

A Lifetime Mediation Skill: Dealing with Assumptions



As a mediator in private practice, one skill I constantly practise is dealing with assumptions—recognizing them, checking them out, and letting them go if they aren't useful.

Last February, I had the opportunity to deal with assumptions when I had the privilege of working as a mediation coach with a group of notarial candidates. The five-day mediation course—spearheaded by mediator, lawyer, and UBC professor

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I was surprised to hear the course was taking place just before exams. My assumption was that people approaching a major, career-advancing examination within a week would be stressed out and hard to work with! When I met the students, I was amazed that on the whole, they seemed calm and prepared for their final examinations and open to learning about mediation. That assumption picked up its heels and walked away.

During the one-week mediation course, notarial candidates learn basic mediation skills, communication skills, and theories about culture and conflict. On the last four days of the course, students participate in role-plays in small groups.

As coach, my role was to observe and encourage the role-players and

facilitate a feedback session at the end of each role-play. Another assumption I held about the students was that after only three days of instruction, their skill level would be—understandably—basic.

To my surprise, I had to let go of that assumption, too. Many students demonstrated advanced skills. They posed excellent open questions and listened reflectively. They paraphrased with ease and skillfully carried out reality checking. And in the feedback session for one particularly provocative role-play, one of the challenges the students brought up for discussion was . . . surprise! . . . the difficulty of letting go of assumptions.

It takes practice over a lifetime to develop this skill. Recognizing that you hold an assumption is the first step. *How do I know what I know?* is a handy question to ask yourself about facts that you hold to be true. So often we make assumptions about another's subjective experience based on our own experiences that, it turns out, may be unique to ourselves.

For instance, my assumption that the notarial candidates would be stressed was based on my own university and law school experience, where every term during exam time I was very stressed and difficult to be with.



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The second step is checking out the assumption. The best way to do this is to gather information by asking open questions, listening with an attitude of curiosity, and keeping your mind open to the possibility that the assumption may have to be sent packing. I checked out my assumption about pre-exam stress by observing students and asking them how the studying was going, how they prepared for the exams, etc. I was surprised by the answers I received because they were so different from the answers I would have given, had I been in their place.

The third step is making a decision about the assumption once you've gathered the information. You can keep it, modify it, or let it go. My decision was to let go of my assumptions while, at the same time, use the information I gathered to understand the students with whom I was working.

This points to the marvellous thing about assumptions: Although they can sometimes impede understanding by getting in the way, when examined they can be catalysts for understanding by allowing new and better information to be brought forward.

Dealing with assumptions—admittedly at times difficult to recognize, check out, and release—is ultimately a useful tool in any communication or mediation situation.

I look forward to exploring this and many other mediation skills with notarial candidates again in the future. ▲

Yuki Matsuno is a Provincial Court (Civil) Mediator, an accredited Law Society of BC Family Law Mediator, and a member of the BC Civil Mediator Roster. She loves to help parties resolve their differences through mediation and started her own teaching and consulting business to do just that.

Voice: 604 738-1392
Fax: 604 677-4193
yukimatsuno@shaw.ca