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Lawyer's Obligation of Truthfulness When Representing a Client in Negotiation: Application to Caucused Mediation

Under Model Rule 4.1, in the context of a negotiation, including a caucused mediation, a lawyer representing a client may not make a false statement of material fact to a third person. However, statements regarding a party's negotiating goals or its willingness to compromise, as well as statements that can fairly be characterized as negotiation "puffing," ordinarily are not considered "false statements of material fact" within the meaning of the Model Rules¹.

¹ This opinion is based on the Model Rules of Professional Conduct as amended by the ABA House of Delegates in August 2003 and, to the extent indicated, the predecessor Model Code of Professional Responsibility of the American Bar Association. The laws, court rules, regulations, rules of professional conduct, and opinions promulgated in the individual jurisdictions are controlling.

In this opinion, we discuss the obligation of a lawyer to be truthful when making statements on behalf of clients in negotiations, including the specialized form of negotiation known as caucused mediation.

It is not unusual in a negotiation for a party, directly or through counsel, to make a statement in the course of communicating its position that is less than entirely forthcoming. For example, parties to a settlement negotiation often understate their willingness to make concessions to resolve the dispute. A plaintiff might insist that it will not agree to resolve a dispute for less than \$200, when, in reality, it is willing to accept as little as \$150 to put an end to the matter. Similarly, a defendant manufacturer in patent infringement litigation might repeatedly reject the plaintiff's demand that a license be part of any settlement agreement, when in reality, the manufacturer has no genuine interest in the patented product and, once a new patent is issued, intends to introduce a new product that will render the old one obsolete. In the criminal law context, a prosecutor might not reveal an ultimate willingness to grant immunity as part of a cooperation agreement in order to retain influence over the witness.

A party in a negotiation also might exaggerate or emphasize the strengths, and minimize or deemphasize the weaknesses, of its factual or legal position. A buyer of products or services, for example, might overstate its confidence in the availability of alternate sources of supply to reduce the appearance of dependence upon the supplier with which it is negotiating. Such remarks, often characterized as "posturing" or "puffing," are statements upon which parties to a negotiation ordinarily would not be expected justifiably to rely, and must be distinguished from false statements of material fact. An example of a false statement of material fact would be a lawyer representing an employer in labor negotiations stating to union lawyers that adding a particular employee benefit will cost the company an additional \$100 per employee, when the lawyer knows that it actually will cost only \$20 per employee. Similarly, it cannot be considered "posturing" for a lawyer representing a defendant to declare that documentary evidence will be submitted at trial in support of a defense when the lawyer knows that such documents do not exist or will be inadmissible. In the same vein, neither a prosecutor nor a criminal defense lawyer can tell the other party during a plea negotiation that they are aware of an eyewitness to the alleged crime when that is not the case.

Applicable Provision of the Model Rules

The issues addressed herein are governed by Rule 4.1(a).² That rule prohibits a lawyer, "[i]n the course of representing a client," from knowingly making "a false statement of material fact or law to a third person." As to what constitutes a "statement of fact," Comment [2] to Rule 4.1 provides additional explanation:

² Although Model Rule 3.3 also prohibits lawyers from knowingly making untrue statements of fact, it is not applicable in the context of a mediation or a negotiation among parties. Rule 3.3 applies only to statements made to a "tribunal." It does not apply in mediation because a mediator is not a "tribunal" as defined in Model Rule 1.0(m). Comment [5] to Model Rule 2.4 confirms the inapplicability of Rule 3.3 to mediation:

Lawyers who represent clients in alternative dispute-resolution processes are governed by the Rules of Professional Conduct. When the dispute-resolution process takes place before a tribunal, as in binding arbitration (see Rule 1.0(m)), the lawyer's duty of candor is governed by Rule 3.3. Otherwise, the lawyer's duty of candor toward both the third-party neutral and other parties is governed by Rule 4.1.

Rule 3.3 does apply, however, to statements made to a tribunal when the tribunal itself is participating in settlement negotiations, including court-sponsored mediation in which a judge participates. See ABA Comm. on Ethics and Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 93-370 (1993) (Judicial Participation in Pretrial Settlement Negotiations), in Formal and Informal Ethics Opinions 1983-1998 at 157, 161 (ABA 2000).

Rule 8.4(c), which on its face broadly proscribes "conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or misrepresentation," does not require a greater degree of truthfulness on the part of lawyers representing parties to a negotiation than does Rule 4.1. Comment [1] to Rule 4.1, for example, describes Rule 8.4 as prohibiting "misrepresentations by a lawyer other than in the course of representing a client" In addition, Comment [5] to Rule 2.4 explains that the duty of candor of "lawyers who represent clients in alternative dispute resolution processes" is governed by Rule 3.3 when the process takes place before a tribunal, and otherwise by Rule 4.1. Tellingly, no reference is made in that Comment to Rule 8.4. Indeed, if Rule 8.4 were interpreted literally as applying to any misrepresentation, regardless of the lawyer's state of mind or the triviality of the false statement in question, it would render Rule 4.1 superfluous, including by punishing unknowing or immaterial deceptions that would not even run afoul of Rule 4.1. See Geoffrey C. Hazard, Jr. & W. William Hodes, *The Law of Lawyering* §65.5 at 65-11 (3d ed. 2001). It is not necessary, however, for this Committee to delineate the precise outer boundaries of Rule 8.4(c) in the context of this opinion. Suffice it to say that, whatever the reach of Rule 8.4(c) may be, the Rule does not prohibit conduct that is permitted by Rule 4.1(a).

This Rule refers to statements of fact. Whether a particular statement should be regarded as one of fact can depend on the circumstances. Under generally accepted conventions in negotiation, certain types of statements ordinarily are not taken as statements of material fact. Estimates of price or value placed on the subject of a transaction and a party's intentions as to an acceptable settlement of a claim are ordinarily in this category, and so is the existence of an undisclosed principal except where nondisclosure of the principal would constitute fraud. Lawyers should be mindful of their obligations under applicable law to avoid criminal and tortious misrepresentation.³

³ The Restatement (Third) of The Law Governing Lawyers §98, cmt. c (2000) (hereinafter "Restatement") (citations omitted) echoes the principles underlying Comment [2] to Rule 4.1:

Certain statements, such as some statements relating to price or value, are considered nonactionable hyperbole or a reflection of the state of mind of the speaker and not misstatements of fact or law. Whether a statement should be so characterized depends on whether the person to whom the statement is addressed would reasonably regard the statement as one of fact or based on the speaker's knowledge of facts reasonably implied by the statement, or instead regard it as merely an expression of the speaker's state of mind.

Truthfulness in Negotiation

It has been suggested by some commentators that lawyers must act honestly and in good faith and should not accept results that are unconscionably unfair, even when they would be to the advantage of the lawyer's own client.

⁴ Others have embraced the position that deception is inherent in the negotiation process and that a zealous advocate should take advantage of every opportunity to advance the cause of the client through such tactics within the bounds of the law.⁵ Still others have suggested that lawyers should strive to balance the apparent need to be less than wholly forthcoming in negotiation against the desirability of adhering to personal ethical and moral standards.⁶ Rule 4.1(a) applies only to statements of material fact that the lawyer knows to be false, and thus does not cover false statements that are made unknowingly, that concern immaterial matters, or that relate to neither fact nor law. Various proposals also have been advanced to change the applicable ethics rules, either by amending Rule 4.1 and its Comments, or by extending Rule 3.3 to negotiation, or by creating a parallel set of ethics rules for negotiating lawyers.⁷

⁴ See, e.g., Reed Elizabeth Loder, "Moral Truthseeking and the Virtuous Negotiator," 8 *Geo. J. Legal Ethics* 45, 93-102 (1994) (principles of morality should drive legal profession toward rejection of concept that negotiation is inherently and appropriately deceptive); Alvin B. Rubin, "A Causerie on Lawyers' Ethics in Negotiation," 35 *La. L. Rev.* 577, 589, 591 (1975) (lawyer must act honestly and in good faith and may not accept a result that is unconscionably unfair to other party); Michael H. Rubin, "The Ethics of Negotiation: Are There Any?," 56 *La. L. Rev.* 447, 448 (1995) (embracing approach that ethical basis of negotiations should be truth and fair dealing, with goal being to avoid results that are unconscionably unfair to other party).

⁵ See, e.g., Barry R. Temkin, "Misrepresentation by Omission in Settlement Negotiations: Should There Be a Silent Safe Harbor?," 18 *Geo. J. Legal Ethics* 179, 181 (2004) (clients are entitled to expect their lawyers to be zealous advocates; current literature bemoaning lack of honesty and truthfulness in negotiation has gone too far); James J. White, "Machiavelli and the Bar: Ethical Limitations on Lying in Negotiation," 1980 *Am. B. Found. Res. J.* 921, 928 (1980) (misleading other side is essence of negotiation and is all part of the game).

⁶ See, e.g., Charles B. Craver, "Negotiation Ethics: How to Be Deceptive Without Being Dishonest/How to Be Assertive Without Being Offensive," 38 *S. Tex. L. Rev.* 713, 733-34 (1997) (lawyers should balance their clients' interests with their personal integrity); Van M. Pounds, "Promoting Truthfulness in Negotiation: A Mindful Approach," 40 *Willamette L. Rev.* 181, 183 (2004) (suggesting that solution to finding more truthful course in negotiation may lie in ancient Buddhist practice of "mindfulness," of "waking up and living in harmony with oneself and with the world").

⁷ See, e.g., James J. Alfani, "Settlement Ethics and Lawyering in ADR Proceedings: A Proposal to Revise Rule 4.1," 19 *N. Ill. U. L. Rev.* 255, 269-72 (1999) (author would amend Rule 4.1 to prohibit lawyers from knowingly assisting the client in "reaching a settlement agreement that is based on reliance upon a false statement of fact made by the lawyer's client" and would expressly apply Rule 3.3 to mediation); Kimberlee K. Kovach, "New Wine Requires New Wineskins: Transforming Lawyer Ethics for Effective Representation in a Non-Adversarial Approach to Problem Solving: Mediation," 28 *Fordham Urb. L. J.* 935, 953-59 (2001) (urging adoption of separate code of ethics for lawyers engaged in mediation and other non-adversarial forms of ADR); Carrie Menkel-Meadow, "The Lawyer as Consensus Builder: Ethics for a New Practice," 70 *Tenn. L. Rev.* 63, 67-87, (2002) (encouraging Ethics 2000 Commission to develop rules for lawyers in alternative dispute resolution context).

Although this Committee has not addressed the precise question posed herein, we previously have opined on issues relating to lawyer candor in negotiations. For example, we stated in Formal Opinion 93-370⁸ that, although a lawyer may in some circumstances ethically decline to answer a judge's questions concerning the limits of the lawyer's settlement authority in a civil matter,⁹ the lawyer is not justified in lying or engaging in misrepresentations in response to such an inquiry. We observed that:

⁸ ABA Comm. on Ethics and Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 93-370, in *Formal and Informal Ethics Opinions 1983-1998* at 160-61.

⁹ The opinion also concluded that it would be improper for a judge to insist that a lawyer "disclose settlement limits authorized by the lawyer's client, or the lawyer's advice to the client regarding settlement terms."

[w]hile ... a certain amount of posturing or puffery in settlement negotiations may be an acceptable convention between opposing counsel, a party's actual bottom line or the settlement authority given to a lawyer is a material fact. A deliberate misrepresentation or lie to a judge in pretrial negotiations would be improper under Rule 4.1. Model Rule 8.4(c) also prohibits a lawyer from engaging in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit, or misrepresentation, and Rule 3.3 provides that a lawyer shall not knowingly make a false statement of material fact or law to a tribunal. The proper response by a lawyer to improper questions from a judge is to decline to answer, not to lie or misrepresent.

Similarly, in Formal Opinion 94-387,¹⁰ we expressed the view that a lawyer representing a claimant in a negotiation has no obligation to inform the other party that the statute of limitations has run on the client's claim, but cannot make any affirmative misrepresentations about the facts. In contrast, we stated in Formal Opinion 95-397¹¹ that a lawyer engaged in settlement negotiations of a pending personal injury lawsuit in which the client was the plaintiff cannot conceal the client's death, and must promptly notify opposing counsel and the court of that fact. Underlying this conclusion was the concept that the death of the client was a material fact, and that any continued communication with opposing counsel or the court would constitute an implicit misrepresentation that the client still was alive. Such a misrepresentation would be prohibited under Rule 4.1 and, with respect to the court, Rule 3.3. Opinions of the few state and local ethics committees that have addressed these issues are to the same effect.¹²

¹⁰ ABA Comm. on Ethics and Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 94-387 (1994) (Disclosure to Opposing Party and Court that Statute of Limitations Has Run), in *Formal and Informal Ethics Opinions 1983-1998* at 253.

¹¹ ABA Comm. on Ethics and Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 95-397 (1995) (Duty to Disclose Death of Client), in *Formal and Informal Ethics Opinions 1983-1998* at 362.

¹² See New York County Lawyers' Ass'n Committee on Prof'l Ethics Op. 731 (Sept. 1, 2003) (lawyer not obligated to reveal existence of insurance coverage during a negotiation unless disclosure is required by law; correlatively, not required to correct misapprehensions of other party attributable to outside sources regarding the client's financial resources); Pennsylvania Bar Ass'n Comm. on Legal Ethics & Prof'l Responsibility Informal Op. 97-44 (Apr. 23, 1997) (lawyer negotiating on behalf of a client who is an undisclosed principal is not obligated to disclose the client's identity to the other party, or to disclose the fact that that other party is negotiating with a straw man); Rhode Island Supreme Court Ethics Advisory Panel Op. 94-40 (July 27, 1994) (lawyer may continue negotiations even though recent developments in Rhode Island case law may bar client's claim).

False statements of material fact by lawyers in negotiation, as well as implicit misrepresentations created by a lawyer's failure to make truthful statements, have in some cases also led to professional discipline. For example, in reliance on Formal Opinion 95-397, a Kentucky lawyer was disciplined under Rule 4.1 for settling a personal injury case without disclosing that her client had died.¹³ Similarly, in a situation raising issues like those presented in Formal Opinion 93-370, a New York lawyer was disciplined for stating to opposing counsel that, to the best of his knowledge, his client's insurance coverage was limited to \$200,000, when documents in his files showed that the client had \$1,000,000 in coverage.¹⁴ Affirmative misrepresentations by lawyers in negotiation also have been the basis for the imposition of litigation sanctions,¹⁵ and the setting aside of settlement agreements,¹⁶ as well as civil lawsuits against the lawyers themselves.¹⁷

¹³ *Kentucky Bar Ass'n v. Geisler*, 938 S.W.2d 578, 579-80 (Ky. 1997); see also *In re Warner*, 851 So. 2d 1029, 1037 (La.), reh'g denied (Sept. 5, 2003) (lawyer disciplined for failure to disclose death of client)

prior to settlement of personal injury action); *Toldeo Bar Ass'n v. Fell*, 364 N.E.2d 872, 874 (1977) (same).

¹⁴ *In re McGrath*, 468 N.Y.S.2d 349, 351 (N.Y. App. Div. 1983).

¹⁵ See *Sheppard v. River Valley Fitness One, L.P.*, 428 F.3d 1, 11 (1st Cir. 2005); *Ausherman v. Bank of America Corp.*, 212 F. Supp. 2d 435, 443-45 (D. Md. 2002).

¹⁶ See, e.g., *Virzi v. Grand Trunk Warehouse & Cold Storage Co.*, 571 F. Supp. 507, 512 (E.D. Mich. 1983) (settlement agreement set aside because of lawyer's failure to disclose death of client prior to settlement); *Spaulding v. Zimmerman*, 116 N.W.2d 704, 709-11 (Minn. 1962) (defense counsel's failure to disclose material adverse facts relating to plaintiff's medical condition led to vacatur of settlement agreement).

¹⁷ See, e.g., *Hansen v. Anderson, Wilmarth & Van Der Maaten*, 630 N.W.2d 818, 825-27 (Iowa 2001) (law firm, defendant in malpractice action, allowed to assert third-party claim for equitable indemnity directly against opposing counsel who had engaged in misrepresentations during negotiations); *Jeska v. Mulhall*, 693 P.2d 1335, 1338-39 (1985) (sustaining fraudulent misrepresentation claim by buyer of real estate against seller's lawyer for misrepresentations made during negotiations).

In contrast, statements regarding negotiating goals or willingness to compromise, whether in the civil or criminal context, ordinarily are not considered statements of material fact within the meaning of the Rules. Thus, a lawyer may downplay a client's willingness to compromise, or present a client's bargaining position without disclosing the client's "bottom line" position, in an effort to reach a more favorable resolution. Of the same nature are overstatements or understatement of the strengths or weaknesses of a client's position in litigation or otherwise, or expressions of opinion as to the value or worth of the subject matter of the negotiation. Such statements generally are not considered material facts subject to Rule 4.1.¹⁸

¹⁸ Conceivably, such statements could be viewed as violative of other provisions of the Model Rules if made in bad faith and without any intention to seek a compromise. Model Rule 4.4(a), for example, prohibits lawyers from using "means that have no substantial purpose other than to embarrass, delay, or burden a third person" Similarly, Model Rule 3.2 requires lawyers to "make reasonable efforts to expedite litigation consistent with the interests of the client."

Application of the Governing Principles to Caucused Mediation

Having delineated the requisite standard of truthfulness for a lawyer engaged in the negotiation process, we proceed to consider whether a different standard should apply to a lawyer representing a client in a caucused mediation.¹⁹

¹⁹ This opinion is limited to lawyers representing clients involved in caucused mediation, and does not attempt to explore issues that may be presented when a lawyer serves as a mediator and, in carrying out that role, makes a false or misleading statement of fact. A lawyer serving as a mediator is not representing a client, and is thus not subject to Rule 4.1, but may well be subject to Rule 8.4(c) (see note 2 above). Cf. ABA Comm. on Ethics and Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 04-433 (2004) (Obligation of a Lawyer to Report Professional Misconduct by a Lawyer Not Engaged in the Practice of Law). In our view, Rule 8.4(c) should not impose a more demanding standard of truthfulness for a lawyer when acting as a mediator than when representing a client. We note, in this regard, that many mediators are nonlawyers who are not subject to lawyer ethics rules. We need not address whether a lawyer should be held to a different standard of behavior than other persons serving as mediator.

Mediation is a consensual process in which a neutral third party, without any power to impose a resolution, works with the disputants to help them reach agreement as to some or all of the issues in controversy. Mediators assist the parties by attempting to fashion creative and integrative solutions to their problems. In the most basic form of mediation, a neutral individual meets with all of the parties simultaneously and attempts to moderate and direct their discussions and negotiations. Whatever is communicated to the mediator by a party or its counsel is heard by all other participants in the mediation. In contrast, the mediator in a caucused mediation meets privately with the parties, either individually or in aligned groups. These caucuses are confidential, and the flow of information among the parties and their counsel is controlled by the mediator subject to the agreement of the respective parties.

It has been argued that lawyers involved in caucused mediation should be held to a more exacting standard of truthfulness because a neutral is involved. The theory underlying this position is that, as in a game of "telephone," the accuracy of communication deteriorates on successive transmissions between individuals, and those distortions tend to become magnified on continued retransmission. Mediators, in turn, may from time to time reframe information as part of their efforts to achieve a resolution of the dispute. To address this phenomenon, which has been called "deception synergy," proponents of this view suggest that greater accuracy is required in statements made by the parties and their counsel in a caucused mediation than is required in face-to-face negotiations.²⁰

²⁰ See generally John W. Cooley, "Mediation Magic: Its Use and Abuse," 29 *Loy. U. Chi. L.J.* 1, 101 (1997); see also Jeffrey Kravis, "The Truth About Using Deception in Mediation," 20 *Alternatives to High Cost Litig.* 121 (2002).

It has also been asserted that, to the contrary, less attention need be paid to the accuracy of information being communicated in a mediation—particularly in a caucused mediation—precisely because consensual deception is intrinsic to the process. Information is imparted in confidence to the mediator, who controls the flow of information between the parties in terms of the content of the communications as well as how and when in the process it is conveyed. Supporters of this view argue that this dynamic creates a constant and agreed-upon environment of imperfect information that ultimately helps the mediator assist the parties in resolving their disputes.²¹

²¹ Mediators are “the conductors—the orchestrators—of an information system specially designed for each dispute, a system with ambiguously defined or, in some situations undefined, disclosure rules in which mediators are the chief information officers with near-absolute control. Mediators’ control extends to what nonconfidential information, critical or otherwise, is developed, to what is withheld, to what is disclosed, and to when disclosure occurs.” Cooley, *supra* note 20, at 6 (citing Christopher W. Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict* 35-43 (1986)).

Whatever the validity may be of these competing viewpoints, the ethical principles governing lawyer truthfulness do not permit a distinction to be drawn between the caucused mediation context and other negotiation settings. The Model Rules do not require a higher standard of truthfulness in any particular negotiation contexts. Except for Rule 3.3, which is applicable only to statements before a “tribunal,” the ethical prohibitions against lawyer misrepresentations apply equally in all environments. Nor is a lower standard of truthfulness warranted because of the consensual nature of mediation. Parties otherwise protected against lawyer misrepresentation by Rule 4.1 are not permitted to waive that protection, whether explicitly through informed consent, or implicitly by agreeing to engage in a process in which it is somehow “understood” that false statements will be made. Thus, the same standards that apply to lawyers engaged in negotiations must apply to them in the context of caucused mediation.²²

²² There may nevertheless be circumstances in which a greater degree of truthfulness may be required in the context of a caucused mediation in order to effectuate the goals of the client. For example, complete candor may be necessary to gain the mediator’s trust or to provide the mediator with critical information regarding the client’s goals or intentions so that the mediator can effectively assist the parties in forging an agreement. As one scholar has suggested, mediation, “perhaps even more than litigation, relies on candid statements of the parties regarding their needs, interests, and objectives.” Menkel-Meadow, *supra* note 7, at 95. Thus, in extreme cases, a failure to be forthcoming, even though not in contravention of Rule 4.1(a), could constitute a violation of the lawyer’s duty to provide competent representation under Model Rule 1.1.

We emphasize that, whether in a direct negotiation or in a caucused mediation, care must be taken by the lawyer to ensure that communications regarding the client’s position, which otherwise would not be considered statements “of fact,” are not conveyed in language that converts them, even inadvertently, into false factual representations. For example, even though a client’s Board of Directors has authorized a higher settlement figure, a lawyer may state in a negotiation that the client does not wish to settle for more than \$50. However, it would not be permissible for the lawyer to state that the Board of Directors had formally disapproved any settlement in excess of \$50, when authority had in fact been granted to settle for a higher sum.

Conclusion

Under Model Rule 4.1, in the context of a negotiation, including a caucused mediation, a lawyer representing a party may not make a false statement of material fact to a third person. However, statements regarding a party’s negotiating goals or its willingness to compromise, as well as statements that can fairly be characterized as negotiation “puffing,” are ordinarily not considered “false statements of material fact” within the meaning of the Model Rules.

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