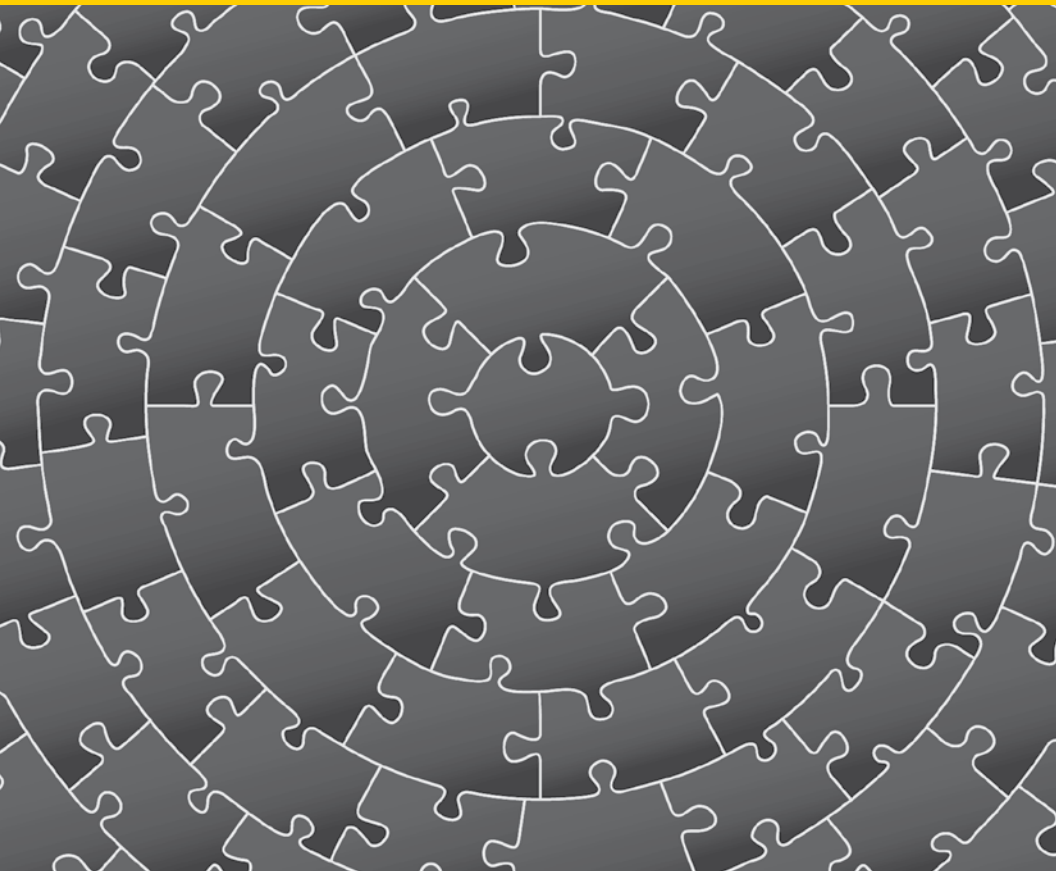




Debriefing
MEDIATORS
to Learn from Their
EXPERIENCES

Simon J.A. Mason and Matthias Siegfried



Debriefing Mediators to Learn from Their Experiences



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United States Institute of Peace
Washington, D.C.



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The views expressed in this guide are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

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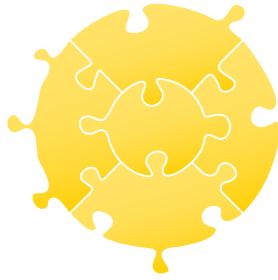
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Introduction

The goal of this handbook is to enhance the practice of mediation by showing how lessons from individual mediators can be identified and made available both to their home organization (e.g., a foreign ministry, intergovernmental organization, or nongovernmental organization) and to a wider practitioner audience. More particularly, the handbook gives guidance to staff debriefing mediators who are or have been directly involved in peace negotiations.

The focus here is *not* on self-assessments by the mediators themselves,¹ nor on evaluations of the mediator's performance by external donors, nor on political or psychological debriefing. Instead, this handbook examines *methodological debriefing*: that is, interviews conducted with the goal of learning lessons about the mediation method from the experience of a specific mediator that are useful for future mediation processes. Methodological debriefing is typically conducted by individuals who have not been directly involved in the mediator's work and who do not seek to judge it but who want to learn the mediator's perspective on what was done and why it was done. Ideally, the mediator will also benefit from the interview by discovering something new through the questions posed, by having the opportunity to recount a challenging experience, or at least by having her or his experiences documented in a structured and objective manner.

Exactly what questions should be asked of the mediator will vary from case to case. In most cases, however, many of the same broad subjects will be of interest to the interviewer. The appendices at the end of this book list a variety of generic questions that target common areas of inquiry. Among the key questions are the following:

- What was expected of the mediator?
- What was done by the mediator?

- How was it done?
- What did not work and what did?
- What lessons can be drawn from this?

If these questions are asked in a way that encourages candid self-reflection, the responses they elicit will add to the growing store of useful knowledge about the art and profession of mediation. Identifying and disseminating the lessons of specific mediation efforts is essential if other mediators are to recognize instructive parallels between their own work and past mediation efforts and to identify the kinds of resources and tools that will enhance their chances of promoting peace processes.

Other Forms of Debriefing Mediators

There are at least three forms of debriefing mediators: methodological, political, and psychological. This handbook addresses only the first of these because it has the greatest potential benefit in terms of enhancing our understanding of the art of mediation in general and thus of stimulating improvements in the practice of mediation in all sorts of circumstances. Political debriefing and psychological debriefing tend to be more useful in terms of specific conflicts and specific individuals, respectively.

Political debriefing: This kind of debriefing is focused on the specific conflict and on what to do in the next phase of the peace process. Typical questions include: What is the content of the peace agreement reached? What are the political implications? What can the parties live with and implement? What roles were played by whom, and what are their next steps?

Psychological debriefing: This form of debriefing is especially important in high-stress situations, where it can help individual mediators avoid long-term burnout or post-traumatic stress disorder—for example, in cases where the mediator has been threatened or the process was frustrating and unsuccessful. All mediators should be regularly debriefed, however, so that it becomes a routine step and so that the mediators that stand most to benefit from it are not overlooked. Psychological debriefing is a delicate process, and the debriefer (usually a psychologist) and the mediator should carefully prepare for and discuss the process before embarking on it. Typical questions include: Where were you as a mediator when you stepped into the process, how were you feeling, how did you experience the process? What do you need to deal with what happened on the personal level, to digest the experience and move forward? This kind of debriefing is often neglected in the mediation field because of a lack of funding or a failure to recognize its importance.

In the following chapters, this handbook lays out key considerations that should frame the conduct of debriefing and outlines the advantages and disadvantages of interviews in eliciting useful lessons. After a brief discussion, in the next chapter, of the role of the interviewer, the rest of the handbook lays out a four-step process. The first step is to prepare for the interview by getting to know the case and clarifying the specific questions and their relative priority. The second step is to conduct the interview. An inquisitive attitude and the use of open questions is useful at the beginning of the interview. Later, once trust has been built, more specific questions can be posed. Throughout, the interviewer's main task is to listen. The third step is to structure and analyze the experience. A delicate balance between the unique and general aspects of a certain case must be struck: if one gets lost in the details of the unique case, one will not see lessons applicable to other cases; if one focuses only on generalities, one does not learn anything new. Comparison with other cases, highlighting differences and similarities, and forming clusters of similar cases can be helpful. The fourth step is to disseminate the knowledge acquired. It is not sufficient to produce "cold," written knowledge; lessons have to be active and "hot" to be of use. Workshops tailored to the needs and experiences of participants, Communities of Practice, individual coaching, tutoring, and "intervision" are some of the live ways of disseminating lessons learned.

What You Need to Know as a Mediator

This handbook addresses mediation support staff, not mediators. However, mediators who are about to be debriefed can beneficially consider the following points:

Clarify the process framework . . .

Before starting the interview, clarify the purpose and timing of the debriefing process. Among other things, this entails reaching agreement with the interviewer on the format and target audience for the final product that results from the interview, and determining the level of access control of the material discussed in the interview (i.e., determining the level of confidentiality). Make sure the interviewer agrees to let you check the debriefing document before it is circulated.

. . . and the scope of the mediation process to be debriefed.

If the debriefing is to generate useful material, it is important to be clear about precisely which mediation process and what time period the interview will cover. The interviewer may need guidance on this, as he or she may not know enough about the case to judge its most important or interesting stages and phases.

Guide the interviewer . . .

Unlike a journalist's interview, the kind of methodological debriefing outlined in this handbook calls for you as the mediator to guide the interviewer. The main task of the interviewer is to listen. Your task is to pass on what you have learned from your mediation experience in as focused and coherent manner as possible. Prepare well: What are the five or so key messages you want to get across? What have you learned that could help other mediators in the future?

. . . but also let yourself be guided by the interviewer.

Some issues that may be interesting to an outsider to the process may not seem interesting to you. Let the interviewer guide you to these topics. Build up a relationship of trust with the interviewer so that you can jointly explore what can be learned from the specific case. The interviewer can bring in comparative knowledge and raise questions based on general mediation frameworks. These questions can help to highlight key points of your unique experience.

Embed Debriefing in a Knowledge Management Cycle

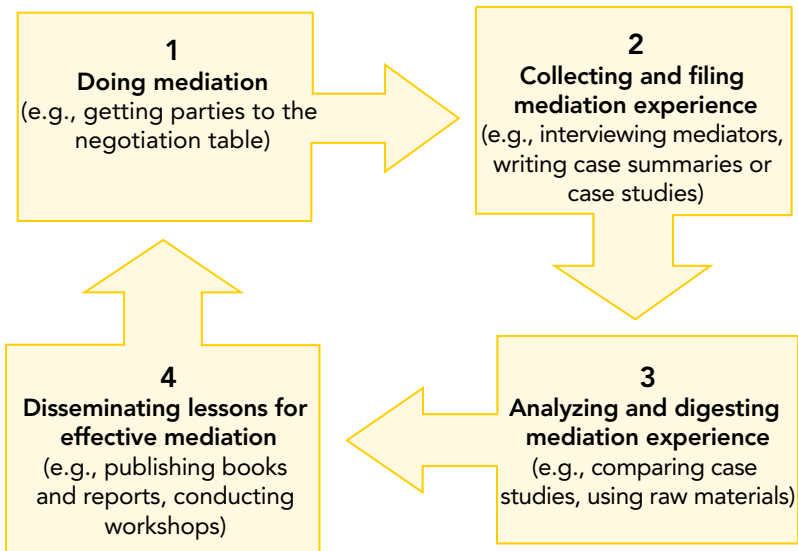
Debriefing must be seen, not as an isolated activity in a mediation process, but as an essential part of a larger organizational learning process known as knowledge management. This process consists of a broad range of practices that enable an organization to learn from past and ongoing activities. Knowledge management activities focus on the identification, development, dissemination, and storing of relevant knowledge.

Knowledge management can be seen (as in figure 1) as an ongoing learning process—an upwards-moving spiral—that consists of four steps, repeated numerous times, but each time at a higher level of expertise. These steps consist of (1) the mediation activity, (2) collecting and filing this experience, (3) analyzing it, and (4) disseminating the lessons. If this dissemination does not lead to better practice, the entire exercise has failed. Steps 2-4 of this knowledge management cycle correspond to steps 2-4 of this handbook. Step 1, preparing the interview, is not illustrated in figure 1.

This handbook is based on the work of the Mediation Support Project, which conducts methodological debriefing of mediators who work for the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (Swiss FDFA).²

“Thanks to our mediation knowledge management system,” remarks Ambassador Thomas Greminger, head of the Political Division IV (Human

Figure 1. The Mediation Knowledge Spiral



Security) of the Swiss FDFA, “we can communicate our work to the Swiss Parliament and the wider public in a much more solid and systematic manner. Internally, it is also very useful to build expertise. If a Swiss mediator or expert encounters a challenge, they can check the mediation summaries to see which cases are similar, and who was involved. They can then approach this person and the two can learn from each other.”

Although the work of the Swiss FDFA is the basis for much of the guidance in this handbook, the following chapters also reflect the experiences of individuals—interviewers and mediators—from a variety of institutional environments, including the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations.

The Peacemaker’s Toolkit

This handbook is part of the series *The Peacemaker’s Toolkit*, which is being published by the United States Institute of Peace.

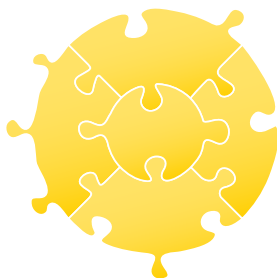
For twenty-five years, the United States Institute of Peace has supported the work of mediators through research, training programs, workshops, and publications designed to discover and disseminate the keys to effective mediation.

The Institute—mandated by the U.S. Congress to help prevent, manage, and resolve international conflict through nonviolent means—conceived of *The Peacemaker's Toolkit* as a way of combining its own accumulated expertise with that of other organizations active in the field of mediation. Most publications in the series are produced jointly by the Institute and a partner organization. All publications are carefully reviewed before publication by highly experienced mediators to ensure that the final product will be a useful and reliable resource for practitioners.

The Online Version

There is an online version of *The Peacemaker's Toolkit* that not only presents the text of this handbook but also connects readers to a vast web of information. Links in the online version give readers immediate access to a considerable variety of publications, news reports, directories, and other sources of data regarding ongoing mediation initiatives, case studies, theoretical frameworks, and education and training. These links enable the online *Toolkit* to serve as a “you are here” map of the larger literature on mediation.

The online version provides video clips of interviews with mediators that illustrate some of the aspects of debriefing mediators discussed in this handbook. These are also available at peacemediation.org/resources.



The Role of the Interviewer

What are the qualities of a good interviewer? People interviewing mediators should have experience and training in mediation and in interviewing. The better they know mediation, the more likely they are to discover interesting aspects of the mediator's work. The key requisite for an interviewer is to be a good listener, someone who is ready to go on a "walk" with the mediator through her or his specific experience. Some basic knowledge of the mediation case is also necessary, so that the interviewer can fully appreciate what the mediator has to say and is better able to identify important aspects of the mediator's experience. The interviewer should always remember that he or she is playing the role of learner (on behalf of the organization), not the role of teacher or evaluator.

As Antje Herrberg from the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) notes, clarity about the role of the interviewer is one of the key success factors in a debriefing: "When I am interviewing a mediator, my role and my goals need to be very clearly defined and I also communicate this to the mediator in an explicit and transparent way. This clarity is an important first step in building an atmosphere of trust."

Get a Clear but Flexible Mandate

The interviewer should understand the nature and limits of the mandate he or she has been given by the organization that has commissioned the interview. If the interviewer has a long-term relationship of trust and is contractually bound to the organization, an oral mandate is often enough. If not, a written, more formalized mandate may be a good idea. Even so, a written mandate should not specify exactly what questions are to be posed or exactly how the interview should be run, because to do so would be to limit the room for creative interviewing and uncovering new insights and information.

The interviewer should clarify what kind of report is to be prepared on the basis of the interview, and whether it will be distributed only within the commissioning organization or to the wider public. Many organizations have mediation guidelines and sets of questions developed for their mediators. If the interviewer has read and internalized these, he or she will be much better prepared to shape questions that will elicit the kind of information the organization is looking for.

Once the interviewer has clarified his or her organizational mandate, the interviewer should explain that mandate to the mediator who is to be interviewed and secure the mediator's willingness to proceed. Most organizations expect their mediators to participate in some form of knowledge management and lessons-learned exercises. Nevertheless, the interviewer should ask the mediator for some sort of informal, oral mandate (e.g., "Yes, I understand what this is all about. I agree to being interviewed by you, I trust you will use the end product as you have indicated.").

Seek Continuity in the Organizational Setup

The interviewer's mandate is shaped by the organizational setup within which he or she is working. Different organizational setups present different advantages and disadvantages for interviewers. There are three basic arrangements:

- **In-house mediator and interviewer:** The most common arrangement in a large, well-funded organization such as the United Nations or a foreign ministry is for a staff member, employed for his or her mediation expertise and knowledge management skills, to interview the mediators who work for that organization. Because the interviewer and the mediator are from the same organization, both are likely to be confident that the interview will be kept confidential and to be clear about the nature of the final product. Another advantage of this arrangement is that the interviewer will likely be a long-term employee and thus better placed not only to develop interviewing skills but also to compare cases and build up a relationship of trust with the mediators.
- **External interviewer:** A second arrangement involves an organization such as a foreign ministry tasking a third party (e.g., a consultant, an academic, or an NGO) to interview mediators employed by that

organization. Outsourcing knowledge management tasks can increase an organization's flexibility in relation to human resources. Enlisting a succession of different interviewers, however, makes it difficult to build up expertise on how to debrief mediators, and thus contracts between an organization and an external interviewer often specify a long-term partnership (as well as clarifying issues of confidentiality).

- **External mediator:** Sometimes an organization is interested in learning from a mediator who is not employed by that organization (but who may have been involved in a peace process in which the organization also participated) and will enlist its knowledge management staff to conduct the interview. In this arrangement, funding, confidentiality, and purpose of the exercise have to be clarified for each case.

Focus on Trust Building

Good debriefing of mediators requires confidence between the mediator and the interviewer. Only with trust will the mediator be frank and will fresh lessons emerge. The mandate and organizational setup must take this into consideration. The form of the interview should also be chosen so as to create trust. Interviews can take various forms (e.g., written exchanges, face-to-face encounters, telephone conversations) and interviewers can employ different ways of recording what they learn (e.g., written notes, audio recordings, video recordings). This handbook focuses on face-to-face oral interviews with the mediator, which have tended to engender the highest degree of trust and candor. Oral interviews also tend to bring out richer and fresher results than do written questionnaires answered by the mediator. The face-to-face dimension allows for a fruitful combination of self-reflection by the mediator and external reflection by the interviewer. The mediator should always have the chance to see and correct the text before it is submitted to the organization for which the mediator works. This guarantee of being able to edit the written report later for accuracy or political incorrectness helps to build trust and encourages the mediator to be more open and less guarded.

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