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Frames of Reference

Ask two people to describe the same event and you're likely to hear two different descriptions. They saw and heard the same thing but framed it according to their own values, beliefs, and experience, and developed a summary based on their perspectives.



Frames of reference are the mental structures we create to make sense of our experiences. Because we design our frames from what we know, and our knowledge is limited, we infer meaning and make assumptions when trying to understand something. Conflict may arise because others with whom we are communicating work from a different experiential base, assign different meaning to events, and arrive at different assumptions about a situation.

Mediators often challenge parties to see other perspectives to help them find mutually agreeable solutions. For instance, mediators may ask parties to:

- Understand that their perspective is unique and accept that there is no single "correct" way to frame the situation
- acknowledge that others have a different perspective they see as valid
- question whether anyone is missing facts that might lead them to a different interpretation of the situation
- consider whether assumptions about another's motivation for acting in a certain way may be wrong

If parties are able to accept another's perspective as a valid way to see the same facts, and if they question their own assumptions, they may find common ground. It is challenging for a mediator to promote this sort of understanding and even more challenging if you are a party involved in an argument with someone. However, finding solutions may be more satisfying in the long run than engaging in the conflict.