

Peer Coaching: On the Loneliness of the Mediator and What to Do about It

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Mediation can sometimes be a lonely business - in one very specific way: when there is no or little qualified feedback and shared reflection. When I teach and train, I always get some feedback and often I get very precise feedback, and sometimes very warm and encouraging feedback. When I mediate disputes or moderate strategy or team meetings for clients, I have rarely ever got more than a thank you and occasionally a "good job." Or when regular clients have not called back for the next job, I am rarely told why. I wonder if other mediators share this experience.

There are several reasons for this, but I think the main one is that clients are rightly focused on their own concerns and problems and they will only really take much note of what the mediator is doing when they are not happy with that. Otherwise they expect good work and have no reason to especially appreciate it. Their concern with their own issues continues after the mediation too, and often they continue discussing what matters to them. A handshake for the mediator is enough.

Then there is the emotional work that mediators do. In my mediations, which are nearly all in workplaces, there is a lot of emotion - aggression and anger, sadness, a sense of rejection, and sometimes tears. Or relief, a sense of empowerment, moments of hope. If the mediation is going well, I feel like a conduit or channel through which that emotion flows. At the end of the session I am often exhausted. Drained. And I ask myself why certain things that were said or done during the mediation touched me emotionally, and why I reacted to them as I did, and if I was able to nonetheless focus on the emotions of the parties and keep my own separate.

There are very good personal and professional reasons for wanting to discuss the work we do. We appreciate resonance and we want feedback about specific questions too. "When this was said, I asked this question - was this ok?" "At this point I was unsure what to do next - any ideas?" "When the next session starts next week, what should I be looking out for?" And plenty more questions like this, on what I would call matters of technique. Even more important are questions that probe my emotional responses to what happens in mediation. If I know my own reactions better, I am able when they occur to more clearly separate them out from the needs of the parties in mediation. Or to show them consciously - as a deliberately chosen mediation intervention.

Of course co-mediation will often help to provide a forum for reflection. But not many cases are co-mediated. And even then, an outside perspective is lacking.

One way to find a sounding board for reflection is to go to a coach. In fact the German mediation regulations on qualification as a Certified Mediator require mediators to do this. These discussions are in confidence, and can be illuminating. The premise is that reflection on what we do works in favour of the quality of what we do. Feedback is not about getting a pat on the back (nothing wrong with that), but about staying on the ball.

I have found another way to ask all of these (and many more) questions and get answers. And to talk about upcoming, ongoing, or finished cases and get feedback and ideas, as well as some help in understanding my own interests and concerns when working on them. The way I have found is not particularly original, but it works wonderfully.

With two colleagues, now good friends, both trained mediators, both practising dispute resolvers, I meet regularly. We talk about cases and our own work in conflict resolution, moderation, and training. This is peer coaching, and it is done in strictest confidence. We talk about working methods, our own doubts about what we are doing, and about clients - without ever mentioning names. We have also developed the coaching format to talk about more personal concerns. We meet every six weeks for a two- to three-hour session, and once a year for a weekend away. Dialogue is incredibly focused. If one of us has a question to discuss, we spend plenty of time on formulating that question until it seems right. We want to know what matters. We take things very slowly. We try out different coaching and visualisation methods. Like mediators in action, we concentrate entirely on the needs of the one of us who has raised a concern, not digressing somewhere else. We rarely give advice, we often ask questions. We empathise. We work out solutions together.

This is the kind of focused time that most people rarely have, not even with their best friends or partners in life. It is a true gift. My peer coaches and I have been working like this for more than four years now, and never has one of us cancelled participation. By way of a spin-off, the three of us have begun to train organisations in peer coaching, itself a form of empowerment.

I wonder if other mediators share this experience.