

My Volunteer Experience – Being a Community Mediator

We asked Anita Ferrari, a professional Coach, some questions about her volunteering experience at Calm Mediation. Anita is a trained Community Mediator and Workplace Mediator who joined the service in 2009.

Q1: Why did you join Calm Mediation?

As a coach, in the corporate sector, I wanted to develop my existing skills and contribute to the voluntary sector. By chance, I had a word of mouth introduction to Calm and was fortunate that, at short notice, a place on that winter's community mediation programme opened up when a participant had to cancel because of heavy snow.

Q2: What do you enjoy most about volunteering?

I really enjoy helping people to see choices they didn't know they had, supporting them in finding ways out of perceived dead end situations and a weight lifted from their shoulders. The co-mediation model is great and I learn from every person I work with. Mediators are from all walks of life, each with a different perspective. Mediation is not just "learn it and you know it" but is a constant stretch; you have to keep expanding your skills as each case presents a different challenge.

Q3: What areas do you need to be mindful of as a mediator?

You need the skills that are taught such as using open questions and following the mediation process to remain impartial. Beyond that I think these help:

- **Know what will "push your buttons."**
Sometimes a situation will make you feel a strong reaction. It's important to recognise this and know how you are going to deal with it. It's rare to know in advance so it's helpful to have a generic signal with your co-mediator to indicate a need for a break.
 - **Work well with your co-mediator.**
The Preparation and Debrief times are important, not just to agree who does what, but to get to know your co-mediator and what's important to them about the way the session runs.
- Is this mediatable?**
- Occasionally it's not appropriate to continue a mediation so it's good to be confident if you need to stop. Also, it's helpful to be comfortable if the clients don't reach agreement on the day. Our role is to facilitate the conversation but the clients control the outcome.

Q4. What do you like least about volunteering?

Where a client clearly doesn't have real commitment to the process so there is little prospect of real change.

Q5. What disputes have you mediated at Calm Mediation?

I've dealt with many disputes where:

- there has been a clash of lifestyles
- the clients used to be friends and have fallen out, so are feeling hurt as well as angry
- the clients have reached a point of being unable to communicate respectfully
- there are anti-social behaviour issues.

Success comes, when the clients start to listen to each other and to shift position in some way, from what they were stuck on.

Q6. Who has attended your mediations?

As well as the clients, there have been interpreters, social workers, client supporters (who sometimes need reminding that they should be non-participatory), observers and even some unexpected pets!

Q7. If I did it again, what would I do differently?

I'd still choose Calm Mediation. My experience is that Calm underestimates how good they are at what they do. They provide a genuinely professional level of service, developed from a wealth of experience. I'm looking forward to where Calm is going in the future.

Q8. Mediation is.....

".....like learning to drive." As you become more experienced, the process itself almost becomes subconscious, allowing the mediators to be truly present and focussed on the clients' needs and all their physical as well as verbal communication.