

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Mapping Mediation: A Practitioner's Guide to the SOLVE Mediation Matrix

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	S SET THE STAGE	O OPEN THE PROCESS	L LISTEN & UNDERSTAND	V VALIDATE OPTIONS	E ENABLE RESOLUTION
T TARGETS	S.1 TARGETS FOR SETTING STAGE	O.1 TARGETS FOR OPENING STAGE	L.1 TARGETS FOR LISTENING STAGE	V.1 TARGETS FOR VALIDATION STAGE	E.1 TARGETS FOR ENABLING STAGE
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S STRATEGIES	S.3 STRATEGIES FOR SETTING STAGE	O.3 STRATEGIES FOR OPENING STAGE	L.3 STRATEGIES FOR LISTENING STAGE	V.3 STRATEGIES FOR VALIDATION STAGE	E.3 STRATEGIES FOR ENABLING STAGE
K KEYS	S.4 KEYS FOR SETTING STAGE	O.4 KEYS FOR OPENING STAGE	L.4 KEYS FOR LISTENING STAGE	V.4 KEYS FOR VALIDATION STAGE	E.4 KEYS FOR ENABLING STAGE
S SKILLS	S.5 SKILLS FOR SETTING STAGE	O.5 SKILLS FOR OPENING STAGE	L.5 SKILLS FOR LISTENING STAGE	V.5 SKILLS FOR VALIDATION STAGE	E.5 SKILLS FOR ENABLING STAGE

This post was drafted by [Leonardo D'Urso](#), [Constantin Adi Gavrilă](#) and [Julia Radanova](#).

In a world where conflict is increasingly complex and the stakes ever higher, the need for a clear, adaptable approach to mediation has never been more important. If the world has seen unprecedented changes in the last one hundred years in demographics, travel and communication, the pace of changes in the last few years – from Covid-19 to Artificial Intelligence, has been beyond anything experienced.

When mediators compare notes at conferences, there is often a shared confession: *my interventions are partly intuition, partly habit, and only occasionally informed by a structured checklist*. Over the past decade, a number of frameworks have tried to bring more discipline to that intuition. A recent contribution is *SOLVE: Mastering Conflict Resolution with the SOLVE Mediation Matrix* by *Leonardo D'Urso, Constantin-Adi Gavrilă and Julia Radanova*.

The *SOLVE Mediation Matrix* is built on more than 25 years of mediation practice and tens of thousands of cases. It is a practical guide for professionals, including mediators, lawyers, judges,

managers, HR experts, students, and anyone interested in effectively managing conflict and improving their resolution skills. It provides a comprehensive framework for navigating conflicts, difficult conversations, and tough decisions, offering specific techniques and strategies for achieving constructive outcomes. In a nutshell, *from practice to theory and then right back to practice*.

At the heart of the book is the SOLVE Matrix, which represents a mediation methodology of 5 steps (**SOLVE**):

1. **Set the Stage**: This represents the groundwork for mediation, including identifying the actors who should be involved, their views on the situation, understanding goals and expectations, clarifying roles, and agreeing on the conditions for dialogue.
2. **Open the Process**: The parties and the mediator usually come together to confirm the agreement to start the mediation process. The parties then articulate their perspectives while trying to restore communication, and the mediator helps them define the topics for conversation.
3. **Listen & Understand**: where the mediator engages deeply with each party, often in private sessions, to understand their underlying needs and interests, gathering sensitive information and ranking interests to inform the subsequent negotiations.
4. **Validate Options** – when potential solutions are generated, discussed and validated against a set of agreed criteria, while ensuring that all parties are satisfied that their top interests are represented.
5. **Enable Resolution** – when agreements are finalized and formalized, and the process concludes with clarity and mutual understanding, facilitating closure for all parties involved.

For each step, the Matrix offers over 140 elements, grouped into five categories (**TASKS**):

1. **Targets**: Clear objectives for what needs to be achieved in each stage by the mediators and participants.
2. **Activities**: Specific actions or steps that mediators and participants could undertake to accomplish the targets.
3. **Strategies**: Approaches that may be employed to effectively navigate each stage and perform the activities mentioned above.
4. **Keys**: Tangible resources, frameworks, forms, techniques, graphs and methods that assist in effectively implementing the strategies.
5. **Skills**: The personal competencies and abilities required to facilitate the mediation process successfully.

The 144 elements are not meant as a rigid checklist. Instead, the SOLVE Matrix is a flexible framework that adapts to different cases, sectors, mediation styles, and jurisdictions.

SOLVE Mediation Matrix (144 elements)

		MEDIATION STAGES (SOLVE)					Time
		S. SET THE STAGE DESIGNING THE PROCESS	O. OPEN THE PROCESS STRUCTURING THE ISSUES	L. LISTEN & UNDERSTAND EXPLORING THE INTERESTS	V. VALIDATE OPTIONS NEGOTIATING THE SOLUTIONS	E. ENABLE RESOLUTION CLOSE THE PROCESS	
Level of detail	1. TARGETS	TARGETS S1.1 Attain the mandate to mediate. S1.2 Conduct conflict analysis. S1.3 Build participants' capacity to engage. S1.4 Ensure the necessary logistics. S1.5 Assist participants in reaching their objectives for the Set the stage.	TARGETS O1.1 Establish a productive environment. O1.2 Restore communication between the parties. O1.3 Understand the relevant facts. O1.4 Develop the agenda of issues. O1.5 Tailor design the process. O1.6 Assist participants in reaching their goals for the Open the Process stage.	TARGETS L1.1 Understand the real problem. L1.2 Explore and prioritize interests. L1.3 Facilitate the shared learning. L1.4 Redesign the process. L1.5 Use objective criteria. L1.6 Assist participants in reaching their goals for the Listen & Understand stage.	TARGETS V1.1 Assessment of case merits. V1.2 Compare options with alternatives to a negotiated settlement. V1.3 Facilitate the generation of creative new options. V1.4 Assist participants to reach their goals for the Validate Options stage.	TARGETS E1.1 Facilitate the parties' decision. E1.2 Formalize the settlement agreement. E1.3 Consider other ADR procedures. E1.4 Exit responsibly. E1.5 Assist participants to reach their goals for the Enable Resolution stage.	
	2. ACTIVITIES	ACTIVITIES S2.1 Convene the parties. S2.2 Sign the agreement to mediation. S2.3 Adopt the mediation rules of the center or customize them. S2.4 Commence the process. S2.5 Conduct preliminary meetings. S2.6 Map stakeholders. S2.7 Confirm the appointment. S2.8 Check mediation process appropriateness and capacity for engagement. S2.9 Set-up the mediation environment.	ACTIVITIES O2.1 Supervise formalities. O2.2 Conduct the joint meeting, unless otherwise agreed by parties. O2.3 Welcome parties. O2.4 Deliver the mediator's opening statement. O2.5 Facilitate the parties' and lawyers' opening statements. O2.6 Summarize perspectives and issues. O2.7 Moderate the joint discussion. O2.8 Transition to the Listen & Understand stage.	ACTIVITIES L2.1 Conduct the first rounds of private meetings, unless otherwise agreed by parties. L2.2 Manage time and logistics. L2.3 Decide with whom to meet first. L2.4 Confirm confidentiality commitments. L2.5 Manage the shuttle diplomacy. L2.6 Offer food and refreshments. L2.7 Transition to the Validate Options stage.	ACTIVITIES V2.1 Conduct additional rounds of private meetings, unless otherwise agreed by parties. V2.2 Continue the shuttle diplomacy. V2.3 Prepare parties for later joint sessions. V2.4 Relay negotiation proposals. V2.5 Conduct "Middle" joint meeting or cross-caucus. V2.6 Prepare the parties for the Enable Resolution stage. V2.7 Transition to the Enable Resolution stage.	ACTIVITIES E2.1 Conduct closing meetings. E2.2 Summarize the settlement terms. E2.3 Help the parties write the agreement. E2.4 Write other required legal documents. E2.5 Use screen sharing technology. E2.6 User feedback.	
	3. STRATEGIES	STRATEGIES S3.1 Coordinate with parties and/or the case manager. S3.2 Comply with ethical conduct rules and policies. S3.3 Conduct a first mediation session. S3.4 Gather information and solicit mediation briefs. S3.5 Ensure party representation. S3.6 Design the appropriate process. S3.7 Evaluate Co-mediation. S3.8 Manage power-imbalances. S3.9 Avoid retaliation and violence.	STRATEGIES O3.1 Meet the parties for a brief pre-joint meeting. O3.2 Be informal and in charge. O3.3 Give lawyers a voice. O3.4 Ask clarifying questions. O3.5 Foster direct communication. O3.6 Initiate private sessions.	STRATEGIES L3.1 Access hidden information. L3.2 Recognize barriers to settlement. L3.3 Prioritize interests. L3.4 Explore alternatives to a negotiated agreement. L3.5 Summarize, confidentiality and "homework".	STRATEGIES V3.1 Exchange of "asymmetric" information. V3.2 Prioritizing issues based on objective criteria. V3.3 Conduct a risk assessment. V3.4 Reality testing. V3.5 Apologies, forgiveness, and healing. V3.6 Overcome reactive devaluation. V3.7 Hypothetical scenarios. V3.8 Bracketing. V3.9 Breaking impasse.	STRATEGIES E3.1 Engage a neutral technical expert. E3.2 Non-binding evaluations. E3.3 Final offers. E3.4 Mediator's proposal. E3.5 One-text method. E3.6 S.M.A.R.T. agreements. E3.7 Leave no space for spoilers. E3.8 Close or adjourn the process.	
	4. KEYS	KEYS S4.1 Culture Compass (Geert Hofstede). S4.2 Model of Conflict Escalation (Friedrich Glasl). S4.3 Ethical mediation filter (Constantin-Adi Gavrilă). S4.4 Wheel of conflict (Christopher Moore).	KEYS O4.1 Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann).	KEYS L4.1 Hierarchy of needs (Abraham Maslow). L4.2 Stages of Grief (Elisabeth Kübler-Ross).	KEYS V4.1 Interests, Rights and Power (Ury, Brett and Goldberg). V4.2 Six Thinking Hats (Edward De Bono). V4.3 Decision trees and risk analysis (David Hulett). V4.4 Prisoner's Dilemma / Game Theory (Merrill Flood and Melvin Dresher, Albert W. Tucker). V4.5 Principles of Persuasion (Robert Cialdini).	KEYS E4.1 Triangle of Satisfaction (Christopher Moore). E4.2 Thinking Fast and Slow (Daniel Kahneman). E4.3 Probability and decision tree for decision making (Howard Raiffa and Richard Bellman). E4.4 Reflecting team (Tom Anderson).	
	5. SKILLS	SKILLS S5.1 Conflict management. S5.2 Planning and productivity. S5.3 Written communication. S5.4 Online communication. S5.5 Cultural awareness. S5.6 Gender-sensitive approach.	SKILLS O5.1 Note-taking. O5.2 Managing intense emotions, anger, and aggression. O5.3 Active listening. O5.4 Summarizing. O5.5 Non-verbal communication. O5.6 Cognitive biases. O5.7 Emotional intelligence. O5.8 Conflict resolution styles.	SKILLS L5.1 Basic Negotiation Techniques. L5.2 Questioning. L5.3 Mirroring. L5.4 Paraphrasing. L5.5 Labelling. L5.6 Tactical empathy (Chris Voss). L5.6 Assertive communication.	SKILLS V5.1 Interest-Based Negotiation. V5.2 Brainstorming. V5.3 Reframing. V5.4 Using neutral/positive language. V5.5 Using flipcharts and whiteboard.	SKILLS E5.1 Decision Making. E5.2 Probing questions. E5.3 The Accusation Audit.	

LEGEND: [Stages] The stages in the chronological series of events within a mediation process; [Targets] Objectives to reach during each stage; [Activities] Physical actions to perform in timely sequence to accomplish the goals; [Strategies] Ways of organizing activities to affect a desired result; [Keys] Tools, tangible resources, frameworks, forms, techniques, graphs, and methods that a mediator uses during the mediation process to guide discussions, understand and manage conflicts, and facilitate resolution; [Skills] Personal attributes, abilities, and interpersonal qualities of a mediator that facilitate effective communication, conflict resolution, and the mediation process's smooth running.

Note: The main keys and skills are included at every phase, but most of them are interchangeable and can be used at any time during the process.

Why did we create this framework?

The reason for developing such a mediation framework is because modern practice has diversified faster than its conceptual foundations. Online platforms, restorative programmes, workplace schemes, and mandatory mediation, among others, have produced a patchwork of “scattered toolkits,” making it difficult to explain why a given intervention is used in a particular case. The *SOLVE Matrix* brings this scattered knowledge into one clear, teachable, and adaptable grid. It offers a common language for mediators—simple enough for training, yet flexible enough across sectors, types of cases, jurisdictions or mediation styles. It offers a common framework without prescribing one style.

Adaptability is essential

Every staged model risks becoming too rigid. The *SOLVE Matrix* is not just about what and how to do mediation, but—crucially—about why. It connects the goals of mediation with the activities and strategies needed to achieve them, all within a flexible structure.

In real cases, the process is rarely linear. For example, a private session during *Listen & Understand* may reveal new facts, requiring another round of *Open the Process*. Still, having a flexible map helps mediators and parties avoid skipping vital steps, like jumping to numbers before clarifying non-monetary interests, thus protecting the process's efficiency. Also, by following the same roadmap, it is easier for mediators and advisors to discuss and agree on the process, therefore limiting the risk of confusing the parties regarding the approach.

The SOLVE Matrix has many possible practical uses:

- As a **self-audit tool**, practitioners can note which squares they routinely cover and which they neglect, turning the gaps into learning goals;
- As a **client-preparation template**, counsel can reverse-engineer the grid to brief parties on the Activities and Keys likely to surface in each phase and the information they should assemble;
- As a **curriculum-design aid**, trainers can map course modules onto the 25 squares to balance process, substance, and skill;
- In **online mediation workflows**, the Activities column can feed directly into platform checklists or automated prompts, supplying the explicit structure that virtual sessions require.

A fill-in Canvas accompanies the Matrix to support any of these applications. Practitioners are invited to treat the SOLVE Mediation Matrix as a living document—one they can annotate, adapt, and rearrange as new techniques emerge.

SOLVE is neither a silver bullet nor entirely new. Its value lies in organizing what mediators already do in a clear, teachable format. Whether the community adopts the full grid, extracts preferred slices, or uses it mainly as a reflective mirror will depend on individual style and context. One key takeaway is less about adopting each square than about asking better meta-questions: *Which stage are we at, and what is the current Target? What can we do to align our Actions and Strategies?* If the *SOLVE Matrix* helps prompt those questions, it will have served a useful purpose.

SOLVE: Mastering Conflict Resolution with the SOLVE Mediation Matrix is available at <https://www.amazon.it/SOLVE-Mastering-Conflict-Resolution-Mediation/dp/B0F2GVN8RY/>

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