

Building Your Mediation Practice: February 2008
The Price of Mentorship
By Diana Mercer

Question:

There is successful mediator in my town that is willing to mentor me for \$400 an hour. I would need to borrow the money; should I do it?

Answer:

It depends on what you need help with in terms of mentoring.

If you're worried about your mediation skills: I find that most mediators are too modest about their mediation skills, and are reluctant to just jump in and give it a try. If this is you, try mediating for a volunteer panel for awhile, until you feel comfortable in the room. Don't pay for mentoring help until you know what it is that you need help with, and you won't know where the gaps are in your mediation skills until you get a few cases under your belt.

Clients are very forgiving and patient with mediators who they feel are invested in the process. If clients think you're really doing your best, and that you really care, they won't care if you stumble over your ground rules talk.

A less expensive alternative is to find another mediator who will let you sit in on cases for free. I don't permit this in my private practice, but when I used to be on volunteer panels, I had other mediators sit in all the time. Ask at the volunteer panel office to recommend someone good if you don't know anyone you could ask. Volunteer with or set up a peer mediation program at the local high school and watch what works and what doesn't work with the students in the room. Coach role plays at a local law school mediation class. You'll catch on quickly enough. Better still, ask another mediator to co-mediate with you on a case and then case conference afterwards.

Our office operates exclusively in a co-mediation setting for this very reason: by co-mediating in every mediation, we learn from each other. This is an opportunity a mentor could never give you (unless part of the mentoring was feedback on an actual mediation session) because he or she is not in the room.

If you're still interested in a mentor relationship after mediating 10 or 20 cases, then make your list of issues you'd like to work on and goals for the mentoring process, and hire your mentor - or recruit a volunteer. But until you know what it is you're struggling with, there's no need to hire someone for help. And if you do hire someone to help, especially at \$400 per hour, be sure you know what it is you want to accomplish with his or her help, particularly if you need to borrow money to pay the fees.

If you're wondering how to set up a profitable practice: If your mentor will be helping you to set up a successful practice, and the goal is to streamline processes and office procedures, discuss marketing and pricing, and refine and perfect ways for you to make money mediating, then it's worth it to pay for mentoring time. Rather than a mediation skills mentor, this person would be more like a business coach or marketing consultant.

The one mistake I made in opening Peace Talks was not reaching out for help sooner with marketing and business advice. If I'd hired consultants earlier, I would have saved money and time in the long run.

About the author: Diana Mercer, Esq. the founder of Peace Talks Mediation Services, Inc., in Los Angeles. www.peace-talks.com. Peace Talks operates in a unique multi-disciplinary model, pairing attorneys, therapists, and accountants as co-mediators. Diana is the co-author of *Your Divorce Advisor: A Lawyer and a Psychologist Guide You Through the Legal and Emotional Landscape of Divorce* (Fireside 2001).