“Who’s sitting in my chair?” – Self-reflective practice for conflict resolution professionals.

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Abstract

Much has been discussed over time about the unbiased and impartial mediator. As a requirement of the Mediator Practice Standards, we go to great lengths to explain to parties about our neutral role in the process as mediators. As trainers we coach students who struggle with this concept of neutrality. We talk about techniques such as putting on a game face and wearing a different hat, particularly during the early days in skills training. For those of us who come from backgrounds where advocacy or professional service for one party rather than both is a substantial part of our everyday role, this notion can be a difficult challenge.

While the Standards direct mediators to seek regular professional debriefing for “skills development, conceptual and professional issues, ethical dilemmas, and to ensure the ongoing emotional health of mediators”, there is no specific requirement for recording debriefing time or supervision, particularly in the private sphere. While some organisations may have a process to address this requirement of the Standards, these are often simplistic, can be done in haste and are rarely followed up. Knowing most conflict professionals wear different “hats”, are often time poor, are working in a more competitive sphere and are dealing with more complex and diverse clients, to what extent are conflict professionals using “debriefing” as an overarching term to encompass general well worn coping skills? Are we using this term defensively? Are we using it to hide our feelings in order to function in an environment that is often emotionally charged, intellectual challenging and steeped in dysfunction? To what degree are we, as conflict resolution professionals, really addressing the internal barriers we face as individuals while working with the diversity of conflict on a daily basis? To what extent do we really feel authentic in our role as a conflict resolution professional? Where do we “put” our own emotions, thoughts and feelings that, despite the rhetoric of neutrality, do not cease to exist just by wearing a “mediator hat”?

This paper is a discussion of the importance of self-reflective practice as a commitment to ongoing professional self-care, professional development and best practice. Drawing on research, practice and the author’s vast experience as a mediator, professional supervisor and committed practitioner, it discusses the importance of engaging with a practice that acknowledges individual feelings, reactions and energy of the mediator. The paper argues that an honest and authentic recognition of the space that each of us fills in any conflict resolution process, is a critical step that is often missing in the path of dispute resolution with parties. It describes a process of self-reflective practice, provides case examples of the process, describes and discusses common excuses and pitfalls such as resistance that impedes the possibility for a more mindful practice. The paper concludes with a discussion of what can be achieved by increasing self-awareness, acknowledging and understanding our own reactions and responses to conflict. It highlights the importance of taking responsibility for our place in the dispute resolution process for our selves and for our clients.