
Kluwer Mediation Blog

When the Going Gets Tough...

Sabine Walsh (Sabine Walsh Mediation) · Tuesday, February 5th, 2013

It was with horror that I read Bill Marsh's blog this week reporting on the shooting of parties to a mediation in Arizona – news of the event hadn't crossed the Atlantic at that stage. One of my immediate reactions was to think – my God, the poor mediator. How do you deal with that? At a recent “Learning and Sharing” meeting (essentially a mediator's peer supervision group) two mediators related stories about mediations in which they had been involved where in both cases one party had, not long after the mediation process was finished, taken their own lives. Discussion of these cases led a number of us to sign up for Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training, a two day workshop run by the Health Services which, it is recommended, all professionals working with people who may be vulnerable to the risk of suicide attend.

But even in less dramatic circumstances mediators, particularly those working in certain areas, are regularly confronted with difficult and distressing stories, situations, emotions, and indeed people. A colleague of mine phoned me recently in relation to a relatively “ordinary” family mediation the circumstances of which prevented her from settling to sleep. She just needed to talk about it. What, therefore can we do and should we be doing as mediators to look after ourselves, and indeed to ensure that we are able to provide the support and the skills that are required in difficult situations.

In Ireland, as yet, there are no formal requirements for mentoring, supervision, or professional practice consultancy, though some mediation organisations do provide opportunities to avail of such services. Other jurisdictions, however, make forms of supervision obligatory and have structured systems in place in order that mediators might avail of support and learning in relation to their practices. In co-presenting a workshop on supervision for mediators with a German colleague last year, I was struck by the different approaches taken to defining, structuring and providing supervision in different countries. In the UK, for example, the term Professional Practice Consultant (PPC) is used and the term supervision tends to be avoided (as it is in Ireland). This may be due to the negative connotations that the terms supervision carries with it in these jurisdictions – practising under supervision, for example, is a sanction imposed upon lawyers who have been found lacking in their practice. In Germany, on the other hand, there has long been a tradition of supervision associated with the psycho-social professions, and it is from this angle and based on the practice of supervision for psychologists, social workers etc. that supervision has been developed in relation to mediation.

The dominant focus seems to vary slightly between these two countries also, the UK putting a high emphasis on “external” outcomes such as quality control, accountability and maintenance of

service standards, and the Germans focusing more on “internal” outcomes such as self-development, and understanding and developing reflective practice. Both countries require supervisors or PPCs to engage in extensive further specialised training, some up to 150 hours.

The often very structured processes offered in these and other countries are enormously beneficial to mediators. While the emphasis may vary somewhat, the general aim of supervision for mediators is to enhance their practice and their well-being within that practice, by a variety of means including interview with a supervisor / consultant, case discussions, team exercises, group feedback and self-reflection. The aims of such exercises are many. The UK’s National Family Mediation Supervisions process, for example, sets out three elements of the process, namely accountability, development and support. Without in any way wishing to undermine the value of the first two elements, it is the last I am focusing on today, namely support for people working in what is often a complex and stressful profession.

The value of discussing a case with an experienced supervisor who is trained to ask the “right” questions and provide constructive and knowledgeable feedback is immeasurable, even more so since our work tends to be shrouded in confidentiality and therefore rarely discussed outside the mediation room (rightly so!) A session with a supervisor can offer insights into our own assumptions and biases, and indeed elements of our own history and experience that may be arising in the mediation room and making our work more difficult and challenging. Group discussions can offer a variety of perspectives on a problem or issue and give a different dynamic to case discussions. Supervisions sessions or “team meetings” within a service enhance consistency of practice and standards while contributing to the general welfare of the team and a sense of cohesiveness and participation within a service where the client based work is often done on a very individual basis.


But even in the absence of formal supervision structures, support and feedback can, and should be accessed by all mediators. Informal group meetings, like we have here, give a sense of perspective, somewhere to “bring” the difficult stuff from a mediation and, if you are prone to the occasional bout of self-doubt as I am, the reassurance that we all struggle with the same things. Picking up the phone to a colleague, or chatting to someone new at a conference can be both supportive and can open new doors to new ways of thinking. If no one is around or wants to listen (one’s spouse can only take so much..) take a few quiet minutes to reflect and write some thoughts down in a journal or notebook. A useful exercise, if the time can be found, is to write a case report (confidentially of course), focusing on strategies and interventions you used as a mediator, then put it aside for a few weeks and re-read it after the mediation is over. What worked? What didn’t? What biases did you identify in yourself, what made staying neutral more difficult than usual? Even better, do this with a few close colleagues, over a steaming cup of coffee and, as the Irish would say, a sticky bun and you will have invested an hour or two of your time in your own well-being and, ultimately, the well-being of your clients. As Bill correctly points out, “considerably humility” is required of all of us, and an important step in attaining appropriate humility is investing the time in ourselves and our practices

To make sure you do not miss out on regular updates from the Kluwer Mediation Blog, please [subscribe here](#).


Profile Navigator and Relationship Indicator


Includes 7,300+ profiles of arbitrators, expert witnesses, counsels & 13,500+ relationships to uncover potential conflicts of interest.

Learn how **Kluwer Arbitration** can support you.



Learn more about the newly-updated *Profile Navigator and Relationship Indicator*



 Wolters Kluwer

This entry was posted on Tuesday, February 5th, 2013 at 1:37 pm and is filed under [mediation as a career](#), [Mediation Outcomes](#), [Mediators' Conduct](#), [Mentoring](#), [Training](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.