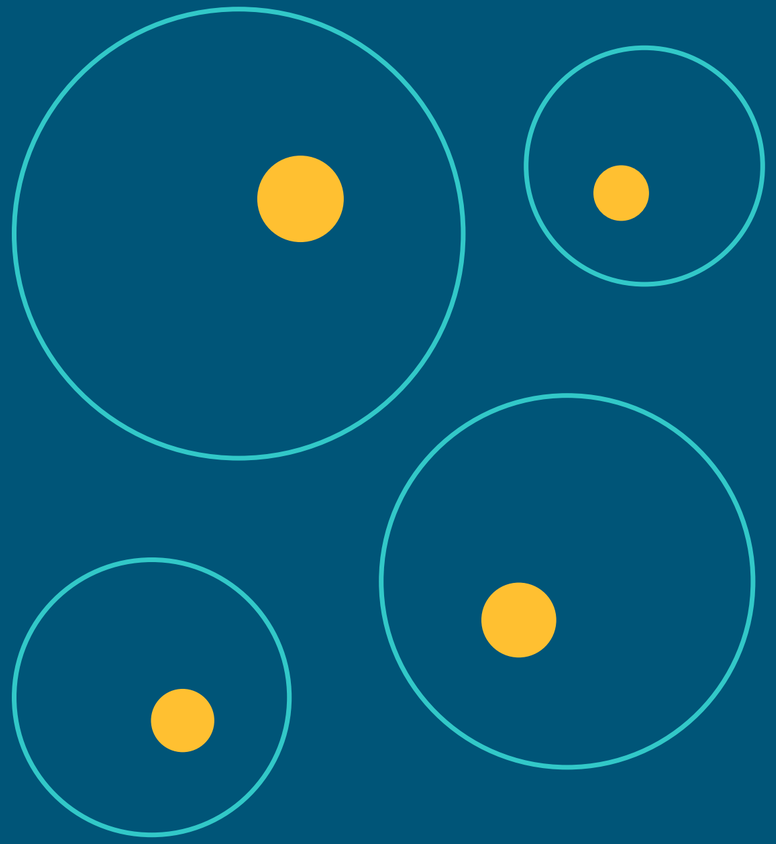
International Mediation Week | November 2026

Are We Asking Too Much of Workplace Mediators?



From individual judgement to collective professional wisdom

Anna Faoagali | Founder, Principal and Advanced Mediator | Emverio Workplace Mediations

We have standards for mediators, but do they reflect the competencies needed to deliver the outcomes employers seek?

Standards for mediators

- Professional competence
- Ethical conduct
- Impartiality
- Process management
- Participant self-determination

?

Competencies?

Outcomes employers seek

- Opportunity for workers to restore their relationships
- De-escalation of complaints
- Functioning teams and performance
- Healthy safe communications and compliance with their internal policies and broader industrial obligations.
- Want to know what to do when relationships break down at work.
- Post mediation support

Have we adequately defined the employer's role in the process?



May not participate in the joint session But not absent.

When does managing power become exercising power?

Creating fair conditions for participation

Manufacturing equality of power



A legitimate procedural responsibility

May introduce ethical risks of its own

The mediator

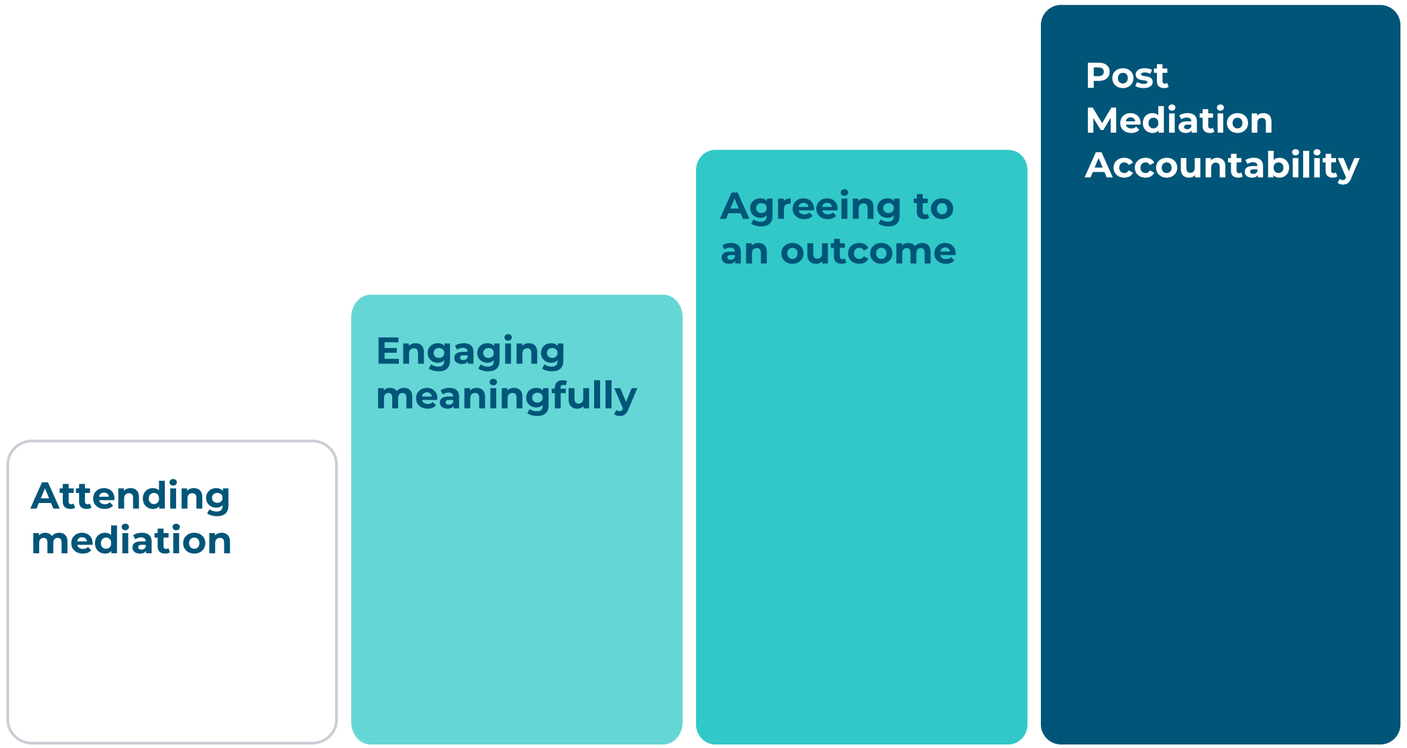
A mediator who attempts to equalise power may inadvertently

- Undermine legitimate organisational authority
- Create an artificial environment that cannot be sustained back at work
- Treat structural problems as interpersonal differences
- Compromise impartiality by redistributing influence

Voluntariness
Reasonable management direction?

Mediation is ordinarily described as voluntary.

But voluntariness is more complicated in an employment relationship.



Intake and suitability, but suitable for what?

Can participants safely engage?

Can they negotiate freely?

Does the matter require investigation?

Have organisational risks been addressed?

Is the relationship capable of repair?

Is the proposed mediation model appropriate?

These are different questions.
They require different competencies and may produce different conclusions.

Do we know what competencies are needed to repair workplace relationships?

General mediation training emphasises

- Listening
- Reframing
- Identifying interests
- Managing communication
- Facilitating negotiation
- Helping participants reach agreement

What do mediators need to understand and plan for?

- Trust
- Acknowledgement and recognition
- Entrenched patterns of conflict
- The influence of organisational culture
- Psychological responses to workplace conflict
- Conditions for sustainable behavioural change
- Post mediation infrastructure
- Helping participants keep agreements

An agreement is the beginning, not the outcome.

When does the mediation role and agreement end?

Agreement

A commitment, not proof of repair

Back at work

Can they put those commitments into practice?

What support will they need and for how long? How is it assessed? Who assesses it?

Where does the mediator's responsibility end, and the employer's begin?

If we assess success only by whether an agreement was reached,
we risk confusing intention with sustained change.

Professional discretion or professional improvisation?

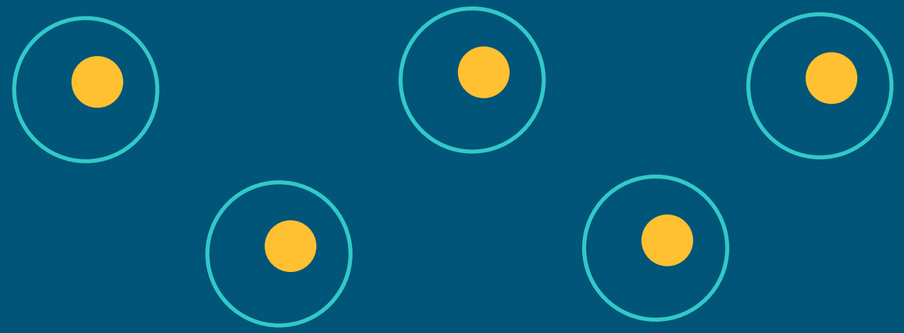
Discretion

Exercising judgement within a shared professional framework



Improvisation

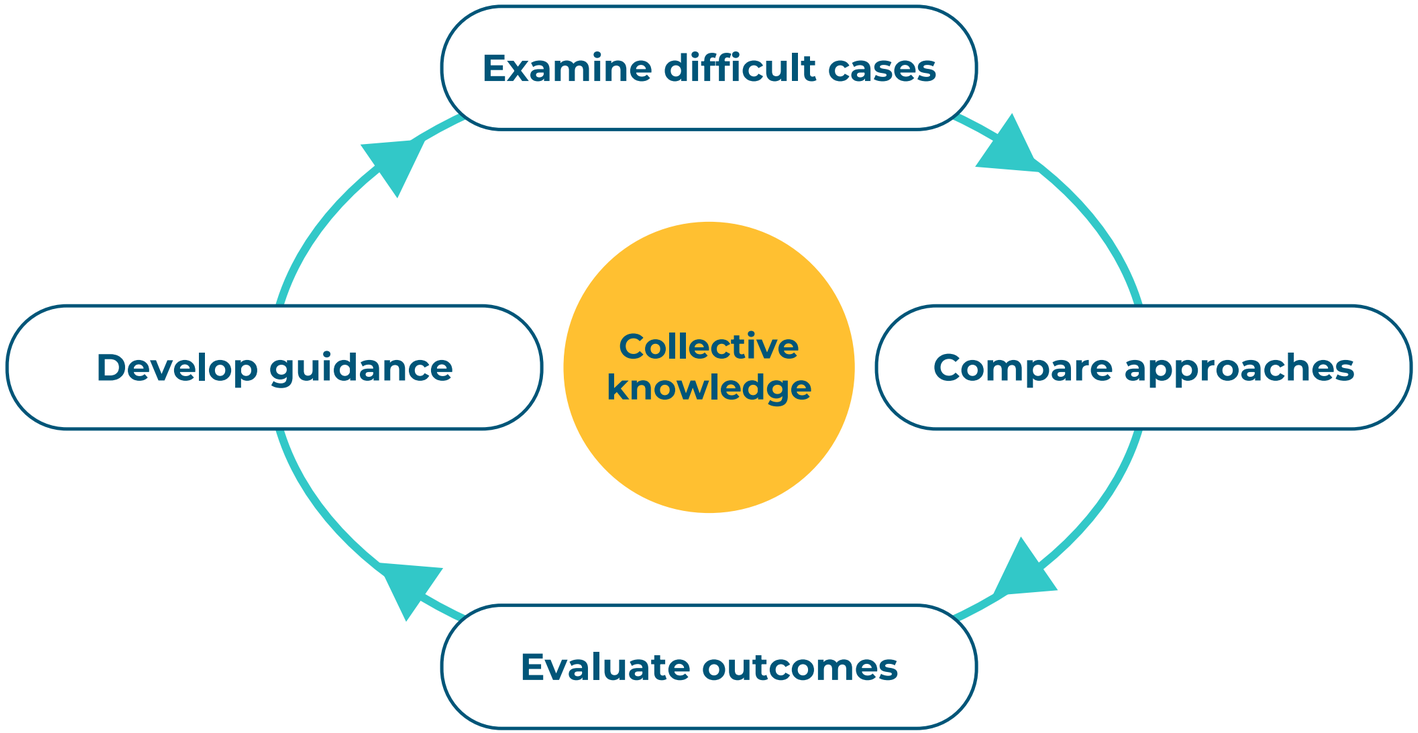
Having to construct that framework independently



Capturing individual experience into collective knowledge

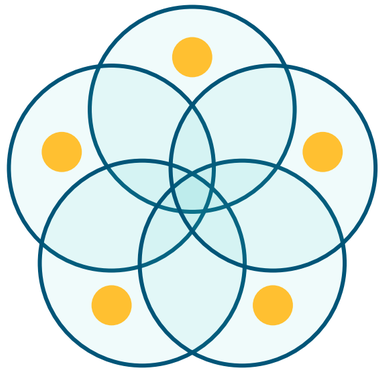
Experienced practitioners develop considerable expertise.

But what happens to that knowledge?



Harmonisation Without Uniformity.

A safe professional space to explore individual practice in a dynamic environment



A shared foundation of principles

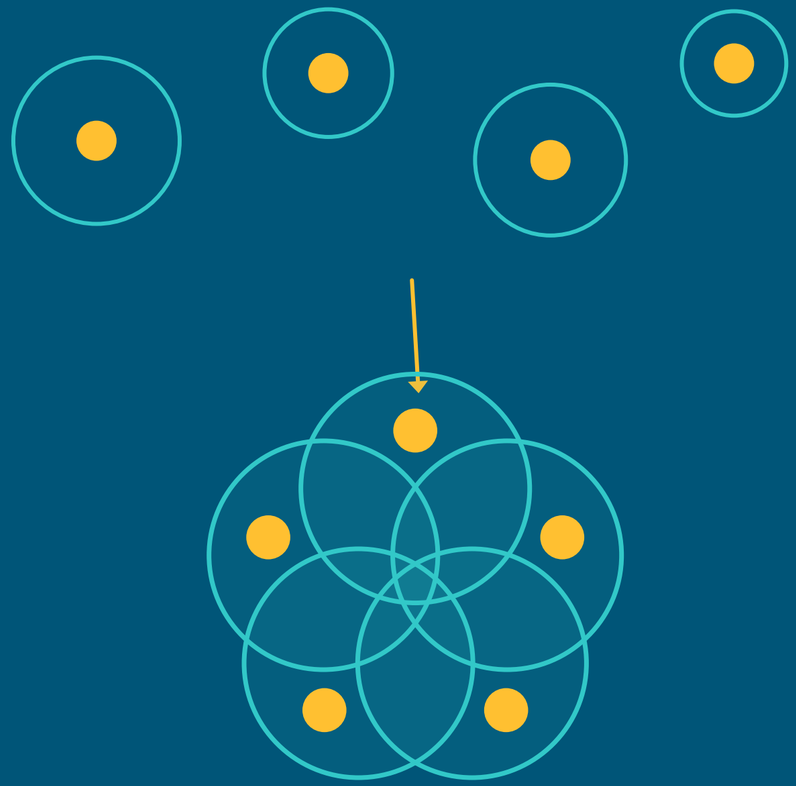
informed by the diversity of our experience

A space where we can

- Unpack complex decisions
- Challenge assumptions
- Learn from one another
- Discuss uncertainty
- Examine what has worked and what has not
- Consider how our approaches need to evolve

Conclusion

From Individual Judgement to Collective Professional Wisdom



Are we doing enough, collectively, to support the work we are asking them to do?