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Reflective Practice as taught to us by a child.

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There are many ways to think about—and use—reflective practice. Last night I watched an 8-year old girl demonstrate a pure, unaffected example of learning through reflection.

Sitting between her father and me, on our flight to Sarasota, she was playing games on the seat-back entertainment system. One of those games was tic-tac-toe; a game we’ve all played, occasionally well, and more often to a draw. That was her experience for the first 10 matches. She was the pelican unable to defeat the computer-generated opponent, a green fish. Nor did the fish have success against her.

I overheard her complaining to her father, “This game is no fun. The games all end the same. No one wins. I want to play another game.” Her father quietly encouraged her to try a few more times. And then, after trying another 7-8 games, she won. She and her dad “high-fived.” He asked her, “How did you do that? What did you do differently?” She looked at the screen, thought for a moment, then said, “I started at the middle, then put an “x” (pelican) in the corner, and another one in the opposite corner. It kinda looks like a ‘v.’” Her father encouraged her to try again using the same strategy. She won a second time, then a third, then a fourth.

The fifth game ended in a tie. She looked to her father for an explanation. Instead of offering his own interpretation, he asked her, “Why do you think that happened?” She was quiet for a few seconds, then bounced in her seat, and said with a smile and a voice just a little too loud, “The computer must have figured out what I was doing!” Her dad nodded, and asked, “So, what do you do now?” Another silence, followed by a hesitant and uncertain response, “I’ll try different corners.” And, so she did, and she won several games.

Many of you reading this will find the story inspiring. You may identify with the child’s delight at discovering a strategy for success, born out of frustration at a game where the default result seemed to be a draw. You may identify with the father, who resisted the opportunity to give her answers and instead encouraged his daughter to think for herself, to find a winning strategy, and then to reflect on and reconsider her strategy when a succession of victories was interrupted by another tie game. And others may think this is a silly example that has little relevance for a mature, experienced professional.

Here’s what I think. There are two important lessons for mediators, especially those of us who have been actively practicing for a few years or more.

First, for professionals who have learned a set of responses to a predictable series of behaviors, there is a risk of mindlessly repeating the pattern of actions we have learned—and that have proved successful in other similar situations. Doing the same thing over and over, anticipating the same result, may sometimes be effective. But, what happens when it doesn’t? Do we redouble our efforts? Do we blame the parties for being resistant or otherwise unwilling to engage in a tough and thoughtful search for solutions? Do we dismiss the event with the notion that people are unique, fallible and sometimes unable to find agreement? Or, like the tic-tac-toe playing girl, do we stop and wonder whether there is another path, another strategy that might be more productive and successful?

Second, let’s consider the father’s response to his daughter’s frustration as she repeatedly “tied.” He did not try to solve the problem for her, despite her obvious distress. He used the experience as an opportunity to teach her an important lesson. In my view, the lesson was that answers are often within you. You don’t need to rely on dad (expert) to give you the answer. You can find it if you’re willing to stop, think about the situation, identify why you are frustrated, look at ways to solve your problem, then test out a solution that seems likely to be helpful. He encouraged her to think for herself. He used questions rather than instructions. He helped guide her thinking, without replacing her ideas with his.

We can use the lessons of this daughter-father experiment to understand the reasons why

reflective practice groups (RPG) can be so effective in helping mediators avoid the “rut” of routine, and instead discover how to get into the “groove” by using the simple, elegant and profoundly effective methods of reflective practice.

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