

Mentoring for Mediators

Mediation in Sri Lanka was formalized with the introduction of the Mediation Boards Act of 1988 by the Ministry of Justice and appointment of the Mediation Boards Commission. Handling approximately 250,000 cases annually with a significant settlement rate of 60%, Community Mediation Boards play a crucial role in providing access to justice and improving community relationships. Their effectiveness lies in creating a safe, informal environment for dialogue to reach mutually agreeable solutions, focusing on the underlying interests of the parties involved rather than legal interpretations.

The success of this community mediation framework hinges significantly on the skill of its volunteer mediators whose understanding of the mediation process guides disputing parties to effectively arrive at an agreement. However, mediators face several challenges in their 'on-the-job practice' such as navigating strong negative emotions and psychological barriers and relying on pre-conceived problem-solving methods. They

need practice, refreshers and constant skill building to understand how to guide parties to identify the true interests within a dispute.

Increasing the number of training sessions is not as simple as it might seem, with only around 20 Mediation Training Officers (MTOs) tasked with supporting approximately 8,000 mediators across the island. Also, current trainings do not address the issue of reflection and self-care. Therefore, The Asia Foundation, which has always supported mediation in Sri Lanka since its inception over three decades ago through capacity building and technical assistance, wanted to explore a new capacity-building approach beyond traditional training. We wanted to introduce a pilot system through the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR)¹ project that would enable peer-to-peer learning where mediators with 25 to 30 years of experience could share their insights with new mediators as a value addition to the existing capacity building training.

The 'Peer Support Model'

The Foundation's Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Unit had previously introduced a 'Peer Support Model' for counselling officers who did not have access to practice supervision. In counselling, practice supervision is needed to sharpen knowledge and skills, maintain ethical boundaries, and ensure selfcare. Again, due to the spread and number of counsellors, the Foundation introduced a peer support model to address this need. However, for mediators, this method was not well-received because it was perceived that potential bias and subjectivity in feedback would compromise the objectivity necessary for effective mediation. These factors highlighted the need for more structured and expert-led supervision.



On the Job Mentoring Training of Trainers Session for Mediator Training Officers

Introducing Mentoring on the Job: A Value-Adding Solution

The introduction of mentoring aimed to provide much-needed continuous development for community mediators while overcoming difficulties faced in the 'Peer Support Model'. The idea of introducing mentoring for mediation arose to build the capacity of Mediator Training Officers (MTOs), who could then act as mentors to Mediator Chairpersons and Deputy Chairs. This approach acknowledged the limited number of MTOs available to support a significant number of mediators.

¹ The Asia Foundation worked with LIFE Consultancy's on the mentoring initiative with support from the Supporting Effective Dispute Resolution (SEDR) program implemented jointly by The Asia Foundation and British Council with support from the European Union.

While mentoring is a well-established concept in academic and career development paths, its formal application within the specific context of volunteer community mediation in Sri Lanka, outside of structured organizational hierarchies, represents a novel approach. In various sectors, mentoring traditionally involves a more experienced individual guiding a less experienced one to achieve specific professional goals or enhance skills. However, our context required a more adaptable and scalable solution.

To address this, we considered the benefits of group mentoring. This involves one mentor (in our case, an MTO) working with several mentees (mediators) simultaneously in a group setting. This model allows the mentor to share expertise and make observations while enabling mentees with similar development goals to learn from each



On the Job Mentoring Training Session for Chairpersons and Vice Chairpersons of Community Mediation Boards (Homagama)

other's experiences and perspectives. This model has the potential to sharpen mediators' skills while providing them with a reflective space for experience sharing.

How is this different from the 'Mentoring' we already know?

The objective was to provide a value addition to the mandated five-day training, offering mediators a space to learn through the experiences of their peers. This moved away from a purely hierarchical, expert-novice model of traditional mentoring towards a more collaborative and peer-supported approach facilitated by the MTOs.

The core of this revised approach is reflective learning. Structured mentoring meetings allow mediators to present difficult or successful cases they have handled, process-related issues, or even stresses of the environment. This allows for a collective analysis of the challenges faced, the problem-solving steps taken, and strategies for overcoming psychological barriers in conflict resolution. Critically, the MTOs provide feedback based on their own experience and expertise of active listening, focusing on skill elements like problem analysis, communication, and asking useful questions. By observing these cases, MTOs can ensure adherence to mediation principles, facilitate the involvement of external expertise in identified areas, and create a safe space for mediators to share emotional burdens.

In the pilot phase, we successfully developed a handbook, conducted 24 mentoring sessions, enabling MTOs to identify capacity-building needs and supervise mediators effectively. These sessions demonstrated the potential of mentoring to promote self-care, continuous capacity building, and problem-solving.

"Our network of mediators is diverse, with individuals ranging in age from 35 to 80 years and educational backgrounds spanning from GCE Ordinary Levels to postgraduate degrees. Despite these varying capacities, we believe that through formalized and structured guidance, a proper understanding, and increased awareness of the mentoring process, we can achieve significant improvements in their skills development."

Mediator Training Officer, Nuwara Eliya District

Mentoring in mediation has the potential to be a structured guidance process for new mediators, ensuring the quality of mediation practices. By adopting this initiative, we can support mediators to serve their communities more effectively and resolve disputes satisfactorily.

Part of the programme



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