

# Getting Started: Eight Tips for New Mediators

by Anju D. Jessani, MBA, APM

**H**aving taught new mediators in both NJAPM and ICLE's mediation programs, I see the concept of "failure to launch" among so many new mediators. They take basic training and then nothing. This article is written for recent graduates of the basic divorce civil classes, with the hope that it may help you get this party started!

**1. Make a conscious decision to proceed with mediation.** If you are like me, you took the class because there was some personal experience that showed you the value of mediation. It is possible that after taking the class, you conclude that mediation might not be for you at this point. If you still feel that you might still want to pursue mediation, make a conscious decision to proceed. Write it in your journal or tell a friend. Make a commitment to yourself to move forward. Say the words, I am going proceed. So, now for some baby steps...

**2. Look for opportunities to volunteer immediately.** Mediators report they feel a natural high during the mediation process. You need to start experiencing that — and you need to get some cases under you belt. Go to NJAPM peer meetings and ask where other mediators are volunteering (see summer 2009 issue of *Mediation News* for schedule and details). Atlantic County has an excellent community mediation program, while Union County has an extensive municipal mediation program. When I started my practice, I volunteered in the custody and parenting time mediation program in Hudson County. Check the New Jersey judiciary site for other volunteer opportunities.

**3. Research what other mediators are doing.** Before you start investing time and money in your

practice, research what other mediators are doing. How many mediators in your area are full-time? Spend a day on the Internet and Google business mediation, divorce mediation, elder mediation, etc. Are you going to be the first to market? That is a tough proposition. Who is advertising in your local Yellow Pages? How large is the mediation section? Any one running local print, radio or television advertising?

**4. Start networking with other mediators, listen and learn.** Again, before you start investing time and money in your practice, network with other mediators to find out whether your perception of product offerings and market demand is realistic. How many hours a week, on average, are they billing to their mediation practice. How long did it take them to get there? What kind of marketing budget do they have? The NJAPM community is very generous in sharing information. NJAPM County Peer Group meetings and General meetings provide excellent networking opportunities.

**5. Take another mediator to lunch once a week, and you pay.** In the same vein, start establishing one-to-one relationships once you meet colleagues at peer group meetings. Sometimes, a mediator in your county is going to be less open with you, so do not be afraid to travel a little. Expect to pay for their lunch, at least the first time. Offer to bring lunch to their office if they say they really do not have much time to meet.

**6. Before you proceed any further, talk to your spouse/family.** By now, you have gotten some volunteer cases under your belt, have a feeling of the lay of the

land, and either have made the decision that this is or is not for you. If you decide you want to proceed, is your family prepared for you not to be home some evenings, if that is when you plan to see clients? If you are thinking of quitting your day job (which I do not recommend — even if you have two years of savings in the bank), do an honest evaluation of your family budget. Do not surprise your spouse with your business plan; talk about it first.

**7. Start preparing a business plan.** This does not mean you have to go ahead and establish a practice. Put pen to paper; this plan cannot just be in your head. Be brutally honest about your income projections, and then halve them. Make sure you don't miss expenses such as malpractice insurance, website design, NJAPM membership dues, continuing education, transportation, office rental and so forth. Then look at your family budget and savings, and see whether the plan is realistic, and if not, what adjustments you need to make. For most graduates, adding mediation to your current practice will make more sense than quitting your day job.

**8. Summon courage and make a commitment.** You have made the decision to proceed with family buy-in, and with eyes wide open about what it will take, including projected income and expenses. Now dive in — the water isn't so cold! You can do it! Make a commitment to making your practice successful — reviewing your plan, and making adjustments as necessary.

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