

ADR Skill of the Month

Avoid Classifying the Speaker

Not too long ago I had to go to the DMV. Before my number was called and without yet seeing what the clerk looked like, I made the assumption (okay, partly based on previous DMV experiences) that this person was a bureaucrat who didn't really want to help me. Without giving her a chance, I had classified her. So when my number was finally called and I went to the counter, the clerk was doomed. My attitude was already in a negative and closed place. When she turned out to be extremely pleasant and helpful, it took me a moment to adjust my thoughts and tone. Then I realized that this whole DMV experience – from scheduling and dreading it, to the actual waiting room time – would have been much more positive if I had simply been open-minded, if not optimistic.

The moment we walk into a meeting – probably even before we enter the room – people make assumptions about us. Without opening our mouths, we have been classified. Most of us have been the victims of such premature labeling and (admit it) we've all been guilty of it too. This is knee-jerk thinking that won't usually be verbalized but which, in its own way, comes out loud and clear:

“Bureaucrat!”

“Difficult parent!”

“Lazy!”

“Pushover!”

“Know-it-all!”

During many of the ADR sessions and mediations I conduct, I see parents label district employees, especially program specialists and directors – and vice versa. In these conflict resolution meetings, I usually ask the parent(s) to speak first. They describe their child and outline what they would like to achieve. Once I understand their interests, I turn to the District representative so that I can likewise understand those aims and interests. I know full well that before they each get their turn to speak, they've likely classified each other, when what they need to do is give each other a chance. But if I maintain my own open mind, I often find the opportunity to open theirs. Then it comes down to the real task; one that cannot be accomplished until the negative presumptions vanish, and that is to actually listen for the true issues and interests.

Marc Purchin, Director of ADR Services

Suggested Tips on Practicing this Skill

1. During a meeting, if your inner presumptions are distracting you from focusing on what you would like to achieve, take a break and adjust your thoughts.
2. Wear a rubber band around your wrist and discreetly snap it every time you catch yourself categorizing the person(s) in your meeting. Then say to yourself, “My thoughts are not helping me focus on my interests” or “My mind is not helping me” or “This person I am inappropriately labeling is not trying to make my life difficult.” If the technique helps, keep at it. It could be welt worth it. (Sorry...)

Southwest SELPA

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