

## **How Do Your Biases Impact Your Mediations?**

by Meredith Richardson

As mediators, in theory, we are supposed to be unbiased.

And yet, we all have biases. We all have our own view of the world and the way it's supposed to be and the way that we are supposed to interact with it. Our biases affect the way we handle mediation in general. We may be directive, problem-solving, facilitative, or transformative based upon our own definition of how mediation should be.

Our biases also affect how we interact with people in mediation.

We all have people who bring out our best selves. We know who they are. We are happier just to be around them. Seeing them makes our hearts smile.

And then there are the others, those who, for whatever reason, trigger the worst in us. There's something about what they say or how they say it or their belief system as a whole that just makes us want to snarl. And, just as we smile involuntarily for those who bring out the best in us, we sometimes snarl involuntarily at those who bring out the worst in us.

They can bring up uncomfortable negative emotions for us. They may cause us to see a side of ourselves that we'd really like to pretend doesn't exist, thank you very much. We are good, nice people who do good, nice things, including, but not limited to, helping people to resolve disputes through mediation. Where do these hateful emotions come from? And how do we make them stop?

The next time that you find yourself snarling inwardly (or outwardly), make note of it. After the incident, when you are clear-headed again, walk yourself through the interaction again and ask yourself how you got there. What was triggering for you? What underlying value, need, and/or aspect of your identity felt threatened? What were the messages you were receiving from the other person, both verbally and nonverbally, and what were the messages you were telling yourself and giving to the other person? What boundary or rule of yours did you feel the other person rubbing up against or breaking? What emotions came up for you? What assumptions did you make about the person's (malevolent) motive or intent? Now that you are calmer, are you able to see it from the other person's perspective?

Years ago, in one of my first mediation sessions, I found myself triggered by the power and control dynamic in a domestic violence situation. (Fortunately, I was co-mediating, so I got very quiet and let the other mediator do all the work.) I was angry at the batterer and wanted to rescue the survivor. My underlying values that felt threatened were easy to define – It's not OK to be verbally and physically abusive to another. It's not OK to control another person. It's not OK to be SO selfish and self-absorbed. The message for me was that this person was “bad” and that I needed to protect and rescue those who were involved with him.

At this point in my career, I rarely find myself triggered in these situations in mediation. I look at a person who is verbally or physically abusive and I see so much more than that. I see a person who probably experienced trauma, and perhaps a lot of trauma, at one or more points in life. I see a person who is doing the best that s/he can and falls short, just like we all do. I often see a person who is fearful, easily triggered, and who looks to control things because it is so scary when things are beyond that person's control. I often see a person who has learned to focus on getting his/her needs met because at some point in that person's life, no one was there for that person.

Yes, I still recognize the dangers. Yes, I still do safety planning. Yes, I do want an agreement that will provide for safe contact between the child and the allegedly abusive parent.

And, yes, I recognize that there are sociopaths who walk among us and who get married and divorced.

I also still hold the same underlying values.

However, I am not triggered by the behaviors. I am calm, open to seeing the options that are available. I can see that person's best self and that person's worst self, all at the same time. And in doing that, I am as close to unbiased as I can get.

Get to know your biases. Know who you are and what you stand for.

And get to know your triggers. You do your best work as a mediator when you are not triggered.