

One of the most persistent misunderstandings in conflict work is the idea that an effective third party must be neutral. This handout explains why neutrality is both impossible and unhelpful — and introduces a more honest and effective alternative: active impartiality.

THE PROBLEM WITH NEUTRALITY

Neutrality implies equal distance from all parties — a position of non-involvement. But this is impossible in practice. A third party who says nothing when someone is attacked, who validates a bad idea to avoid upsetting someone, or who allows a power imbalance to go unchecked is not neutral. They are complicit in an unfair process.

More importantly, neutrality is not what parties actually need. Research and experience consistently show that parties in conflict want something very different from a blank-slate facilitator.

WHAT PARTIES ACTUALLY WANT

To be told when they have a bad idea

Parties want honesty, not validation. An effective third party names when an idea is unworkable — regardless of who proposed it.

To be supported when they have a good idea

When a party offers something constructive, the third party validates it — making it visible and real in the room.

To have their good ideas made compelling to the other side

The third party acts as translator — taking an idea that one party can't hear from the other and making it legible and credible.

To be defended if attacked

When a party is personally attacked, the third party intervenes — not to take sides, but to protect the dignity and safety of the process.

ACTIVE IMPARTIALITY DEFINED

"In the strive to maintain balance and an equal playing field for all sides, a mediator or facilitator may need to intervene in different ways to ensure that the space for resolution remains a space of equality and dignity."

Active impartiality means being equally committed to all parties — not equally distant from them. The third party is an active advocate for the process and for each person's right to be heard, protected, and treated fairly.

THE FOUR ROLES OF ACTIVE IMPARTIALITY

ROLE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE
Truth-Teller	Names what is not working — a bad idea, a dishonest claim, an escalating pattern — regardless of who is responsible.
Validator	Recognizes and amplifies what is working — a good proposal, a moment of genuine listening, a constructive shift in tone.
Translator	Makes a good idea from one party legible and compelling to the other — bridging the gap between what was said and what was heard.
Protector	Maintains the safety and dignity of the process — intervening when someone is attacked, sidelined, or overwhelmed.

A PRACTICAL TEST

Before each session, ask yourself: am I equally committed to each party's right to be heard, protected, and treated fairly? That is active impartiality. It is not about having no views — it is about ensuring your views never distort the fairness of the process.