

Coaching at the Mediation Table: Promoting Self-reflection and Self-governance.

How often does this happen? One (or both) of the participants at the table repeatedly shoots themselves in the foot with self-defeating behavior. From the mediator chair, you watch the dynamics and wince. *If only she would stop making those jabs every time he tries to make a concession!* And you get a sense that this may be part of a pattern...their interactions seem fraught with long-standing dysfunction. *Ouch! I can't stand it anymore! I have to say something!* You caucus. You plan to do some coaching. You want to give some feedback.

Coaching can be a valuable tool in mediation and the results can greatly benefit the parties and their situation. Coaching and feedback edge up to a fine line of appropriate and ethical mediator interventions. As mediators, we have a duty to protect self-governance of the parties. When mediators insert themselves into solutions by offering advice, either on the substance of the dispute or behavioral dynamics, they may be interfering with the parties' ability to create their own lasting solutions. And yet, some intervention might be helpful, even necessary.

The most important work we do in mediation helps the parties reach *their own* durable and lasting solutions. Like a durable agreement, the critical element in permanent behavioral is that it is self-regulating. The agreements and behavioral changes are sustainable because the solutions flow from the parties themselves rather than from the mediator. One of the most difficult challenges for new mediators is overcoming the tendency and desire to push parties towards an obvious solution. We must be equally diligent in overcoming our desire to push parties towards obviously needed behavioral changes. We must remember that what *we* think needs changing in another person may not be the most important change from *their* perspective.

Move from teacher/advisor to coach. Studies show that people learn best when asked questions that increase their ability to reflect. Open-ended questions, posed without veiled suggestions, are the most likely to generate new learning which can help parties move towards change that is consistent with their own unique sense of necessary direction. In order for a behavioral change to be lasting, it must come from the person's own understanding of their complex circumstances, circumstances that we, as mediators, only momentarily glimpse. When we get it wrong, we leave the parties puzzled, and sometimes crippled, about how to get it right. Coaching parties towards behavioral change can be tricky, and our best resource is the party themselves. Intentional inquiry is the best way to be helpful...and appropriate...in your coaching. You may not end up with immediate and brilliant responses, but a well-timed question will linger, the ultimate results -- outstanding!

Instead of this...	Try this...
When you said _____, I noticed his defensive reaction.	What did you notice about his reaction to when you said_____.
You might get a better response if you tried_____.	What kind of response are you looking for from him? What could you try that might get that response?
Instead of accusing him, try to make an “I” statement.	What could you say that would help him hear how you are feeling?
The dynamic between you is _____.	What kind of relationship would you like? What can you do to move towards a relationship like that?

Timing is everything! A person is more likely to reflect on their own behavior and preferred future if they believe they have been heard and understood. Be sure to reflect emotional messages and identify interests before posing reflective questions.

And, if you feel absolutely compelled to offer advice (a last ditch effort to salvage the situation) always ask permission. “I have some thoughts about what might help. Are you open?” And remember, keep your suggestion simple and easy to understand.