholders for negotiated rulemaking (“reg/neg”) to address these problems.¹

¹ These observations were raised by David Batson of the EPA and others at an all-day conference, “Changing Times, Changing Legal Practice: Effective Legal Strategies to Resolve New Environmental Disputes,” held at The University Club in New York City, Nov. 17, 2009. The conference, presented by Pace Law School's Kheel Center on the Resolution of Environmental Interest Disputes, included Lowenstein Sandler PC, Leyland Alliance and Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker LLP as co-sponsors, and had a good number of participating sponsors, including the Federal Bar Association's Alternative Dispute Resolution Section and its Environment, Energy, and Natural Resources Section; the American Bar Association Section of Environment, Energy, and Resources; the Environmental Law Institute; the New York City Bar Environmental Law Committee; Pace Law School Center for Environmental Legal Studies; and the New York State Bar Association's Dispute Resolution Section.

Several years ago, the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Institute's (CPR) annual meeting featured an exercise in facilitated multi-party negotiation, drawing on the hypothetical of rebuilding the World Trade Center (WTC). It was an excellent display of the unique features of multi-party negotiations and the ways in which they benefit from a neutral facilitator.² In that post-9/11 scenario, five divergent groups struggled to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution to questions of how the WTC site will be used (memorial or commercial), who will pay for the rebuilding, and who will get credit for posterity. This negotiation was held in the shadow of media coverage. Three of the five stakeholders (victims' families, state, and city, as well as insurers and developer) involved numerous members. In view of the pressure applied by constituents "outside the room," it was important to be able to structure a constructive discussion in which all could strive for consensus.

This WTC scenario underscores the value a neutral party might bring. The neutral can help develop a good structure for talks, identify interests and issues, help in setting and revising the agenda, conduct caucuses, deal with the formation of independent cabals, assist in brainstorming, help with reality testing, and maintain constructive focus as the terms of this multi-factorial deal are hammered out. One enhanced challenge for the mediator in this type of negotiation is working the balance between remaining a background player—a facilitator, drawing out the parties' interests and thoughts for resolution—while exerting sufficient influence to maintain a structured and progressive discussion. There is a tangible risk that relations and communications will fray where each group excessively asserts its own interest and stalls consensus-seeking talks by fili-

2 Rebuilding the World Trade Center Site: An Exercise in Multi-Party Negotiation, presented by Professor Lawrence Susskind of the Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation, draws on taped segments of a 90-minute exercise used by participants in the January 2007 Annual Meeting of CPR (now the International Institute for Conflict Prevention and Resolution). Each of the multiple groups consisted of six participants, representing (1) the families of those who died as a result of the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings on Sept. 11, 2001; (2) the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, representing the owner of that land; (3) the City of New York; (4) the Silverstein group, which had a long-term lease on the site and was responsible for rental payments and rebuilding; (5) the insurer of the collapsed buildings; and (6) a facilitator charged with fostering a constructive negotiation. The tape and associated materials can be purchased at http://www.pon.org/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=417. This author was part of a CPR working group that developed the initial problem, under the guidance of Peter Phillips of CPR. The raw material for that program was reworked and refined by Professor Susskind and his students prior to the January 2007 CPR Annual Meeting. An obvious takeaway from this role-playing is that—with divergent interest groups under public scrutiny, the tendency to form caucuses among fewer than all participants, and the need for consensus—the participants benefited greatly from having a facilitator manage the discussion.

bustering, table pounding, or withdrawal. The mediator brings value here by developing a transparent process while preserving the ability to caucus and, fundamentally, by keeping people at the table. With all of this activity, the artful mediator is challenged to keep the “less is more” philosophy of neutral intervention close at hand.

Shifting from the host of public and community disputes and deal making, we now turn to the realm of civil litigation. Perhaps first in mind for litigators is the multi-defendant case—for example, construction cases, or third-party liability matters—where multiple defendants and third- or fourth-party defendants have been added to the fracas. Often, insurers are involved. Similarly, there is the class action or its variant, the multi-plaintiff case. Beyond these, the areas where multiple parties and interest groups are involved in litigation are legion.

[15.1] II. THE CONSENSUS-BASED RISK ALLOCATION MODEL

Civil litigators are all too familiar with one phenomenon in the multi-defendant case: mutual finger-pointing. When asked who bears responsibility for a particular occurrence or loss, defendants have a tendency to direct attention away from themselves and seek to shift the burden of payment onto one or more of the other defendants. In construction-related cases, or the third-party insurance world in general, this is a frequent occurrence. Often, counsel or claims adjusters will enter a negotiation with a predetermined percentage they believe their company should bear relative to the other defendants. Moreover, they have set views on the percentage responsibility the other parties should bear as well—particularly party X, whom they deem to be the chief target, or party Y, who was in a position similar to their own. This can generate feelings among professionals not unlike sibling rivalry.

Over the course of several mediations in which this common phenomenon arose, I developed and refined an approach that has proven to be consistently effective in extricating multiple defendants from the quagmire caused by mutual finger-pointing. This approach can be termed a “consensus-based-risk-allocation model.” It can be seen as an effort to garner information from the parties themselves and to have the solution to their imbroglio emerge from their own thought processes, rather than have it independently developed and pronounced by the mediator. Because it involves an amalgamation of their collective thoughts, it is seen as consensus based. It is termed a “risk allocation” model because it involves the thought processes of all defendants (including counsel and insurance

representatives) in calculating how risk of loss at trial should be assessed and allocated among all of the defendants.

Before describing this process, one social-psychological phenomenon bears noting: Defendants can get hung up on relative percentages and looking over their shoulders at what the other defendants are contributing. Dealing with hard dollars can help disengage defendants from this inter-party struggle. The consensus-based risk allocation model is designed to shift parties' focus from percentages to hard dollars and to focus each defendant on its own pot rather than the other defendants'. This helps parties move from stalemate to progress.

The procedure is fairly straightforward. First comes preparation and diagnosis. I typically hold an initial joint session with all parties and one or more caucuses (private, confidential meetings with fewer than all parties). Because multi-defendant negotiations are cumbersome, plaintiffs often are surprisingly willing to share their more or less realistic desired settlement number earlier on in the process, to enable the mediator to be effective. This is essential to the method's success. During the initial caucuses—first with the entire group of defendants and then with subgroups of defendants—the mutual finger-pointing becomes apparent, producing its diagnosis. To address this problem, I hold a series of caucuses with each of the defendants. In each caucus I ask the same set of questions:

1. What is the likelihood the plaintiff will win at trial and, if so, how much?
2. What percentage liability will be allocated to each defendant?
3. How much will it cost to try this case?

Answers to these questions are recorded on an Excel spreadsheet, with a horizontal row for each defendant's answer and a vertical column for each defendant discussed. Examples of these spreadsheet templates are presented in tables 1, 2, and 3.³ Question 1 is developed a bit further, to account for any comparative share allocated to a successful plaintiff. A final row is added to take the averages of the input from all defendants.

By the time this approach is used, there has been back-and-forth, in joint session and via initial caucuses, on all parties' views of the strengths and weaknesses of the case, addressing both liability and damages. Risk

³ See tables 1, 2 and 3 in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

analysis, if needed to develop greater realism, can be performed before or in conjunction with the discussions in these caucuses. My general observation is that by the time we have gathered answers to the above three questions, the parties have reached a certain degree of realism and have developed some trust in the process and the mediator.

When the interviews have been completed, I develop three different types of “pots,” or economic scenarios.

[15.2] A. Trial Outcome and Transaction Costs

Using the trial-outcome predictions recorded on the Excel spreadsheet, I calculate the average of the amount the plaintiff is predicted to win. Thus, for example, if there are ten defendants, there will be ten educated guesses of damages at trial, which can be averaged. By luck of the draw, in most instances where I have used this method, there has been minimal doubt that the plaintiff would win, but exuberant disagreement on the allocation of responsibility among defendants. Therefore, in these scenarios, there is little need to apply a total loss risk factor to the averaged damages number. See, for example, the results reflected in table 4.⁴

In table 4, 1 is assigned to the “Plaintiff Wins” column, serving as a 100% type of multiple against the damages and any plaintiff’s comparative liability share. If, however, there were a strongly perceived risk that the plaintiff would have an outright loss, that risk factor column can also be completed and averaged. The resultant average can be applied to the average damages number to produce the defendants’ collective view on case value. An example of this additional calculation is displayed in table 5.⁵

The net result, with either set of expectations on the plaintiff’s likelihood of winning at trial, is the defendants’ collective assessment of case value. By itself, this could be used as a framework for negotiations.

Beyond this, the predicted defense costs can also be calculated as in table 6.⁶

Significantly, one might make the common observation that collective transaction costs outweigh the risk of loss at trial. These costs are properly cumulated rather than averaged. When combined with trial outcome,

4 See table 4 in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

5 See table 5 in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

6 See table 6 in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

they give us the collective sense of the combined exposure to damages and transaction costs. An example is shown in table 7,⁷ positing the simplified case of all the defendants' recognizing that the plaintiff will win something at trial. Figures for this table are drawn from tables 4 and 6.

If there is any doubt about the candor of the various defendants' own cost estimates, the costs can be averaged for use when discussing likely costs with a particular defendant (see table 6). There is also the more cumbersome approach of including costs for every defendant in the third question during the initial interviews of each defendant and using those figures. This is typically unnecessary but can be used to produce the numbers to fill in the Costs Through Trial column of table 7.

With the development of the above-noted numbers, the mediator is in a better position for discussing risk analysis and transaction cost analysis with any defendant.

[15.3] B. Probable Settlement Number

It also pays to make note of the amount the plaintiff needs to settle the case. The first set of numbers, on case outcome and transaction costs, can now be used to reassess the realism of the plaintiff's probable settlement number. Before holding further discussions with the defendants, I might reengage the plaintiff in an exploratory caucus to get a better sense of what is needed to settle the case. Of course, it is important to be careful not to disclose to the plaintiff confidential information gathered in the defendant caucuses. Nevertheless, all of the information supports the development of an educated guess at a probable settlement number. For purposes of our examples, let us assume that the plaintiff would settle the case for \$1.5 million.⁸

⁷ See table 7 in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

⁸ While this is just a hypothetical, given the assumptions in tables 4–6, this is not an unrealistic number. \$1.5 million is 75% of the average projected case outcome where the plaintiff wins every time (\$2 million, per table 4), and is a lesser discount off the projection where the plaintiff is seen as having some risk of outright loss (approximately \$1.65 million, per table 5). There are benefits in having present use of funds, as opposed to waiting for trial (although this is somewhat offset by New York's 9% judgment interest rate). There are also benefits to the plaintiff's counsel, who often operates on a contingent fee, in spending less time on the case, avoiding outlay of expenses on experts and other litigation-related costs, and in trading an uncertain win after trial and possible appeal for the certainty of a settlement. Of course, we are assuming that the entire group of defendants has not radically underestimated realistic damages at trial. Use of risk analysis in the caucuses where this information is gathered can help with quality control for these figures.

