



Gefühlsmonster®Cards – Another Way to Begin the Mediation Process

The Gefühlsmonster® cards are a tool used to more easily and openly talk about emotions. People usually respond well to them – especially to those that depict difficult feelings. The cards often make people laugh and playfully facilitate an awareness of one's current attitude. The cards allow mediators to get a quick impression of their clients' emotional situation, and they can establish a solid basis for the next steps in a session or meeting. Adequate preparation is an integral part of using the cards. This article will explain how the cards can be used and what one should keep in mind while using them.

The Gefühlsmonster® cards were created 15 years ago. I asked my son Christian to develop them for use with a school class, and originally they were black-and-white images of the various "monsters." The success of these cards motivated me to use them for my coaching, mediation sessions, and seminars, and in 2005 I self-published them in a new color edition.

How Are the Cards Used?

Experience has shown that displaying a spread of cards on a table or inside a circle of chairs has an encouraging effect. When looking at the cards, people begin to smile or chuckle. When asked which cards best represent one's mood, participants choose one to three cards that best show one's current mood or attitude. This gives mediators, coaches, and trainers an immediate impression of their clients' emotions.

Like all instruments, these cards work best if all involved parties are convinced of their utility. This means that prior personal experience with these cards plays an important role.

The Method: Using the Gefühlsmonster®Cards to Initiate a Mediation Session

Following suggestions by Marian Muenger-v. d. Klooster from Switzerland, I developed the following instrument: the participants of the mediation process arrive for an initial appointment; a short conversation makes everybody feel welcome, and refreshments are provided. At that point, I hand out a set of the business card-sized Gefühlsmonster® cards with the following instruction: "Before we begin with the mediation process, I would like to know how you feel in the context of the current conflict situation that has led you here. Please look through the set of cards and the many types of emotional expressions, and choose one to five cards that correspond with your present sentiments. Also, please choose some cards that you believe best represent how you think your conflict partner feels at this time." (Ideally, you will use the actual names of the persons, partners, superiors etc.) "Please put the cards on the table, with the cover sheet on top - this way you can afterwards share and create an interest in your assessment of yourself and the others."

Of course, these introductory words demand a good rapport with the present individuals, and may be modified depending on the context. Make sure that all participants trust you and your use of the cards. A refusal of this technique would immediately place the mediator on an opposite footing; naturally, this would be a less-than-ideal situation for the beginning of any mediation. The use of these cards in a mediation setting must always follow the "primary rule of preventing aggression": both sides must be able to save face, and their dignity and self-respect must not be threatened. Instinctual tact and sensitivity are always core components of a mediation session, and this is especially important when dealing with the delicate subject of personal feelings.

As a mediator, I now have a few minutes to watch the clients choose their cards and to make initial assessments. One issue that can be examined already at this early stage is time management: one person may choose cards much faster than another. This can lead to an escalation between both parties, but a normalizing statement easily defuses such an early conflict: "Is speed for you an important aspect? I often experience this with people who are in a conflict situation." (This may be adjusted, depending on who is involved in the conflict, such as a couple or professional colleagues.)

I use intuition again to determine whom of both persons to address first to reveal his or her cards. It is important to ask what the chosen cards mean to that person, how he or she interprets the meaning of the images. Should you go this route, then you will be surprised just how much a person's take on an image may differ from your own! The language used by your client to explain the images will tell you far more about the conflict situation than your own description ever could.

At this point, I ask the second person to put the cards on the table and to comment on them, making sure that the cards are:

- visible to both parties
- placed in front of the person that they are meant to describe

The mediator should:

- be present (at this point, the parties should not talk with each other or about the cards)
- ensure that, when the parties choose their cards they are put on the table with the cover sheet on top – and that afterward when the cards are reversed the images are visible to all parties
- be prepared for a "loaded" atmosphere

As participants choose their cards, the atmosphere may also become quite relaxed or filled with short bursts of laughter. Humor emerges.

To describe my own procedure, I would like to give a short description of a case.

Situation:

Two colleagues, Mr. Bork and Mr. Günther, come to me for an initial conversation prior to mediation.

Choosing of the cards:

Mr. Bork's choice for himself:



Commentary: I am feeling very uncomfortable in this situation; I can't take it much longer.

Mr. Bork's choice for Mr. Günther:



Commentary: I think Mr. Günther has been feeling quite upset all along.

Mr. Günther's choice for Mr. Bork:



Commentary: Mr. Bork is angry and upset.

Mr. Günther's choice for himself:



I am really angry with Mr. Bork.

This leads to an atmosphere of agreement about the colleague's evaluation of Mr. Günther, and it affords him the basic need of being understood. Subsequently, a constructive conversation develops about the difference between the cards that were chosen for Mr. Bork: Mr. Günther is now prepared to listen to Mr. Bork's position and to understand that besides the anger Mr. Bork may feel for him, he also feels very uneasy about the conflict itself.



Based on this initiation of a conversation, the mediator now has an explicit understanding of the situation both conflict partners find themselves in; their interaction becomes clearer, making it easier to decide on the next steps. Sometimes, it is useful to ask what kinds of emotions a satisfactory resolution of the conflict would elicit. (Each side of the conflict is allowed to speak only for themselves!). In fact, on some occasions, a turning point in the mediation process occurred already at that stage because a colleague chose this card, and commented on this choice with the words, "Then I would be incredibly relieved!"

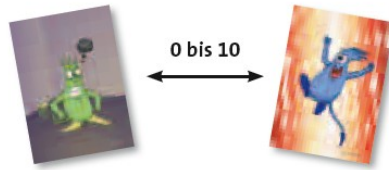
Additional tips

Since the cards remain on the table throughout the mediation session, it is possible to use them again throughout the conversation. You may at appropriate times return to a chosen image when summarizing the situation. (For example, addressing a son attending mediation with his mother: "You feel so uncomfortable when your mother



hugs you in front of your friends, and that makes you quite angry!" - indicating the card he has chosen).

The conflict partners themselves are sometimes incredibly creative and refer back to the cards on their own during the conciliation process, and may begin to choose other cards to express their emotions more emphatically.



The Gefühlsmonster® cards can be used to ask many different types of questions. For example, the cards may be used for questions that seek responses of scale: “How satisfied are you with the result of today’s mediation, or how do you feel about this project?”

Clients’ final assessments of the success of the mediation often refer back to the Gefühlsmonster® cards as a sort of positive “light bulb moment.” One time, a couple was discussing the emotional impact of a man’s infidelity – they realized that both had at the time been overworked and unhappy with the relationship. From one moment to the next, a very dense situation was defused, and in a considerate conversation they remembered how they already began to drift apart at that time.

I find it incredibly interesting to examine the effects these cards may have for the clients. In any case, the cards achieve a sense of being seen and feeling noticed in one’s anger, desperation, or sadness over a conflict – emotions can be communicated to both the mediator and the other party. Therefore, I don’t believe that the difficult emotions that an early-stage use of the cards may reveal should quickly be discarded again. One might think that leaving the cards visible for longer periods of time may result in a persistence on and dwelling in these attitudes (thinking of the concept of mirror neurons). In this regard, I believe that further research, study, and consultation with specialists is still necessary, and I will provide further insights on this matter at a later time. It is certainly beneficial for the mediation process itself to illustrate the emotions that accompany a satisfying solution and to support the resolution of the conflict with images.

Summary

The Gefühlsmonster® cards allow your clients to talk about feelings and attitudes in a new and more direct fashion. As the beginning of the mediation is quite a loaded situation for most people – you never know if the mediator is going to judge you... - it can be helpful to hold on to a physical object and initially focus only on your own situation. Looking through the cards provides some amount of safety; there is nothing to “accomplish,” and only one’s own emotions count. This type of intervention also has a positive effect on the mediation process because it may force previously established attitudes to the side. The reciprocal questioning as a next step – immediately at the beginning of the mediation process - facilitates in an almost playful way a positive change in perspectives. In contrast to the issues and attitudes clients themselves may bring into the session, the responses to the Gefühlsmonster® cards often prepare a more positive framework for a constructive climate. And, last but not least, the use of the cards at an early stage allows us as mediators to take a breath and fully focus on the participants.

One final piece of advice: Be careful about over-using the cards or offering them during every session. The examples I have described have developed out of five years of using this tool to initiate meetings. Although I use this tool in nearly all of my mediation work, I usually use them only once. I have found them very useful for individual consultations as well. Develop your own idea of what role the Gefühlsmonster® cards should play in your practice; using these cards even only a single time will produce insightful or touching experiences that will surprise you.