Like in many fields, such as counseling, so it is in the area of mediation and peacemaking. There are different approaches. This article presents three, including the proper role of the mediator in the reconciliation process.

One approach to mediation, particularly in the legal arena, uses a “whatever it takes” approach to get the parties to agree. A panel of attorneys were asked what lawyers wanted from mediators. The answer was, “we want someone to bang heads, to knock some sense into our clients and get them to settle.” One respected and highly sought-after mediator reflected much the same attitude when he said, “what’s wrong with head-banging and pressure? The parties come to me because they want to be out of there with a settlement by 6 pm. I give it to them. And if it takes a little arm-twisting, so be it.”

Others recoil to such an approach so much so that they go to the other end of the spectrum by minimizing (some might say, castrating) the role of the mediator. It is called the “non-directive approach.” Mediators are to be present but non-directive. That is, the mediator should not try to influence the parties in any way. As if doing something wrong, one mediator sheepishly wrote, “I admit it: I have tried to nudge participants in mediation towards agreement.” He added, "I know we are supposed to be indifferent to whether or not agreement is reached.”

Within this second framework, there is a school of thought that redefines what success in mediation looks like. It is not a resolution of the dispute that brought the parties to mediation in the first place. It is how the parties interacted during their meeting. “Success is measured not by settlement per se, but by party shift toward
personal strength, interpersonal responsiveness, and constructive interaction,” wrote one proponent. The interaction, not the outcome, is all important.

What does this approach to mediation and its definition of success have to do with peacemaking? Very little. At best, it is a secondary consideration. What started out as a reaction to overbearing mediators who only had the resolution of a legal dispute as their primary focus, ended up as mediators with no focus on resolution and reconciliation at all.

There is a third approach guided by a different vision that finds roots in the word “peacemaker” itself. The term itself suggests action, one who makes peace happen. This is a person, according to the Miriam-Webster dictionary, “who makes peace especially by reconciling parties at variance.”

Indeed, this is the meaning we find if we trace the word back to the New Testament. According to the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, a peacemaker will “endeavor to reconcile persons who have disagreements, making peace.” Similarly, a mediator was known as one who “mediates between two parties to remove a disagreement or reach a common goal.”

This approach is called the Reconciliation model of peacemaking. (It is also known as the Judeo-Christian model of peacemaking). Reconciliation is the goal. The role of mediator falls in-between the first two frameworks described above. If the parties understand that the goal of the mediator is to resolve conflict and establish relational harmony, and they give their permission to participate in such an approach, the mediator is free to use his or her creativity, insight, interpersonal skills, and energy to help forge a path forward. In essence, peacemakers work hard to do what the parties have not been able to do for themselves, that is, make peace.

The mediator that adheres to the reconciliation model, therefore, doesn't feel guilty for trying to nudge the parties towards agreement. On the other hand, head-banging and arm-twisting have no place in this process. It wouldn't work. Whereas it is possible to put pressure on parties to settle a given issue, parties who are unwilling to reconcile a relationship cannot be forced to do so, anymore than one can be forced to love someone.

“Peacemaking mediator” is probably the best way to describe the role of the mediator in the reconciliation model. Given the significance of the undertaking, such individuals can be hailed as “the active heroic promoters of peace in a world full of alienation, party passion, and strife.”