

What Bruce Springsteen Taught Me About Resolving Conflict

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By David H. Ironson

A recent visitor to my office paused to study several framed photographs hanging on the wall, each of them featuring me alongside Bruce Springsteen, and asked, with some amusement, whether I might be one of his more devoted fans.

The answer is, unquestionably, yes.

For nearly fifty years, Springsteen's music has been a constant in my life and I've been fortunate to have seen him perform countless times across the country and abroad.

Bruce Springsteen's music endures because it speaks honestly about the realities of human conflict and perseverance.

For decades, "The Boss" has written with remarkable insight about conflict, resilience, disappointment, hope, and the complicated dynamics between people trying to find common ground.

Alternative dispute resolution (ADR) succeeds for much the same reason.

At its core, dispute resolution is not merely about legal claims or financial exposure. It is about people confronting uncertainty, weighing risk, preserving dignity, and searching for a practical path forward.

After decades as both a civil litigator and a judge, I have learned that mediation is not simply a procedural alternative to trial. It is a human process. Success often depends less on legal positioning than on emotion, preparation, credibility, and timing.

Oddly enough, a number of Springsteen songs capture the realities of ADR remarkably well.

"The River": Understanding What Lies Beneath

"The River" deals with the themes of conflict and hardship. Mediation can ease these burdens by providing an opportunity to resolve the conflict in an expedient and cost-effective manner.

In “The River,” Springsteen says, “and the judge put it all to rest.” Mediation allows an individual to take control of the situation rather than have the court dictate the outcome.

Parties in mediation often arrive focused exclusively on positions: the amount demanded, the amount offered, who was right, and who was wrong.

But underneath every dispute runs “The River,” the deeper story driving the conflict.

Sometimes it is fear. Sometimes pride. Sometimes exhaustion. Sometimes the simple desire to be heard.

The most effective mediators understand that successful resolution rarely comes from attacking legal arguments alone. It comes from identifying the underlying interests that the parties themselves may not fully recognize. Lawyers who ignore those emotional undercurrents often find negotiations stalling despite strong legal positions.

A river represents moving forward. It rarely stands still. Mediation encourages parties to look downstream to navigate a path forward.

“Born To Run”: Dialogue Can Create Hope and a Brighter Future

Mediation encourages parties to express their hopes and desires confidentially to the mediator with the goal of a brighter tomorrow. Mediation allows parties to move past the conflict and, as the lyrics in “Born to Run” tell us, “to get to that place where we really wanna go.” A skillful mediator assists parties in reaching their desired destination so that they are able to “walk in the sun.”

“Hungry Heart”: The Need to Be Heard

One of the most overlooked realities in dispute resolution is that many litigants are driven by something deeper than money or legal positioning.

Often, parties want acknowledgment. They want validation. They want to feel heard.

That emotional component can shape negotiations far more than lawyers sometimes expect. A party who believes their concerns have been dismissed or minimized may reject objectively reasonable settlement proposals simply because the process itself feels unfair.

In “Hungry Heart,” the main character seems to be running away from conflict: “I went out for a ride and I never went back. Like a river that don’t know where it’s flowin’, I took a wrong turn, and I just kept goin’.”

Mediation provides the opportunity to confront the issues head on in a less intimidating forum.

The best mediators recognize this dynamic early. They create an environment where parties can express frustrations, explain motivations, and feel genuinely listened to before meaningful negotiations begin. In many cases, that alone can lower barriers that previously seemed impossible to overcome.

“Badlands”: When Litigation Becomes Personal

Springsteen’s “Badlands” captures frustration and escalation; emotions that frequently overtake litigants during prolonged disputes.

In commercial, employment, family, and personal injury matters alike, parties can gradually lose sight of the original issues and become consumed by anger. Once litigation becomes personal, rational evaluation becomes far more difficult.

This is where skilled ADR can be particularly effective.

Mediation permits parties to explain their position in a less formal atmosphere, in detail and without the pressures of time. Mediation allows you to “keep pushin’ til it’s understood and these badlands start treating us good.”

A good mediator lowers the temperature. The process creates an opportunity for parties to step outside the constant cycle of accusation and response that often defines active litigation. It allows lawyers and clients to focus on resolution instead of retaliation.

That shift can completely change the trajectory of a case.

“Brilliant Disguise”: Credibility Matters

One of the central challenges in mediation is credibility.

Parties frequently overestimate how persuasive they appear to neutral decision makers. Lawyers sometimes assume aggressive advocacy alone will carry the day. But experienced mediators quickly identify exaggeration, selective storytelling, and unrealistic expectations.

In Springsteen’s “Brilliant Disguise,” appearances become difficult to trust. The same is true in litigation. Mediation allows for an open exchange of information and the potential for rebuilding and/or managing credibility issues: “I want to know if it’s you I don’t trust, cause I damn sure don’t trust myself.”

The most persuasive advocates in ADR are usually the most credible ones. They acknowledge weaknesses when necessary. They avoid overstatement. They present realistic analyses instead of theatrical performances.

Mediation, through dialogue, allows suspicions to be explored and addressed.

“The Promised Land”: Preparation Wins Cases

“The Promised Land” urges individuals to move past the conflict and to “blow away the dreams that tear you apart” and “blow away the dreams that break your heart.” Mediation allows parties to work towards a creative solution. But too many parties approach mediation casually, treating it as little more than a mandatory stop on the way to trial. That is a mistake.

There is no substitute for preparation in ADR.

The most successful mediations occur when counsel thoroughly understand the facts, damages, legal issues, insurance considerations, and client objectives before negotiations begin. Preparation allows parties to negotiate confidently and make informed decisions in real time.

The lawyers who consistently obtain favorable outcomes are rarely the loudest voices in the room.

They are the best prepared.

“Thunder Road”: Moving Forward and Leaving the Past Behind

At some point in every dispute, parties face a decision: continue fighting or move forward. ADR allows you to pull “out of here to win” by putting conflict behind, avoiding costly litigation, and achieving a brighter future.

There are certainly cases that must be tried. Some disputes require judicial determination. Others involve principles or legal issues that cannot reasonably be compromised.

But many cases reach a stage where continued litigation no longer serves either side’s real interests.

That moment requires perspective and judgment. “You can hide ‘neath your covers and study your pain” or you could “roll down the window and let the wind blow back your hair.”

ADR provides an opportunity to resolve disputes with greater efficiency, privacy, flexibility, and control than traditional litigation often permits. It allows parties to shape their own outcomes rather than place those outcomes entirely in the hands of a jury or court.

In that sense, effective mediation resembles the spirit of “Thunder Road.” It is not about abandoning the fight. It is about recognizing when it is time to move toward resolution instead of remaining trapped in conflict, or as Bruce says, “We’re riding out tonight to case the promised land.”

Final Thoughts

The legal system will always require trials, and some cases demand them. Increasingly, however, the most meaningful and effective resolutions occur outside the courtroom through thoughtful negotiation, candid evaluation, and experienced guidance.

And despite what some litigants may initially believe, settlement is not “No Surrender.” More often, it reflects the judgment to recognize risk, reassess priorities, and resolve conflict before it consumes more time, expense, and energy than the dispute itself warrants.

Total victory is rarely attainable. Wise resolution, however, often is.

Sometimes the best outcome is not winning everything. Sometimes it is achieving closure, restoring perspective, and moving forward toward something better... a legal version of Springsteen’s “Land of Hope and Dreams.” Bruce’s lyrics surely resonate: “Leave behind your sorrows, let this day be the last, well, tomorrow there’ll be sunshine and all this darkness past.”

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