

Mediators Need Skills in Handling Difficult Emotions

Theory-of-Change Symposium

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[Rosa Abdelnour](#) argues that knowledge of and the ability to deal with the psychodynamics of conflict are key to being a good mediator. These should be the main focus of mediation trainings. She is a lawyer, mediator, arbitrator, and trainer in Costa Rica.

What's most important for you to do as a mediator when parties and their lawyers are at an impasse, someone shouts, emotions rise, biases dance everywhere, and all participants stare at you? Lawyers fight in front of their clients to impress them about how tough they are. You think, "What should I do next?"

You are in a mediation session and one party begins to complain, cries and blames the other party about what happened. You can't say: "Hey, be calm. I understand you perfectly. I would probably do the same thing in your case." After "I understand" comes a "but" and final "NO." You don't resolve the conflict. You don't have to say who is right.

To handle these situations, mediators need soft skills, emotional intelligence, nonviolent communication, empathy, assertiveness, good humor, and emotional regulation. Mediators need to be good listeners, trying to understand how people feel without judging them. Mediators need to handle people's emotions. General knowledge of the laws "on the books" doesn't solve these problems.

People are units of mind, body, and environment. Mediators need training in psychology and neuroscience and a lot of practice handling the psychodynamics of parties' interactions. This should be the heart of mediation trainings, including in law schools.