

"The fingerprint of humour", interview by Irene Seidel, *Mediator*, March 2015

Mediator is a quarterly, cross-disciplinary journal for mediators. The interview discusses the use of humour in mediation, for instance through empathy, valorisation, exaggeration or provocation.

Original interview in German:

<http://www.humorinstitut.de/media/1501-Mediator-Interview-mit-Eva-Ullmann.pdf>

Interview with Eva Ullmann

The fingerprint of humour

The resource of humour lies dormant in many areas, although it is obviously effective. The German Institute for Humour (Leipzig) stands for a combination of analysis, training and especially humour practice. The team surrounding director Eva Ullmann conducts research into the appropriate mixture of seriousness and humour. To this end, they also looked over the shoulders of mediators in specially designed workshops in order to find out more about their "humour fingerprint". The following interview with Eva Ullmann offers some reflections on this topic.

Is humour a conflict solving strategy?

Eva Ullmann: In everyday life, we constantly try to be perfect and to avoid contradictions. But we actually work better if we deal with contradictions in a humorous way. We have more solution strategies if we include humour as a method, especially with regard to misunderstandings and conflicts.

Are people amused when you introduce yourself as the representative of the German Institute for Humour?

Eva Ullmann: Abroad, the mere existence of a German Institute for Humour produces great hilarity. *The Economist* recently wrote: the Germans need an institute for their humour – they need professional help! Of course, we don't view the situation in quite such a dramatic and exaggerated way. We assume that even the Germans have a sense of humour – a very varied and multifaceted humour, at that. This is especially true for an empathetic and sensitized group of people like mediators.

There are so many different kinds of humour. Which one is useful in mediation?

Eva Ullmann: Humour has many faces. If you laugh because your own precious chinaware was shattered into a million pieces, that's positive, perhaps even admirable. But if you laugh because someone else's porcelain vase broke, that's an entirely different thing. I can laugh *with* a person or *about* them. Consequently, humour research distinguishes between valorising and devalorising humour. Valorisation elicits closeness, while devalorisation creates distance. As you can imagine, in mediation, the first variant is more efficient.

Valorisation elicits closeness? Could you please give an example?

Eva Ullmann: One method of using valorising or appreciative humour in mediation is the positive reframing of a negative statement. Let's take an example from everyday life: "I'm always dropping things." Instead of pursuing this with criticism, you can also comment on your own mishaps in a more relaxed way: "I'm always dropping things. I do that so I can stretch my fabulous body when picking them up." You exaggerate your own mishap and nobody gets hurt in the process.

Affectionate exaggerations are also useful for dealing with tension during a mediation. They can provide people with a more relaxed perspective on a given situation.

Don't I risk irritating the parties in conflict?

Eva Ullmann: That depends on whether humour is perceived as an attack or as a general serene attitude. If you want to play it safe, positive reframing is rather harmless and de-escalating.

It can also be useful to announce at the outset that you will be exaggerating the obvious in order to relax the conversation but that your aim is not to take sides for one particular party. In the ideal case scenario, exaggerations prompt cathartic laughter. Even a grin or a smirk can relax the tense atmosphere, and those present are again ready to listen to their opponents. One should nevertheless continue to distinguish between appreciative humour and devalorising and hurtful humour.

Is this appreciative general attitude the basis that ensures humour is perceived as positive by the mediation parties?

Eva Ullmann: In order to signal their appreciative attitude, mediators often use the active listening technique. Before it's the next person's turn to speak, the mediator summarises the statement of the first speaker, for instance: "You would like your colleague to be more accessible and less distant." A humorous and affectionate exaggeration of this might be: "Your colleague's cool distance makes you livid." A generally benevolent attitude, an open body language, and especially a neutrality towards the parties in conflict is crucial here.

What if the situation threatens to escalate?

Eva Ullmann: When things start to get rough, you can go a step further and try a humorous provocation. Let's imagine two squabblers are just about to start yelling at each other. Point out the simmering tension and provide a straightforward description of the atmosphere: "Hold on, let me just mark off the battle ground and jot down some ground rules. In the meantime, you may choose your weapons and then we'll try to have a civilised fight."

Which risks and "side effects" can a humorous provocation have?

Eva Ullmann: A humorous intervention always carries a certain risk, even if that risk is only that no one will laugh. But that's not necessarily the end of the world. An important precondition for a targeted use of provocation is the abovementioned general appreciative attitude. For mediators, empathetic antennae and an awareness of the needs underlying a conflict are important prerequisites for success. If you add humour to this basis, humour which does not substitute seriousness but rather complements it, you get a promising combination that can relax the tension.

Can you learn to have a sense of humour?

Eva Ullmann: Everyone has a sense of humour. There's no need to learn this. But you can continue to train your sense of humour. The Institute for Humour regularly works with mediators, for instance with the Steinbeis-Beratungszentrum für Wirtschaftsmediation (Steinbeis Counselling Centre for Business Mediation) in Stuttgart and Leipzig, and its director, the lawyer Bernhard Böhm. The Institute for Humour supports him with humour seminars and assists with mediation training. For anyone interested, I can heartily recommend our next open seminar in Leipzig in September.

We can monitor the development of your humour as a mediator, coach, speaker or pedagogue. In workshops, we look over your shoulder and strengthen your very own humorous fingerprint. The point is not to constantly produce knee-slappers but rather well-placed humour which conveys content and ideas more quickly.

The German Institute for Humour represents a combination of seriousness and humour. We like to inspire with humour.

Thank you very much for this interview!

Irene Seidel

Eva Ullmann is director and founder of the Institute for Humour. Her pedagogical and medical studies have stood her in good stead as a humourist, author and speaker of many years, in the course of which she has appeared on German television several times.