

ADR Skill of the Month

No Place for Distractions

When a conversation deserves undivided attention (and don't they all?) your first consideration should be to find a location that presents minimum distractions.

Imagine a parent and teacher having a "confidential" conversation about their child/student, but conducting it in the classroom right after school. Other students and parents are streaming in and out; the teacher is constantly interrupted with questions and maybe simultaneously putting away supplies or organizing papers, and thus making little eye contact. Of course the distractions could also come from the parent: taking a work call on her cell phone, or whose child keeps popping into the classroom asking, "When can we go home?"

Avoiding distractions may seem like a no-brainer but it really does need your conscious attention — and a plan — as soon as the agreement is made to have a serious talk. I'm sure you can understand how the location you choose will play a critical role in determining the tone and outcome of your meeting.

So, where do you find a distraction-free environment? Ideally there would be a comfortable room with four walls, someplace conducive to private, uninterrupted conversation. If you have such a room on your campus or at your business, you're lucky. (Just be sure to promptly book it!) In many cases, however, the solution is not so handy. When I am working at a school site, I sometimes recommend having a conversation out on the yard or lunch area when the students are not around.

There is also the option to go off-site altogether. A local coffee house or park may do nicely. True, these may come with their own distractions but they can provide a level of confidentiality that comes with being away from the regular workplace. Similarly, there can be advantages to the feeling of being in a "neutral" site. For that reason alone, going off-site may be the preferable choice if the conversation/meeting is between two or more colleagues dealing with a work conflict.

Examples of Common Distractions — Can you come up with others that occur in your work environment?

- People coming in and out
- Phones ringing
- Outside noises
- Poor air conditioning/heating
- Time limitations
- Preoccupations (thinking about everything else except the current conversation)

Alternative Dispute Resolution Services (ADR)

- Mediation
- Training
- Coaching
- Facilitation

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