

David Richbell - Lessons in Mediation and Life

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Many of us are mourning the recent death of David Richbell, a UK-based mediator and mediation trainer widely known and loved around the world.

I was lucky enough to count David as a close friend and colleague. We mediated together, delivered training together, cheered England at rugby together. And so I have had good cause to reflect over the last few weeks not only on our friendship, but on what made David such a good mediator. Here are some of the things which come to mind.

It mattered

Peace and resolution mattered to David. He was not interested in notching up more settlements. He was interested in people understanding one another, and in so doing finding a way forward. He understood what too few mediators do - that enabling people to understand each other will usually bring about resolution, whereas simply pursuing resolution will often not bring about understanding.

Courage

None of this made David soft, or anything approaching it! I remember co-mediating with him in a particular situation over a lengthy period (nearly a year in all). On one occasion, someone was rude to him on a conference call so he just hung up and waited for them to call back - which they duly did! He seemed to care little for seniority, and had the courage to ask the hard questions, challenge people and keep the ship on course. Always graciously, but fearlessly nonetheless.

Perspective

As a former quantity surveyor, David was a details and numbers man. He was quite happy to deal in the detail, but he was also able to retain perspective - what does all this detail mean for the wider question of settlement? Where is this particular conversation going?

His sense of perspective extended to his grasp of his role as a mediator. He knew intuitively, and from experience, that it was not all about him. That may seem obvious, but I'm not convinced that all mediators do. That knowledge meant that David knew when to take the lead, and when to back off and follow. Mediating is, in the end, service. Humility is its fertile soil.

An enabler

David was a great enabler. He exuded a belief in people, not least that they are more than capable of finding a resolution themselves, given the right context. This permeated the way he mediated and the way he trained. He was not interested in telling people what he thought, so much as enabling them to find things out for themselves. It is a mediator's way. Ask any of his mediation clients.

And ask any of his countless mediation students over the years. On training courses, his eye was often drawn to those who were particularly struggling to grasp the required skills or to make the transition into a new way of doing things. I have particularly strong memories of him getting alongside them, investing time, hope and confidence during the breaks. And, perhaps inevitably, his belief in them rubbed off, their terror of failure waned, and they qualified!

Holistic

As I have often said, no one can be "a mediator", as if it were a role we could put on or take off. We can only be "ourselves, mediating". To be effective, mediators need to be authentic. To be authentic, we need to be a genuine expression of ourselves. You couldn't slip a cigarette paper between who David was and how he mediated. That's the whole, and holistic, point. Our sheer humanity is a much stronger force in mediations (and indeed in life) than we sometimes seem to believe. David knew that, and lived it out.

Recently, I met a lawyer at a mediation who had heard of David's death and expressed her sadness. "He was", she said, "her favourite mediator". I suspect there are many like her.

Thank you, David, for all you have given us.