



Building Trust in Mediation

Trust is defined as “confidence in the integrity, character and truth of a person or thing.” When trust is broken in a relationship, the only possibility of restoring it is through honest dialogue about what has happened. In mediation a starting point for building trust is “good faith,” the intention to respect others, negotiate, and to carry out agreements.

Good Faith is a principle of mediation and includes the notion of fair dealing. Fair dealing means that the parties give and receive the information necessary for making decisions. The term good faith has ancient roots—in small communities or clans a person’s word was sacred—deceiving one’s family or neighbors had dire consequences. Loss of close-knit communities over the past three hundred years has eroded the notion that we are each responsible to others to uphold standards of honesty and integrity. In personal relationships the criterion for building trust is in living up to the values and standards that are important to us.

Mediation is recognized as a model for ending relationships, but also offers a framework for working on issues within relationships. Few of us realized negotiation would be needed in couple relationships—it is rarely mentioned in the hopes of “happily ever after.” Use of mediation to learn negotiation skills provides parties with a model for resolving conflict that is sustainable. The tools of dialogue and negotiation can be valuable in many life situations. Mediation focuses on concrete agreements that often include written documents. Written agreements give parties a reference point to determine whether they are taking the specified steps to reestablish trust. Trust is rebuilt when agreements are upheld.

Disclosure of information, while sometimes painful, is crucial to rebuilding trust. The Sustainable Knowledge Model of Norm Educating Mediation provides a structure that furthers the sharing of information. While no mediator can guarantee that all issues will be resolved, this model can promise clarity by identifying issues and specifying next steps.

The process of rebuilding trust in mediation might include some of the following:

- *Setting boundaries*- even in couple relationships it is important to allow each person private space for his/her own thoughts and feelings; respecting each other’s privacy is crucial in building trust;
- *Agreeing on confidentiality*- some people are comfortable sharing personal information with friends and family members; your partner may be more or less willing than you are to share feelings about issues in the relationship with others. Ground rules need to be established about what each of you may or may not share.
- *Establishing ground rules*- establish a time to talk about issues and create specific ground rules that will maintain safety during difficult conversations; ways to enhance safety include: taking turns speaking and not interrupting; listening for areas of agreement; owning your part of the problem.
- *Doing what you say you will do*- this requires no explanation. It’s simple. Trust cannot be built if you do not live up to agreements.