

Kluwer Mediation Blog

From Emotional Intelligence to Emotional Competence – A key issue for professional development for Young Mediators

Virginia Vilches Such (Lawyer, Mediator and Trainer in Conflict Resolution) · Monday, May 11th, 2015 · Young Mediators Initiative (YMI)

I was twenty-five years old when I joined Young Mediators' Initiative (YMI) and first participated at the Andalusian System for Labour Conflict Resolution (S.E.R.C.L.A) as an official mediator. At SERCLA, we normally have an average of ten people at the mediation table. Sometimes, not only am I by far the youngest person in the mediation table, but sometimes I am also the only woman. Having just turned twenty-eight years old, I still mediate at SERCLA and I still believe I can consider myself a young mediator, both in age and in experience. When the YMI Team invited me to contribute to this blog, I thought of what I would like to read about.

Two questions came to my mind:

“How to manage emotions during my first experiences as a young mediator?” and, “what makes mediators improve and achieve professional excellence?”

Well, to me the answers to these two questions go together and the key is emotional intelligence.

Independent from the length of our trainings, I believe that first experiences as mediators are unique, that you have to go through them in order to see what emotions actually arise within you, at that very moment, and learn how to handle them. In this regard, I believe that it is interesting for young mediators to have an idea of what emotions are more common and how to handle them. Here, I share my list of the 5 most important emotions that I identified during my first mediations and how I have learned to manage them:

1. Shyness. Especially during your first interventions, being shy can be an obstacle for intervening in mediations with multiple actors.

– What can we do to overcome this?

Work on your public speaking skills. In conflict situations, parties rely on the security and positivism that mediators bring, so you want to be confident and secure in your interventions.

2. Fear. Mediators have a lot of responsibility in the process: parties share their most important conflicts and trust us to guide them towards a solution. This sense of responsibility may also trigger some fears, such as the fear of not getting to agreement, fear of making the wrong intervention in the wrong moment, and fear of creating a weird situation or losing face before your colleagues.

– How to deal with this?

Even if we are professionals committed to excellence in our work, we should not forget that we are all human and that failing is part of the process of growing as a person and improving as mediators.

I built these three basic rules for my own career as a mediator:

(I) Be brave enough to act when you truly believe that case needs it, even at risk of failing;

(II) Be intelligent enough to identify your mistakes; and

(III) Be humble enough to admit your mistakes, so you can learn from them.

Following these three basic (but not always easy) rules, I believe that mistakes will no longer be such a failure, but rather will become an opportunity for growing and improving as mediators.

3. Frustration. The majority of the mediators I have met share a common vision; they believe that conflicts are also an opportunity to learn and grow and that there is a constructive way to deal with them. But, outside our small (but growing) community of positive and enthusiastic mediators, most of the people will respond to us by saying things like: “That is too Utopian” or the more diplomatic may say “mediation may work, but not here, not now, not in this case, not in this country, not in this culture,...”. Facing such negative and skeptical responses over and over again is not easy. So I believe, we need to do a lot of personal work to not let all these negative emotions take over.

– What can one do in these situations?

First, acknowledging the limits of the system is important. Even if mediation has great potential, the truth is that not everyone and every situation is prepared for it. Second, especially at the beginning, it is extremely important to work on yourself. Save your energy for when you actually have the power to influence, and make your effort sustainable over time. This profession is a marathon, not a sprint, and you need to keep your balance in order to be able to stay firm in your values, and positive in the most difficult situations. Thus, we will prevent frustration from burning us out.

4. Impatience. Patience is crucial for mediators, especially in early stages of the process. When mediators who are young in experience start developing their analytical skills and ability to assess conflicts, we learn to identify the key issues in conflicts. However, this does not necessarily mean that parties are prepared to see it.

– What can one do in this situation?

Be mindful not to push parties towards what we think is the solution when they are not yet ready. Work on developing your patience, in order to see the point where parties stand at each part of the process, and guide them step by step.

5. Sympathy/antipathy. Sometimes we may feel an aversion or dislike for one of the parties, or a special tenderness or affection for the other. Despite this being a natural human response, it may affect our ability to mediate with neutrality, so we shall pay special attention to these tendencies.

– How do I manage this?

Most of these emotions are triggered by a judgment (either positive or negative), so paying attention to our judgmental thoughts is a basic. Identifying these feelings is the key to preventing them from affecting our job, or maybe, declining to intervene if we consider that appropriate. Since I believe these kinds of situations are recurrent, despite the time of experience of mediators, I think we should pay constant attention to our judgmental thoughts and sympathetic/antipathetic feelings.

That having being said, is emotional intelligence enough to become an excellent professional in

mediation? Reading Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence* gave me the answer. No, it is not enough. Emotional intelligence is very important indeed, but it should be translated to developing several competences that we shall apply to our job as mediators. This is to say, emotional intelligence is the foundation, but starting from here we shall develop further competences.

At the University of Seville, I collaborate in research about a catalogue for mediators' competences. According to this catalogue, the most important competences for mediators that have their foundations in emotional intelligence are:

1. Ability to control and transform negative emotions into positive ones.
2. Ability to bring hope and positivism to mediation.
3. Ability to build a climate of safety and trust during the mediation.
4. Ability to build trust with clients.
5. Ability to face emotional dissonance (this happens when we feel in a certain way but we want to show something different), for instance – dealing with difficult clients.
6. Ability to keep neutrality when we feel certain kind of aversion or preference for one party.

In my short experience as mediator, I believe that developing emotional competences is the key for professional excellence in mediation. First, I think we should start by building strong emotional intelligence through reflection and personal work. Then, we should work to transform them into emotional competences as professional mediators. I hope this reflection is helpful for practitioners in this field. And I invite (both young and veteran mediators) to reflect on your experience and to share it.

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