Exploring Expected Futures

by Cheryl Picard and Kenneth Melchin, July 24, 2023

Insight Mediation offers mediators novel tools and strategies for helping parties transform conflicts by gaining and verifying insights about themselves and others. In this "working" paper, we illustrate an important Insight mediation strategy highlighting how it might differ from what other mediators may have learned in their mediation training. To this end, we include an example of a short interaction between the Insight mediator and two sisters, Carla and Adrianna, who are in disagreement about how to support their aging mother. We pick up the conversation at a point during the process of "deepening the learning conversation" where the mediator is using an Insight strategy known as "Exploring Expected Futures."

Exploring Expected Futures is used in situations where the mediator notices parties are remaining locked in their defense-attack behaviours leading to an awareness of the need to shift the pattern of the parties' conversation. The insight mediator knows that the parties are blocked by feelings of threat and an inability to listen and understand what each other is trying to say. In particular, they are being blocked in their ability to "learn" anything new about each other. To mitigate this, the mediator responds with the intention of generating new insights as a strategy to deepen the learning that is a prerequisite for conflicting parties deciding to change their conflict behaviour.

In our example of the use of this strategy the mediator's efforts are directed at facilitating a conversation with one sister about what is important to her in such a way that the other sister becomes able to listen without feeling threatened. He does this by probing the threat, not with the intent of remaining focused on the threat, but to help elicit what the sister is protecting as a result of the threat. With this in mind the mediator's questioning and listening is structured to move the conversation so that Carla can listen to Adrianna without feeling the need to defend herself. In other words, the mediator helps Adrianna move through the threat and out the other side. When this happens Adrianna is able to talk about her own hopes and cares in relation to her own expected futures.

When Adrianna talks about her hopes and cares in relation to her own expected futures, Carla, the listener, is less likely to feel attacked or criticized given that the conversation is no longer focused on attacking her. It has shifted to focus on Adrianna's expected futures in light of her own experiences. As a result of noticing this, Carla's current understanding of the conflict is less likely to be blocked by threat feelings enabling her to begin listening with curiosity. As the mediator is moving through this conversation with Adrianna, he is also paying careful attention to Carla, looking for body language that indicates a shift from a defensive posture to a curious one. After moving through the numerous interventions that form the strategy of Exploring Expected Futures with Adrianna, and verifying that Carla has indeed understood what Adrianna has been saying, the Insight mediator will shift attention to Carla to establish a similar conversation to help her talk about her hopes and cares in relation to her own expected futures, this time with Adrianna listening and coming to feel less attacked or criticized. Once parties are able to have a few experiences of listening and learning without being blocked by threat feelings, they often become able to take over the conversation themselves to pursue novel paths forward. Let's examine the interactions between the insight mediator and the disputing parties.

Noticing the Mediator's Focus

As mentioned previously, our case example involves a conflict between two sisters, Carla and

Adrianna, who strongly disagree about how to deal with their aging mother. The mediation has already been going on for a while and attempts by the mediator to shift the attack-defend dialogue between the sisters have not been successful. They continue to speak and respond to each other with attitudes and behaviours that dismiss each other's views. Some of what the mediator is noticing are repetitive explanations of what each party wants, raised voices when they talk to each other, snarky remarks, and other verbal and non-verbal dismissive behaviours.

If you are a mediator trained in another approach, we suggest you pause at this point and consider the situation from the perspective of your prior training. Before proceeding, ask what you would be thinking if you were the mediator. You have already been working with the parties for a while, so you may be feeling some frustration. Perhaps you would want to remind the parties that they agreed to listen and not interrupt each other. Beyond this, you know you need a strategy for moving forward. What strategy would you select? If you were to select a strategy based on your prior training, can you name it and what would it entail? Once you have formulated an answer to this question, read on to see how it would differ or overlap with an Insight Mediator's strategy.

In this paper we focused our attention on only one specific Insight mediation strategy to enable us to better describe and teach the strategy. After noticing the parties continuing to engage in ongoing patterns of defend narratives, the mediator learned that the parties needed help to deepen the learning conversation and decided to respond by using the strategy of Exploring Expected Futures. This strategic choice was due to having observed that both Carla and Adrianna continued to feel threatened through their interactions, and as a result they exhibited little curiosity about what the other was saying verifying that their ability to learn from each other was blocked and that the line of questioning needed to change. Instead of exploring what is important to each party about helping their Mom, the mediator shifted his questioning to focus on their expectations about the future; more specifically what the sisters are trying to prevent from happening in the future. What worries the sisters is exemplified in the mediator's dialogue below and the discussion that follows.

Entering the Dialogue

After noticing the parties are stuck in on-going defend narratives the mediator enters the conversation and says: "*Clearly it is hard right now for either of you to listen to what the other thinks would be best. This is not uncommon in situations where family members are concerned about another family member's welfare. In fact, this difficulty is why you asked for help through mediation. Let me shift the focus of the conversation a bit to see if we can discover what is so threatening and what is making it hard for you to listen to each other. If you are going to be successful making decisions about how to deal with your aging mother it will be helpful to learn what each of you is worried about. Who would like to start?*"

As the older sister, Adrianna offers to begin. The mediator turns to her and says: "*Adrianna, talk a bit about what you would expect a supportive and helpful person or friend would do if you were to share with them your worries about your aging mother.*"

Discussion: The Insight mediator begins the strategy of Exploring Expected Futures by asking Adrianna a question that invites her to shift attention away from the current narrative about the conflict events and problems. She deliberately asks a question that focuses her attention and the attention of Carla, the listener, in an area that takes the conversation away from events that implicate or blame Carla. Instead, she asks Adrianna about how she imagined the conversation would unfold from her experience of talking to others about things concerning her.

What the mediator does not do is stay in the problem-saturated narrative, as this will sustain parties defend patterns of interacting. Nor does the mediator simply ask what parties care about right now. Instead he directs attention to future expectations because this is where the deeper, most pressing cares and threats generating the conflict are to be discovered.

Let's continue with the conversation and our analysis. If Adrianna provides new and potentially less accusatory information in response to this question, then the mediator follows up with a question to Adrianna that adds a further layer onto this information. The mediator here is using the micro skill of "asking layered questions"[1]. Layered questions involve the mediator asking the party an open curious question about the answer that was given to the question that was asked before. Notice in the mediator's paraphrasing below that he avoids attaching blame to Carla for not being supportive of her sister but instead follows up with a question about her interpretation of perceived lack of support. *"You expected the person to trust your thinking on how to deal with your mother at this point in her life, and to be open and supportive of your ideas. What do you hear a person telling you when you are not given the support you expect?"*

Discussion: This layered question begins to deepen the learning conversation by asking Adrianna about the threat she feels when she does not receive the support she expects. Even if the question focuses attention towards a negative expectation, the focus remains on something within Adrianna and not on something that explicitly implicates Carla. This gives Carla "space" for paying attention to what Adrianna is saying without feeling personally criticized or attacked.

If Adrianna provides information about a possible threat that could be fuelling the conflict, the mediator follows up with another layered question to Adrianna that builds on the first two and deepens by exploring her expected dire future. Notice that the mediator "paraphrases[2]" what she heard before proceeding to ask another layered question. This skill of paraphrasing first and asking second is what Insight mediators refer to as "bridging"[3]. "*Clearly there is something quite worrisome for you when you encounter this apparent lack of trust (this is the mediator's interpretation of the party's response to the prior question). What are you imagining will happen if this continues?"*

Discussion: This is an extremely important question because it provides Adrianna with a way of speaking about her feelings of threat in a way that relates, not to Carla, but to her own future expectations. Insight mediators know that usually these future expectations have roots in the party's own past, and she is inviting Adrianna to speak about events in her own past that lead her to expect this dire future outcome. Once again, this places Carla in the position of observing and listening to Adrianna speak about her own threat-to-care narrative. The mediator purposefully does not yet bring Carla into the conversation because she wants to make sure Carla does not feel she has to defend against Adrianna's interpretation of events. Before inviting Carla to speak she wants to allow Adrianna to finish talking about her own fears.

If Adrianna provides information that is expansive rather than contractive, then the mediator once again asks a layered question to deepen further. Asking layered questions to deepen understanding are not simply additive, they intend to provide insight into the essence or core of the threat interpretations leading to defend responses. Recognizing the conversation with Adrianna is at an important junction, the mediator invites Adrianna to speak directly about Carla.

"*There is something important about Carla trusting you, Adrianna, that you care deeply about and that you are trying hard to protect. Perhaps you could speak directly to Carla and tell her what is it about*

your relationship that matters to you so much and what you are afraid of losing."

Discussion: With this question, the mediator is giving Adrianna the chance to formulate the positive value that is at the centre of her feelings of threat—the care she feels she is protecting. Through deepening we have learned that this is all about protecting her future relationship with her sister. With this question, the conversation remains detached from blaming Carla in two ways. First, Adrianna's response is an exploration of her own life narrative, a narrative that does not accuse, blame or attack Carla; and second, the question asks about a positive value held by Adrianna rather that a negative disvalue that could be taken as a criticism of Carla.

All through this questioning with Adrianna, the mediator has not only been noticing and listening carefully to her, she has also been carefully observing Carla's reactions. She is interested in knowing whether Carla's body language reveals that she is responding to what Adrianna is saying with attention and curiosity. If so, she may be shifting away from her ongoing stance of attack-defend and is learning something new. If Carla's body language reveals openness and curiousity, the mediator will shift attention to the other party, in this case Carla, and begin Exploring Expected Futures. But, before this happens, it will be important for Carla to verify that she has heard correctly what Adrianna has been saying. The mediator turns to Carla and says something like this: "*Carla, you have been listening attentively to Adrianna talk about what matters to her. It is important for you to share your understanding of what matters to your sister so she can tell you if you have this right or correct what you have misunderstood. What is your understanding of what matters most to Adrianna?"*

"*Now that we know you understand Adrianna, perhaps you would talk about your ideas on how best to deal with your Mom, being sure to let Adrianna know what matters to you and what you are afraid will happen given that the two of you have not been able to agree on your mother's care. So, let me ask you: What would you expect a supportive and helpful person or friend to do to help you find the best way to deal with your Mom's situation, and if that didn't happen what would you think?"*

Discussion: The mediator continues along this path of deepening the learning until both parties show some genuine interest in what the other is saying. Once both parties become curious about each other they will begin asking questions to expand and deepen what they know and they will stop contradicting each other or dismissing each other's ideas. At this point, the mediator becomes more confident that the parties have, at least for the present, shifted out of their attitudes of attack-defence. They have opened their minds to allow for curiousity and learning from each other. The mediator can now feel relatively confident about engaging in new lines of inquiry that explore possibilities and decision-making for dealing with the parties aging mother.

To help readers reflect on their understanding of the strategy of Exploring Expected Futures we summarize below the progression of the mediator's interventions moving the parties from their defending behaviours to curious wondering. Two points need highlighting. First, the progression is based on the mediator responding not prescribing, which in Insight mediation is referred to as "responsive intentionality[4]. This behavioural outcome reminds the Insight mediator to be responsive to the parties using theory-informed intention to both the situation and the individual. Our second point underscores that it is questions that lead to insight and learning. And, while the structure of the question matters, the more important aspect is what the question asks about. Whereas some mediation methods focus attention on the discovery of interests or needs, the Insight approach seeks to reveal the threats behind conflict behaviour. Insight mediators engage parties in conversation about whether their

feelings of threat are deliberate attacks on what matters to them.

Recapping the Use of Layered Questions during the Strategy of Exploring Expected Futures

The series of layered questions below are numbered to show the progression of the layered questions asked by the mediator during his deepening conversation with Adrianna. We want to point out that the questions are not formulaic; they are a "dynamic pattern of responses that follow the parties own storytelling".

The Insight mediator began by asking Adrianna a curious question that went something like this: "*What do you expect that a supportive or helpful person would do in this particular situation?*"

When Adrianna provided some new information in response to this question, the mediator followed up with a curious question to Adrianna that added a deeper layer onto this information: "*What do you think a person is telling you when she does not give you this help or support?*"

When Adrianna talked about information that the mediator understood as a threat fuelling the conflict, he followed up with another layered threat-based question, again to Adrianna, that deepened on the first two questions by exploring future expectations of threat: "*What is the worry or dire future that you expect to happen when you do not get this help or support?"*

Once again, when Adrianna provided information that moved the conversation forward, the mediator followed up with another layered question to deepen further on future expectations: "*What is it that you are trying to protect when this sort of conversational roadblock happens?"*

When Adrianna is able to provide new information in response to this deeper question that appears to be at the root of her fears, the mediator first verifies that Carla had heard what Adrianna said. He asks: "*Carla, what is your understanding of what Adrianna is envisioning will happen and how she is protecting that it does not happen?"*

All the while through this questioning, the mediator has been directing his questions to Adrianna and he has been listening carefully to Adrianna. As importantly, he has also been observing the reaction of Carla, and whether Carla's words and body language reveal whether she is responding to Adrianna with an attitude of defend-attack or whether she is becoming genuinely curious about what Adrianna is saying. Once it is determined that Carla understands what Adrianna has been saying, and that she is ready to talk about what matters to her and how it is being threatened in the current context, the mediator shifts his attention to deepening on the threat-to-care that Carla feels being sure to also attend to Adrianna's reactions.

Conclusion

In this brief text, we have provided an illustration of the Insight mediation strategy Exploring Expected Futures. Our goal has been to help mediators trained in other approaches identify particular ways that practicing Insight mediation differs from practices rooted in their prior training. We selected this particular strategy because it highlights how Insight mediators think differently about conflict. Insight mediation does not understand conflict as arising from incompatible or conflicting positions or interests. Rather it arises when parties' ability to learn from each other in conversations is blocked by feelings of threats-to-cares. To help parties move past these blockages, Insight mediators know they need to find ways to "deepen" their learning conversation. This case study illustrates how the Insight mediation strategy of Exploring Expected Futures helps parties achieve this goal.

Books for Further Reading

Melchin, Kenneth and Cheryl Picard, Transforming Conflict through Insight. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2008.

Picard, Cheryl A. Practising Insight Mediation. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2016.

Notes

[1] See Picard, Practising Insight Mediation pg. 134.

[2] Ibid. pgs. 112-123.

[3] Ibid. pgs. 139-140.

[4] Responsive intentionality is described in Cheryl's book, Practicing Insight Mediation, pages 31-33.