

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Mediators practising as civil celebrants – a coincidence?

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In 2006, the Hong Kong Government introduced a scheme that marriages can be officiated by civil celebrants at a time and a venue chosen by the couple. Since then, I have been practising as a civil celebrant along with my other areas of practice. At the time of becoming a civil celebrant, I thought officiating marriages should be easy and stressless. Upon coming across different clients and occasionally difficult situations, I realise that celebrating the marriage of a couple and the journey to it in fact is not as simple as it appears to be.

Although I have the gut thinking that mediation practice does share some similarities with the practice of solemnization of marriages, I had not given any serious thoughts on the two professions until I discovered several months ago that my friend who is an accomplished mediator and mediation trainer also practises as a civil celebrant. My mediator friend must not be celebrating marriages for money. He is sufficiently busy with his other engagements. Without asking him why he is practising as a civil celebrant, I am certain he is a person of wisdom and there must be good reasons behind.

This blog entry is an attempt to suggest that there are indeed similarities in the work of a civil celebrant and that of a mediator. A civil celebrant deals with differences under the shadow of harmony. A mediator deals with differences which are generally perceived as disputes in the context of litigation, arbitration or otherwise. The skills required to overcome the challenges and difficulties faced by a civil celebrant are in my view similar to the relevant skills of a mediator.

In this blog post, I am not going to use a “compare and contrast” approach because most of the readers do have a basic understanding of the mediation. I shall share below some of the issues and/or situations that a civil celebrant may have to handle and leave it to the readers to draw their own conclusion on whether the work nature of the two professions has something in common.

Who are my clients?

Technically speaking, the fiancé and the fiancée coming to book for the services are the civil celebrant's clients. Probably universal across cultures but definitely in Asia, a wedding ceremony involves more than 2 persons. The parents as well as the family members, the best man, the maid of honour and other close friends may perceive themselves as stakeholders interested in this important event.

Since anyone may make a comment on how the ceremony should be conducted, the civil celebrant must have the ability to read into who has the power and authority to give instructions and to override the views of the others. How to chart the wedding ceremony forward without offending the bride, the groom and other stakeholders on an occasion which is supposed to be a happy one is like skating on thin ice.

Self-determination

In a civil wedding ceremony, the process is flexible and the bride together with the groom may choose to go through a ceremony in a manner that they like the most. That said, not everyone has done extensive research on what they are going to go through and at times, they may not know what exactly they want though it is their important life milestone.

By way of illustration, who should lift the wedding veil and when it should be done could be an issue without a model answer. The professional photographers may want the veil to be lifted as early as possible with the kind intention of taking more good pictures without the veil covering the face of the bride. Nevertheless, the bride is not sure whether her aged father may be able to lift her veil properly and she is also under the impression that the veil should be lifted by her husband before they exchange the marriage kiss because this is what the prince and the princess always did in the fairy tale movies. The groom smartly turns to the civil celebrant for assistance.

When the veil should be lifted and who should do it are positions. Positional bargaining is always dangerous as an impasse may arise. How a skilful civil celebrant assists the parties to identify their needs and concerns behind their positions and how a civil celebrant nudges them to come up with a consensual way, which can address all the needs and concerns and at the same time is unique and creative for this couple, could be very challenging. However, if that is done nicely, it is an achievement which will surely be appreciated.

No “Take Two”

A judgment, if with errors, may be rectified by corrigenda. Written legal submissions, if with mistakes, may be rectified by a supplemental submission or oral submissions. The contents of a marriage certificate are expected to be perfect and flawless. Meticulous proof-reading skills are needed to make sure that there are no typographical errors on each of the marriage certificates.

A civil celebrant must be ready to prepare for the unexpected such as bringing along extra printed copies of the marriage certificate, workable pens for signatures and in outdoor weddings, kits to protect the marriage certificate from being wetted by the rain or blown away by the wind. A slip or just a less-than smooth oral delivery at the wedding ceremony though without a legal consequence may be taken as a mishap by the marrying couple and some of their guests.

How to maintain the same passion and enthusiasm on the part of the civil celebrant after doing hundreds or even thousands of appointments is not easy at all. An experienced civil celebrant is conscious that he/she is a guide to the two who are going through a process which is probably a once in a lifetime experience and thus, they expect the others to be as thrilled as them.

No assumptions

An experienced civil celebrant will not ask the parents of the bride and the groom to shake hands after the wedding ceremony though he/she will shake hands with each of them. One cannot and should not assume that the parties and/or the parents, etc. are genuinely happy with the marriage and the ceremony though everyone takes it to be a joyful event.

Likewise, a civil celebrant should not wish the newlyweds to have a lot of babies as imposing value on others without knowing them sufficiently is grossly inappropriate.

Always positive

Anything could happen at a wedding ceremony. A baby may be crying loudly, the very young guests may be making noises and the mobile phones may be ringing. The bride or the groom may be too emotional to say the vow properly. The microphone that the parties are using may be out of battery or out of order. A civil celebrant must handle the negatives positively. A display of humour could be a ploy but one must ensure that the jokes will not hurt the feelings of the others.

The determination to ensure that the ceremony will be completed positively requires not only good preparation, high EQ but also perseverance on the part of the civil celebrant.

Source of Satisfaction

Although the remuneration of working as a civil celebrant has no match with that of a court work litigation lawyer and one can hardly delegate any substantive part of the task to the juniors, the satisfaction that one may derive from the process could be extremely satisfying.

In the most recent wedding ceremony, the groom had expressed his gratitude to me before he started to read out the names on his prepared note of appreciation. While I am not sure whether he had done the right thing of mentioning my name first, I was very pleased at that moment because my humble role as a civil celebrant is appreciated and acknowledged.

In my career as a civil celebrant, I have more than once celebrated the wedding ceremonies of all the grown-up children of the same family. I still vividly remember running into the elder sister of the groom with her husband and their new-born baby before commencing the wedding ceremony. The sister thanked me for my services rendered a year ago and said to me that she had recommended her younger brother and sister-in-law-to-be to engage my services. What a big recognition that money could hardly buy.

Gift from God

Pope Francis recently met the Roman Rota for the beginning of the judicial year and said, [“Every marriage, even non-sacramental marriages, are a gift from God.”](#)

Civil celebrants playing a professional role in celebrating marriages are certainly helping God give out His Gift. The role of celebrating marriages in a non-sacramental manner could be as sacred and important as that of the same role in the church.

The above may just be a self-serving and self-justifying effort to explain why some mediators do spare their time to practise as civil celebrants. While not many may care why we practise the two ideologically similar professions, I do encourage civil celebrants and mediators to collaborate and learn from each other. Mediators and civil celebrants are both angels making a better world.


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