

The Self-Led Mediator: A Brief Introduction to the Internal Family Systems Model

By David Hoffman

In the early years of my work as a mediator, I had the mistaken impression that the mediating parties would be willing and able to negotiate in the rational way described in “Getting to Yes.” What I discovered, however, was that people in conflict tend to be driven more by emotion than by rationality.

This realization led me on a path of remedial education, exploring the psychology of mediation. I wondered why the parties in mediation frequently engaged in what seemed like self-defeating behavior driven by feelings they could not always name. I thought that if I could learn at least the rudiments of what mental health professionals know about what makes people tick, I could be more successful in resolving conflicts.

I turned to my late wife Beth Andrews, who was a psychotherapist. She showed me the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association – the guide that mental health professionals use for categorizing various forms of psychological dysfunction. “Aha,” I thought, “these pages describe people I see day in and day out in my mediations.” For example, the diagnostic criteria for “narcissistic personality disorder” include a sense of entitlement, lack of empathy, and arrogant behavior – a common constellation of traits in some of the parties I work with.

I encountered two problems, however, in my inquiry into the psychology of mediation. First, unlike mediators, mental health professionals are trained to uncover and heal the underlying sources of pain, fear, or insecurity that drive self-defeating behavior – a quest that lies far beyond the scope of a mediator’s mandate and training. Even for those mediators who *are* mental health professionals, such therapeutic interventions are inappropriate in their role as mediators.

Second, most therapeutic models are built around an assumption of a deficit on the part of the patient. This assumption (I’m OK, you’re not OK) creates emotional distance between mediators and the people that we work with.

Then Beth got trained in the Internal Family Systems (“IFS”) model created in the 1980s by psychologist Richard Schwartz, and she shared with me its basic insights. At

last, I thought, here was an intuitive, non-pathologizing model that mediators could use – one that emphasized what we as mediators have *in common* with the people whose cases we work on.

1. IFS – The Basics

The central idea of IFS – and it's a simple one – is that we all have “parts,” or sub-personalities. This, by itself, is not revolutionary. Many schools of psychotherapy posit that we have parts – such as Freud's “id, ego, and superego.” There are several features of the IFS model, however, that make it unique.

First, in the IFS model, we all have *lots* of parts, and they arise from our experiences, and so we all have *different* parts. For example, there's a part of me that feels panicky if I am going to be late for an appointment. Why? Because when I was a teenager, my grandmother (whom I deeply loved) criticized me for being routinely late for my visits with her (she was absolutely right!). Her criticism made me feel ashamed about having hurt her feelings. Now, I am usually on time for appointments, because there's a part of me that has internalized my grandmother's reproach, which has morphed into a stern self-critic.

Second, these internal parts have symbiotic, family-like relationships with each other (hence the name Internal *Family* Systems, though the model actually focuses on individuals, not families). For example, the parties in mediation usually have optimistic parts that are hopeful about reaching a favorable resolution, and also pessimistic parts that are skeptical about getting there. If the parties had only the former, they would often be deeply disappointed by the need for compromise, while if they had only the latter, they might not show up for mediation at all. Most people are well-served by having both an internal optimist *and* an internal pessimist and strive for a healthy balance between the two.

Finally, in the IFS model, there are no bad parts – simply parts that have been overly burdened by suffering or trying to protect us from suffering and may be using misguided strategies intended to serve us. For example, in one of my current cases, one of the parties is plagued by alcoholism, but the part that leads him to drink excessively believes it is helping him, by keeping him from doing something far worse.

Even though we all have different parts, the IFS model uses the following typology to help us understand their roles.

a. Exiles are parts of us that hold our psychic wounds (e.g., a rejection, loss, or trauma), our fears (e.g., fear of failure or deprivation), and our shame (e.g., feelings of being unworthy of love or acceptance because of something we've done or because of some aspect of our identity). These parts are called exiles because we usually try to banish them from our day-to-day awareness. It's just too painful to dwell there. In mediations, the parties generally do not share with us these vulnerable, burdened parts.

b. Firefighters react when something happens to us that painfully triggers an exile. For example, in a divorce mediation involving custody issues, if one parent accuses the other of being a terrible parent, the response usually comes from an angry firefighter part that seeks to douse the flames of criticism and self-doubt with a harsh counteraccusation or an abrupt departure from the room and a slammed door. Mediators frequently encounter firefighter parts.

Such firefighter behavior may seem self-defeating, but in the moment, the firefighter's impulsive actions are intended to make us feel safer by distracting us or warning the other party to back off. Real-life firefighters plunge into a fire and, when hosing everything down, they don't spare the antiques – they're on a mission. Similarly, our internal firefighters seek to dull the pain and/or repel the attack "by any means necessary," without considering collateral damage, such as a failed mediation.

c. Managers play many roles in our internal system. Managers know how to balance a checkbook, get us to appointments on time, and keep us from eating more ice cream than we should. Their intention is to prevent our exiles from being reinjured by keeping us out of trouble. In mediation, the parties' manager parts are often practical – for example, they are good at weighing the advantages and disadvantages of settlement proposals. But our managers can also go overboard, and for many people (myself included), our most active managers are hyperactive self-critics.

Together with firefighters, managers are described in the IFS model as "protective" parts. Firefighters and managers use different strategies (for example reactive vs. proactive), but both have good intentions and are trying to help us.

d. Self energy, in the IFS model, is our seat of consciousness. It is described in some religions and wisdom traditions as our heart, spirit, or soul. When we notice that we have parts, it's our Self energy that's doing the noticing. Although our parts have agendas, our Self energy has no specific agenda other than harmony, love, and well-

being. Dick Schwartz lists eight “C” words as Self energy’s key attributes: calmness, curiosity, clarity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity, and connectedness.

Self is like the conductor of an orchestra, leading our parts to perform harmoniously with each other – for example, for the parties in a mediation, enabling them to manage the tension between empathy and assertiveness, between listening and making sure that they are heard.

The goal of the IFS model is to be Self-led, with our parts in sync and with none of those parts hijacking our operating system.

2. IFS and Mediator Self-Awareness

Like everyone else, mediators have parts – some of them more helpful to our work than others. Among my helpful parts is a problem-solving part that enjoys challenges, such as a conflict with complex legal, financial, and emotional dimensions. Another helpful part cares about social justice – wanting to make the world a better place by saving people the expense, delay, and stress of a trial.

What about my unhelpful parts? There’s a part of me that’s impatient with stubbornness, closed-mindedness, and greed – whether it’s coming from the parties or their lawyers. Yet, the IFS model tells me that there’s a reasonable cause for every seemingly unreasonable attitude or behavior. These attitudes and behaviors arose as part of the person’s protective system, and a vulnerable exile probably lies beneath. Moreover, when we see extreme behavior, it’s likely because of extreme woundedness in the exile that this behavior is protecting. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote that “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each [person’s] life, sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” When my impatient parts are acting up, a manager part steps in to remind me about Longfellow.

IFS also helps me see and work with my reactive firefighter parts. For example, until recently, I became irritated whenever I was interrupted. In one mediation fifteen years ago, I warned a lawyer who kept interrupting me and others that I would leave if he didn’t stop, but he couldn’t help himself. Barely containing my anger, I told him I would come back if he agreed to abide by share-the-airtime ground rules, and I left the conference room. He eventually agreed to let others speak without interruption, and so I returned, and we settled the case. But it was deeply unsettling to me to have behaved so unskillfully.

After learning about IFS, I realized that this lawyer's interruptions triggered an exile in me – a little-boy part of me that had been interrupted repeatedly at the dinner table by a Dad who believed that children should be seen and not heard. That vulnerable exile had internalized a message that my ideas were not worthy of adult consideration. A few years ago, when I realized where my over-sensitivity to interruption came from, I could reassure that exiled part of me that people who interrupt do not make me or my ideas less worthy of respect. I took some time to visit with that young exiled part, extended compassion to it for the wounds and insecurities it had been carrying all these years, and updated it on my current situation (i.e., I have chosen an occupation in which people often interrupt each other, and that's just how they communicate – I shouldn't take it as a personal affront). I now feel much less triggered when interruptions occur in mediation and in my life outside of work.

3. Managing Difficult Conversations

One of the most common challenges in mediation is managing the parties' bickering, accusations, and counter-accusations. IFS provides useful, non-blaming tools for interrupting such exchanges. For example, I often say to fractious parties that their "gladiator" parts seem to be leading the conversation:

Mediator: *I wonder if you could each ask your gladiator parts to take a step back and make some room at the table for your problem-solving parts. I think that would lead to a more productive discussion.*

I sometimes add that there's nothing wrong with having gladiator parts – we all have them, and they're useful when we need protection. I have found that people instinctively know what I mean by "gladiator parts" and they respond to my request by dialing back their animosity.

4. The Parties' Internal Negotiations

Another common challenge is working with the parties' ambivalence about settlement. Just because a party chooses to mediate does not mean that they have abandoned strongly held feelings that they are right and the other side is wrong. Often the parties are hoping that the mediator will vindicate their highly partisan view of the case.

Because of their strongly held views, most parties find themselves at the end of a day of mediation facing a painful decision about whether to settle or turn to litigation. Here's a description of such a case:¹

A fired employee, who had been a high-level manager in a pharmaceutical company, had a tough choice to make. The company's final offer of settlement was \$250,000, and she badly needed the money. But she believed strongly that she was fired because of gender discrimination. I sat with her and her lawyer while the company's representatives were in another room. I said to her, "it sounds like there's a part of you that would like to fight the good fight here and stand up for women's rights." "Absolutely," she said. "And I am also hearing that there's a part of you that is concerned about paying your bills and trying to be practical about the risks of a trial." "Yes, that too," she said. I softened my voice a bit and said, "I think we all have an 'inner mediator' that can listen to the various parts inside and help them arrive at a wise decision – can you feel that mediator inside you?" Her voice softened too, as she said, "Yes, . . . I know I need to settle this and move on."

As I look back on this settlement, two lessons stand out – first, the power of metaphor (i.e., Self energy as our "inner mediator") and second, the way that IFS permits the mediator to step out of the role of advocate for settlement and instead empower the parties to chart their own course.

5. Fostering Mutual Understanding

Yet another challenge in mediation is the "single story"² that parties often create as an accusatory explanation for the other party's behavior. Imagine a divorce mediation of a couple in which one parent (Chris) worked outside the home as sole breadwinner, while the other parent (Pat) raised the kids. Imagine further that Chris suddenly wants 50% of the parenting time. In many of these cases, Chris argues that the only reason Pat opposes 50/50 custody is because Pat will be entitled to more child support if Pat has the majority

¹ The following account is from David Hoffman, *Transformation as a Lawyer*, OUTLOOK (the journal of the Foundation for Self-Leadership) (September 2019).

² For an excellent discussion of this term, see Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of the Single Story," TED talk (July 2009), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmjKUDo7gSQ>.

of the parenting time. Pat usually makes the opposite argument – i.e., that Chris wants 50/50 parenting time solely to pay less child support.

In private caucus sessions, each parent is often willing – with some gentle encouragement – to see the complexity of the other parent’s motivations:

Mediator to Pat: *I wonder if there’s a part of Chris that genuinely enjoys being with the kids, in addition to a part that’s focused on money?*

Pat: *I have definitely seen that part of Chris.*

Mediator: *I wonder if you can feel a similar combination of parts inside yourself – in other words a parent part that is focused like a laser on what’s best for the kids, and also a part that’s worried about finances.*

Pat: *Absolutely*

After having a similar separate conversation with Chris, it may be fruitful to bring the parties together to talk about the multiple parts that come up for each of them when they disagree about parenting time and child support. Sometimes in conversations of this kind, the parties identify exiled parts that their managers are protecting – such as traumatic memories of their own parents’ divorce or painful struggles to make ends meet. And when the parties begin sharing accounts of where their fears come from (i.e., stories told by their exiles), the mutual vulnerability inherent in such an exchange can dramatically improve the dynamics of their negotiation.

6. Unconscious Bias

Mediators are ethically required to be impartial, but as social psychologists and neuroscientists have shown us in recent years, we all have biases – and many of them are unconscious. Sometimes these unconscious biases show up in the mediation room – either because one of the parties inadvertently offends another party, or we do. When working with people who are different from us – based on age, gender, class, race, religion, disability, nationality, LGBTQ+ status, or a combination of such characteristics – it is not uncommon for us to become suddenly aware of stereotypes or attitudes that we harbor and are not proud of.

IFS provides a useful framework for thinking about our biases – both the ones that we are aware of and others that are unknown to us but nevertheless influence our

behavior. Instead of trying to ignore or suppress biased thoughts, the IFS model encourages us to get curious about how they arose. Looking within, we often find that our parts that hold biased views acquired them at a young age from the media, relatives, or schoolmates, before we were intellectually equipped to see how unfair or inaccurate these views were. Curiosity about these bigoted parts creates an opportunity to heal and reeducate them – a more promising strategy than ignoring them, trying to suppress them, or pretending that they don't exist.

7. Ethics

One of the most critical considerations in the use of IFS, or any psychological model, in mediation is to avoid crossing a line into the unauthorized practice of psychotherapy. If we discuss “parts” and Self energy with the parties in mediation, are we crossing that line?

One answer to that question comes from a recognition that a discussion of our parts is not confined to psychotherapeutic interventions – it's common parlance. “A part of me,” we might say to a friend, “wants to go to the concert with you, but another part thinks I should stay home and finish a project.” Even the idea of having a higher “Self” is a familiar part of our culture, sometimes expressed, as Lincoln put it, as “our better angels.”

However, even with training in IFS, mediators should avoid trying to heal exiles. To be sure, the parties in our cases sometimes reveal painful or traumatic experiences. There is usually nothing inappropriate about asking such a party if they have discussed those experiences with a therapist. But to actually engage with a party's exiled parts, or try to guide the party in an unburdening of that exile's pain, is work that should be done by a clinician.

Even the healing of protective parts – such an overactive self-critic or a hypervigilant firefighter who experiences any ambiguous comment from the other party as an attack – is beyond the scope of what IFS-informed mediators should be doing. Our job is to befriend these protective parts by acknowledging their concerns, so that they do not become hyperactive and sabotage the mediation. Healing them is a job for a therapist.

8. Conclusion

Although originally developed for psychotherapy, IFS is an intuitive and non-pathologizing model that provides mediators with a set of tools for helping the parties in mediation make wise, Self-led choices. IFS can also help us, as mediators, understand our own reactions to what transpires in mediation and, with such insights, enable us to be more fully present, calm, curious, and compassionate. Thoughtful use of the IFS model is consistent with the view that while mediation is not psychotherapy, it can be therapeutic.

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