

## Mediator Girl: ready to change the world

SAMARA SHAH

IT IS 5pm on a Friday and I've got the kind of tiredness I'd associate with stepping off an overnight flight at 6am - and I'm not the only one.

It has been an intense few days and, though exhaustion is apparent in everyone, there is a bubbling energy in all of us.

We have taken in so much new knowledge and insight that no-one wants to be the first to leave in case the golden nugget of information is yet to be revealed. However, with planes or trains to catch, friends to meet or pubs to go to, we all head our separate ways.

When I walked into this room four days ago, I had no real idea what to expect. The course was titled Mediation Skills Training so, while I expected to be learning about the skills to resolve and manage conflict through mediation, the actual means by which the training would be delivered was a complete unknown.

"You can't change the world, you can only change yourself" was one of the opening themes in the morning session, and the more cynical in the group might well have thought they had misread the course as being one on meditation.

Actually, now that I come to think of it, there were some breathing exercises after lunch and we did talk about clearing our minds...

Perhaps I did get the wrong room, or maybe it is just the case that mediation training isn't just another law course but an essential lesson in life skills for lawyers.

By the end of day one, I felt like I'd just completed a journey through a self-help book.

The concepts were relatively simple to understand - the power of silence, how important it is to listen and ask open questions, rapport-building (never to be underestimated!) and taking time for reflection. In the role-plays, we realised the true skill of a mediator in putting all these concepts into practice. Clearly this was something we were going to have to work at, and we hadn't yet got to the hard reality of how to deal with difficult negotiators and breaking deadlock. I did start to wonder why we aren't teaching this stuff in law schools.

As lawyers, we are trained to problem-solve, to troubleshoot, to bargain, to talk and to win. As mediators, we are trained to not even think about solutions until we explore the problem. To let the parties in conflict find the solutions. To sit back, to listen and to find out what really matters. To focus the parties on gaining rather than winning.

I felt like I'd been handed the road map to peace and was ready to book myself on the first flight to Baghdad. Country in conflict? Here comes Mediator Girl... dispute resolution in a single day!

Once you start practising the skills of a mediator, it becomes difficult to stop. This did not go down a storm back in the office. At a Monday morning meeting, when asked "What are the legal issues with this?", I replied: "What do you think the issues are?" However, it definitely has its place, and many of my friends and colleagues will be delighted to learn that I plan to work on being a more effective listener and try not to fill every silence with conversation.

The 15 delegates may have felt acutely aware that not one of us could change the world alone. But we could, quite feasibly, change ourselves - and that was really rather exciting.

• *Samara Shah is a solicitor with Standard Life. The column reflects a personal view.*