All For One and One For All: Group Process and a Learning Community Approach to the Development of Effective Debriefing for Practicing Mediators

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Abstract

Mentoring and debriefing opportunities have been provided from time to time in the past for IAMA mediators; the uptake has never been very good. The tendency has been to criticise the mediators for the failure of these initiatives; however, it is more likely that poor process was to blame. This paper looks at a way of integrating adult learning and feedback principles with the role of group dynamics and the concept of learning communities, postulating that these create the core components of an effective debriefing and mentoring program for practising mediators.

Introduction

In late 2008, the New South Wales Chapter of IAMA launched a pilot program designed to provide mentoring for its mediator members. Apart from any other consideration, the pilot was intended to enable IAMA to demonstrate its compliance with the newly implemented National Mediator Accreditation System (NMAS). The pilot program has not been rescinded and remains in place.

Within the pilot, as a professional credibility and quality control measure, mediators seeking to be empanelled as mentors are required to have a level of respect and experience recognised by their peers, and to have NMAS accreditation, preferably as coaches. There are special confidentiality provisions protecting the mentoring relationships once they are established, and a reporting mechanism has been in-built so Continued Professional Development (CPD) points can be allocated and the usage of the scheme can be monitored. The contact details of all mentors have been made available to all chapter members. As an incentive to use the pilot, mentors and mentees would be entitled to claim extra CPD points. The pilot was formally launched at a CPD event in the New South Wales chapter offices and there appeared to be strong support for its operation, from potential mentors as well as from mediator members.

To date, according to the pilot mentoring panel reporting mechanism, it has been used once. Sophisticated analytical tools were not built into that pilot scheme, so it is possible only to conjecture as to the causes of its poor uptake. Though the apparent failure of the pilot may seem disappointing, it is congruent with anecdotal reports about the poor use of mentoring and other similar processes within the IAMA mediator community.

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National Mediator Accreditation System (NMAS)

After extensive consultations around Australia, NMAS was implemented on 1 January 2008. IAMA was strongly supportive of the system and a founding member of NMAS. It was also one of the first organisations to become a Recognised Mediator Accreditation Body (RMAB) within the system.

Within the 'Commentary on the Practice Standards', in the section on Competence, specific expectations are expressed about mentoring and debriefing:

> *7 Competence*
>
> *Mediators must be competent and have relevant skills and knowledge.*
>
> 1)   *Mediators should seek regular professional debriefing. The purpose of debriefing is to address matters relating to skills development, conceptual and professional issues, ethical dilemmas, and to ensure the ongoing emotional health of mediators. Debriefing can take place following a solo mediation, a co-mediation, in groups or through independent sessions with another experienced mediator.*[2]

In addition, the NMAS Approval Standards include that an RMAB must have a range of specified characteristics, including:

> b)   *provision of a range of member services such as, an ability to provide access to or refer mediators to ongoing professional development workshops, seminars and other programs and debriefing, or mentoring programs;*[3]

Based on the author's own experience, there can be no doubt that both mentoring and debriefing do continue to occur informally among IAMA's mediator members, but these informal, ad hoc contacts could not be described as 'programs'. Nor is there any 'quality control' over the consistency or standard of mentoring/debriefing.

What is Debriefing?

Debriefing was initially the preserve of the military, providing an opportunity for unit leaders to gain useful intelligence from their own troops about events on the battlefield:

* battlefield events could be given a logical order of sequence,
* misconceptions about an operation's actual events could be clarified,
* certain parts of information could be declared 'confidential',
* there could be open acknowledgement of soldiers' grief concerning the death and injury of mates,
* there could be open acknowledgement of the accomplishments of unit members,
* all ranks gained a sense of importance for having participated in the operation, and

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2   Prof Tania Sourdin,"Australian National Mediator Standards: Commentary on the National Mediator Practice Standards", 2007.

3   Prof Tania Sourdin, "Australian National Mediator Standards: Approval Standards", 2007

- soldiers were able to voice and acknowledge emotions and reactions to the events of the operation, including normalising any exhibited symptoms of anxiety.[4]

It became apparent that debriefing sessions were good for unit morale and increased the sense of unit cohesion.

Debriefing has also gained some fame as a tool to assist people who have been exposed to an especially traumatic event, when it is called 'Critical Incident Stress Debriefing'. Examples of this type of debriefing include assistance for a community after a severe bushfire, or assistance for a hostage immediately upon her/his release.

However, of more immediate relevance to mediators, debriefing is now used extensively in many professions as a teaching/learning tool. Within the context of CPD, debriefing can be especially useful. For example, debriefing can:

- develop and foster a professional 'learning' and support network,

- facilitate professional contact between experienced and less experienced practitioners,

- be a forum in which practicing mediators can discuss specific mediations,

- provide an opportunity for mediators to receive constructive peer feedback on their interventions and methodologies,

- enable all mediators to experiment with new approaches to skills and methodologies.

Adult Learning, Feedback and Assessment

Debriefing is essentially a learning opportunity, both for the individual seeking to be debriefed as well as for the person/group conducting the debriefing. Before looking specifically at debriefing in this context, it would be useful to give a brief overview of the key components in adult learning.

> *Individuals differ in their preferred learning style, requiring varied educational approaches with indications that exposure to familiar and unfamiliar teaching techniques will develop learning. Different modalities and learning preferences have been described in adult education such as visual, visual/verbal, physical (kinaesthetic) and auditory reception. In addition, both formative and summative assessments enhance their learning outcomes; either as a trigger for learning or as assessment reflection and feedback.[5]*

In other words, we learn best when the teaching is expressed in various ways, or formats: we can watch electronic overheads only for a limited time before we lose concentration; we have the same limits when listening only to a lecturer; we can lose interest in practice if we do not have its purpose reinforced. Obviously, different people have preferences for different teaching formats, but a varied combination should reach everybody, as well as providing a constantly stimulating learning environment. When the various formats (or modalities) are combined in unexpected ways, we learn best.

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4   Based on the website: www.debriefing.com
5   Grant, Robyn P and Cooper, Simon J: "The benefits of debriefing as formative feedback in nurse education", Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing Vol 29, Number 1 (September – November 2011)

As their names suggest, formative feedback and summative assessment, refer to how people's learning progress is tracked, during the course of learning and after its completion. Summative assessment usually occurs at the end of a course of learning and is designed to check that the person learnt what was intended. Thus, in IAMA, there are summative assessments at the end of the Practitioners' Certificate in Mediation (structured demonstration of basic mediation skills in front of a video camera, plus a written exam), and at the end of the Professional Certificate in Arbitration (a written exam).

Formative feedback is less formal and, for the individual being assessed, is usually less traumatic. Formative feedback usually occurs where an individual (i.e., trainee) receives personalised feedback from an instructor, or under some circumstances, from peers. If delivered correctly, this feedback will more deeply embed and enhance the learning outcomes (i.e., we learn more if we have opportunities to talk through with other learners what we are learning). Within IAMA's mediation training course, opportunities are provided for each participant to give their own formative feedback to themselves – they are asked to consider their learning progress thus far during the course.[6]

> Formative feedback has been shown, in numerous studies, to improve students' learning and enhance teachers' teaching to the extent that the learners are receptive and the feedback is on target (valid), objective, focused, and clear.

So, in a formal teaching context, it can be very useful for participants (or learners) to submit formative feedback at the end of a teaching day. This is readily done if learners are asked to describe briefly (and out loud) what they learnt during the day. In this case, the feedback is being provided in a structured context by the learning peers.

Group Dynamics and the Feedback/Learning Process

In 1947, Kurt Lewin published his seminal work on group dynamics.[7] In essence, Lewin described the power that groups assert over their individual members; his research became a driver for many studies on human behaviour in the group context – the group, or social context is, of course, our commonest context.

In 1965, Bruce Tuckman built on Lewin's original ideas by enunciating a four stage group development, or decision-making, process.[8] Tuckman asserted that a group of individuals will:

*   form: early stages of a group's history, in which the members either get along with the other members, or, more importantly, *pretend* to do so;

*   storm: group members stop being overly polite and express their differences as they try to 'get down to' the issues at hand (e.g., in a training course, they will do whatever they can to bring 'difficult' members under control in order to improve everyone's opportunities for learning; this has been observed to include arguing with each other within the 'safety' of an instructor's presence);

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6   Shute, Valerie J: "Focus on Formative Feedback", Educational Testing Service, Princeton University, New Jersey, USA, 2007

7   Lewin, Kurt: "Frontiers in Group Dynamics", 1947

8   Tuckman, B: "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups", Psychological Bulletin 63 (6), 1965

- norm: the members of the group will develop a level of trust in each other and appear to set what are the norms of acceptable behaviour within the context of this particular group; and

- perform: the group will work cohesively towards a common and agreed goal; they are visibly efficient and cooperative (when compared with the stilted politeness of 'forming', a group at this stage of its development will have members who chat in a fully engaged way).

(Such formally constituted groups can become pivotal parts of their members' lives for the period that the group exists, so Tuckman later added another stage: "adjourning/mourning", to describe the group members' sense of loss during the period immediately following the dissolution of the group.)

These concepts were developed even further by M. (Morgan) Scott Peck who, apart from spending time on roads less travelled, looked at how Tuckman's principles of group development could be extrapolated to large groups, or communities. M. Scott Peck defined community as 'a group whose members have made a commitment to communicating with one another on an ever more deep and authentic level.'[9] For the purposes of this paper, the author will extrapolate from Tuckman's principles, rather than make the extra "leap" of applying Scott Peck's ideas, though it is useful to keep them in mind when considering how best to establish groups and learning communities.

During the IAMA Practitioners' Certificate in Mediation, emphasis is placed on the development of group decision-making – the first day of the course is designed specifically to foster group cohesion through a variety of activities whose main focus is the development of a learning group. By the end of day one, the participant group is expected to have reached the 'performing' stage; if not, extra work is done at the beginning of day two to ensure this progress has occurred. This sense of group cohesion becomes so strong and supportive during each course that it is reasonable to anticipate that, whenever trained mediators attend an IAMA mediator CPD event, they expect that original group cohesion, or 'norming', to still exist – even to be palpable.

Accepting Tuckman's developmental structure, and the penultimate group stage of 'performing', it is possible to validly assert that a 'group' of mediators (of mixed levels of experience) is able to define their common and agreed goal as being, the provision of debriefing and mentoring support and assistance. In such a context, it behoves the facilitators to ensure that sufficient flexibility exists in the group to enable constant revisiting of Tuckman's developmental stages, as and when developments within the group require.

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9   Scott Peck, M: "Meditations From the Road", Simon and Schuster, 1993

The Learning Community

> *Research on learning theory, how the brain works, collaborative learning, and student engagement has taught us that people learn best in community.* [10]

The concept of 'learning communities' appears to have arisen in opposition to the 'individualist' focus of the twentieth century.[11] Learning communities have become widely recognised and are being used in many contexts. For example, at the Australian National University, students are encouraged to join learning communities within the university, to broaden their learning experience beyond mere lectures:

> *Learning communities are groups of people who share a common interest and meet regularly to help each other learn and grow*.[12]

In 2003, the University of Tasmania released a research paper looking at learning communities. The paper included this definition:

> *Learning communities are consistent with a constructivist approach to learning that recognises the key importance of interaction with others, and the role of social interactions in the construction of values and identity.*[13]

It is a natural, perhaps even axiomatic, progression from the limited numbers of a group to the broader context of a full community. Within IAMA, mediators comprise almost half the existing membership (i.e., around 700). Such numbers with professional commonality (i.e., mediators) would readily meet the definition of a community. However, within debriefing sessions, it is unlikely that all 700 will ever be in attendance at any one time. It may be sensible, or feasible, to build a Mediator Member Learning Community through the fostering of several mediator member groups.

Each time one of these groups comes together – for example, for a structured debriefing session – the facilitated session should enable the group to progress through Tuckman's stages of development, so rekindling the group ethos that existed during mediation training, but also facilitating the development of a 'performing' group. In time, these groups will not need to progress through the Tuckman developmental stages, but will exist in stage four 'performing', taking up at that stage whenever they meet together. Once they are successful, and seen to be successful, these groups will attract more members.

Ideally, clusters of mediator member groups will coalesce to build the wider IAMA Mediator Member Learning Community within which members can meet with different groups across all the chapters.

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10   Bickford, Deborah J & Wright, David J: "Chapter 4: Community: the Hidden Context for Learning", in "Learning Spaces", Diana Oblinger (Ed), Educause, Dayton University, Ohio, 2006

11   Kilpatrick, Sue, Barrett, Margaret & Jones, Tammy: "Defing Learning Communities", University of Tasmania, 2003

12   www.anu.edu.au/learningcommunities

13   Kilpatrick, Sue, Barrett, Margaret & Jones, Tammy: op cit

Debriefing in the Mediator Member Learning Community

Within the context of effective groups of mediators, and a broader Mediator Member Learning Community, facilitated debriefing becomes a valued process that is integrated into the IAMA learning and support network. The debriefing session becomes a group event, fostering contact between experienced and less experienced practitioners; it develops as a recognised opportunity for mediators to give and receive constructive peer feedback on their interventions and styles, enabling all IAMA's mediators to acquire new skills and to gain the confidence for experimenting with those skills and methodologies. The structured debriefing session should focus on the provision of formative feedback that derives from peers, thus allowing all attendees to learn from each other.

Rather than a cosy chat among colleagues, a debriefing session enables participants to see that:

> *(a) ability and skill can be developed through practice, (b) effort is critical to increasing skill, (c) mistakes are part of the skill-acquisition process.* [14]

A fully functioning debriefing network can develop even further. Based on the objectives defined by the European Union's current project for debriefing its own mediators (especially those who have worked in global peace negotiations),[15] IAMA's Mediator Member Learning Community could:

- produce occasional reports for either the IAMA Journal or the IAMA Newsletter – these reports could summarise key professional insights/lessons/challenges/techniques arising from debriefing sessions;

- develop debriefing guidelines specific to mediators, as guides for the development of other mediator debriefing networks; and

- produce a debriefing 'toolkit' that helps define best practice in the area.

Conclusion

In the past, mediator mentoring and debriefing initiatives were developed on a very ad hoc basis, lacking proper analysis of purpose and process. Group dynamics, learning communities, formative feedback and structured process were not taken into account when developing the pilot programs. It is probable that the cause of the failure of these programs lies, at least in part, in inadequate process design.

If a mediator debriefing/mentoring program is to be effective within IAMA, it must be properly developed and fostered using the recognised group and learning community parameters. It must also provide structured opportunities for formative feedback among experienced and less experienced mediators in formal and informal 'community learning' contexts.

In common parlance, effective mediators are 'comfortable in their own skin' and, once in that state, they have the capacity to reach outwards and enjoin others in the 'Mediator Learning Community'. However, whenever members of that community get together, the facilitator/s must ensure the continuing development and maintenance of a fully-fledged learning community environment.

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14   Shute, Valerie J ibid
15   "Debriefing EU Mediators", December 2012, Mediateur

If these principles guide the development of mediator debriefing in IAMA, the organisation will have the capacity to take a leading role in the design of effective debriefing tools that can guide other mediator groups.

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4   Lewin, Kurt: *Frontiers in Group Dynamics*, 1947.

5.   'Debriefing EU Mediators' MediatEUr: European Forum for International Mediation and Dialogue: 2012 [www.themediateur.eu].

6.   Scott Peck, M: *Meditations from the Road*, Simon and Schuster, 1993.

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11. Website: www.debriefing.com.