

## Power of Imagination in Mediation

By: Sylvia Mayer

*Imagine.* Imagine closure. Imagine being able to focus on your future. Imagine having this lawsuit behind you. Imagination is a powerful tool in mediation. Sometimes, the most effective path to conflict resolution is to imagine a future without conflict.

To illustrate, I will share a story about a “business divorce” case that I mediated. The dispute involved two individuals who had been best friends and business partners. Their business had been highly successful for many years but, ultimately, the business failed. The failure ruined their friendship, their reputations, and their finances.

Each blamed the other for the failure and accused the other of wrongdoing, deceit, lies, and other unethical behavior. The business failure and financial ruin damaged their reputations and wounded their pride. Their sense of betrayal created a huge trust deficit in what had once been a trusted relationship. In addition to the financial impact, they also lost their decades-long friendship, a loss that each was grieving.

*Betrayal. Grief. Wounded pride.* These emotions can be major obstacles to resolution. It was an intensely emotional mediation. Both parties needed a safe space to share and vent. Both needed empathy and validation. Both also needed to find a path forward to leave this pain behind them.

Once their emotions had been spent and their feelings validated, I shifted their focus to the future. I asked them to imagine life with the litigation and the pain behind them. *Imagine.* Imagine is a magic word that can unlock future opportunities.

As small children, our brains shift gears when our imagination is triggered. Think about it. Even now, what happens when you hear “once upon a time”? Does it open your mind up to memories of stories and storytelling? Do you become more receptive to new possibilities?

Choosing to imagine tells our brains to set aside critical thinking and, instead, triggers our creativity allowing us to explore new opportunities. Our imagination



allows us to let go of the hurt, so we are free to grow in new directions and see options we did not see before. In the example above, the parties' imagination allowed them to move forward and find a path to resolution of the conflict. We were able to forge a creative solution to the dissolution of the business and related issues.

Particularly in emotionally charged situations, imagining a future without the burden of those emotions may be the key to unlocking the path to resolution.