

6-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Walker, Polly (2005) "Developing Solomon Islands' style mediation," *ADR Bulletin*: Vol. 7: No. 10, Article 2.
Available at: <http://epublications.bond.edu.au/adr/vol7/iss10/2>

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Cross-cultural perspectives in mediation training

Developing Solomon Islands' style mediation

Polly Walker

In October 2004, I had the opportunity, together with Nadja Alexander and George Fox, to be part of a team of facilitators from the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS) at the University of Queensland.¹ We travelled to Tulagi Island to deliver one of a series of mediation training workshops initiated collaboratively by the National Peace Council (NPC) and ACPACS.

The participants on Tulagi Island were chiefs from a number of the provinces, NPC members and church personnel involved in resolving conflicts in their communities and throughout the Solomon Islands. The mediation workshops were designed to provide participants with the opportunity to develop effective skills and strategies to support the resolution of conflict within their communities.

The theme of the workshops was *Developing Solomon Islands' style(s) mediation*. The workshops were aimed at increasing Solomon Islanders' capacity to analyse conflicts and to devise appropriate indigenous responses that would enhance long term solutions. In previous workshops held throughout the Solomon Islands, six members of the NPC had been identified as potential trainers. These 'trainee trainers' assisted ACPACS personnel in facilitating the workshops.

The program integrated two training styles:

- an elicitive training approach which provided a process for people to engage what they know about transforming conflict, and to build from that knowledge;
- a prescriptive approach designed to empower participants through the acquisition and mastery of new knowledge, techniques, and strategies for dealing with conflict.

A main goal of the training was to

provide the freedom and flexibility for participants to compare/contrast indigenous and Western mediation styles, and to evaluate and decide which processes they might use in resolving conflicts. Participants varied a great deal in how they spoke about their plans to integrate the two models. Some planned to refer less challenging conflicts to a team using a Western style approach, freeing chiefs to deal with more serious conflicts through the traditional processes. Others described Western mediation skills they believed would enhance their current processes and how these could be integrated in a culturally appropriate manner.

In the *elicitive* processes of the workshop, the participants explored their culture and the knowledge they brought to the sessions as the foundation for developing culturally appropriate Solomon's Style Mediation Processes. The workshops provided an opportunity for people to describe culturally appropriate models, with the facilitators serving as catalysts for developing new approaches. Participants' cultural knowledge, their learning styles, current conflicts they were facing, and their language were seen as the foundation on which new models would be based.

The *prescriptive* aspects of the training were designed to empower participants and build capacity through teaching new skills and sharing effective processes drawn from Western style mediation. We encouraged participants to compare their traditional styles of conflict resolution and Western style mediation. The process was designed to develop models which were to some degree an integration of both styles, or a new style developed on the strengths of traditional Solomon Islands' styles and Western mediation.

Each workshop consisted of five days

of training, with two additional days travel/arrival and departure/travel which was utilised for addressing community protocol (meeting with chiefs and senior people) and providing individual feedback to participants, particularly to the six trainees who plan to assume responsibility for future training in the Solomon Islands.

Each day began with an activity or forum thematically linked to an aspect of the program. These activities were designed to provide continuity with each previous and future day's learning. Developing mediation Solomon Islands' style(s) meant making conflict management and mediation processes work for the participants in their day to day experiences in their local communities. Through a series of consultations ACPACS staff had prepared a range of themes designed to be relevant to participants.

However, it was also crucial to work with participants' stories from the field to shape the training to be as useful, relevant and engaging as possible to those involved. Workshops began with stories from the participants about local experiences with conflict and efforts toward resolution. The workshops were conducted in an interactive manner and involved: mini-lectures, facilitator-led discussions, demonstrations, role plays, community fora, modelling of micro-skills, coaching combined with personal feedback, theatre games and other kinesthetic approaches designed to be respectful of Solomon Islands' cultures.

Workshop activities integrated the benefits of both elicitive and prescriptive training. The trainers shared knowledge and expertise in Western style cross-cultural mediation. At the same time, the nature of the process accommodated conflict resolution processes based in Solomon



Islanders' indigenous knowledge and worldview.

Workshop Activities included:

1. **Translating mediation** – discussing the following interfaces: local with imported, monitors with NPC staff, church, chiefs, police/state, and formal justice system.
2. **Planning intervention** – preparing yourself and the people involved, appropriate assertiveness, earning the respect and trust of parties, researching and understanding the problem and the people involved, laying the foundation for a process.
3. **Choosing a path** – based upon case studies and information provided by participants: selecting what is the best process in a situation/setting, presenting this to participants in mediation, broader issues to consider.
4. **Micro skills reviewed** – through demonstration and group activities: listening, acknowledging, paraphrasing, reframing, analysing conflicts.
5. **Self-check** – introduced self awareness and monitoring in ways that reduced violence/conflict within the process itself.
6. **Peer mentoring and feedback** – skills for giving each other feedback and mentoring those with less experience.
7. **More micro-skills** – de-escalating conflict, dealing with angry people/high emotion conflict.
8. **Designing a process** – based upon research of the problem or issue: who needs to take part, where, when and how.
9. **Running a process: from introductions to stories** – establishing roles, putting people at ease, dealing with escalation, developing rapport and trust, listening for real and underlying issues.
10. **Running a process: identifying and discussing issues** – isolating key issues, making a list, helping people talk.
11. **Running a process: from options**

to agreements and ceremonies – options development, suitability checks and negotiation, finalising agreement.

12. **Women and men working together for peace** – addressing gender issues specific to the communities.
13. **Fishbowl process practice** – in three large groups participants took part in a role play in which the role of the mediator was passed on to each member of the group. Each facilitator observed one group and discussed techniques with participants.

The week on Tulagi Island was a fascinating, challenging exercise as both facilitators and participants grappled with issues of power, of change, and of analysing mediation/conflict resolution skills from many different cultures. At the end of the week, participants described a wide range of Solomon Islands styles of mediation they planned to implement in their communities: comparing, contrasting and integrating from both systems, and evaluating which is best in particular settings.

Training Solomon Islanders to take over the facilitation process was seen as an integral part of the process of developing Solomon Islands' Style Mediation Models. The next step proposed in this initiative is a workshop series designed to train the NPC trainees in group facilitation skills. It is envisioned that these workshops will build capacity that will enhance the success of NPC trainees in facilitating training sessions throughout the Solomon Islands. ●

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Endnote

1. Trainers involved in earlier workshops included Paul Jensen, Joy Kirau, Morgan Brig, Beth Mayne and Leo White.