

# Mediation: Skills and Techniques

By Laurence J Boule, Michael T. Colatrella Jr, Anthony P. Picchioni

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## Phillip Hart reviews a repatriation of Professor Laurence Boule's earlier work of the same title.

When I was a younger man, brimful of boyish bravado, a mate and I pulled apart his car's engine. Armed with a detailed workshop manual, we followed the instructions meticulously ("Detach orange cable N13 from the rear left rocker manifold...")

Sadly, we missed the bit about first draining all the oil out of the engine, so at that crucial moment when we detached the bottom part of the engine, the whole floor was suddenly engulfed in a black, viscous, inexorable flood. (I doubt that we learnt much from the experience, as my mate's father came to the rescue, lent us his own car to go on our long road trip North, and while we were away got someone who knew what they were doing to fix it!)

Boule's wonderful *Mediation: Skills and Techniques* reminds me of that workshop manual. It is detailed. It is compendious. It is broken into excruciatingly fine sub-sub-sections: Part 3.III.C.5 is titled getting "Out of the Past and Into the Future"; Parts 4.B.1.(f)(i) and (ii) distinguish private rationales from public explanations for who speaks first. This is the sort of detail that can be very helpful. It gives confidence to those who are feeling their way through the complex business of running mediations.

The detail can also be overwhelming. The logical-looking sequence of steps can give the strong impression that there is a single, recommended method, which I found strangely intimidating at first. If I could only move smoothly through all the steps and

sub-steps and sub-sub-steps, I'll be right, but how will I ever remember all this detail? What if I blank out when I should be moving between pages 87 and 95? What if I miss a step!?

After a few moments hyperventilating, I was reassured by this passage: "There are immense differences in how people learn new skills and techniques[:]:... cognitively, ... through observation ... and through doing."

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The authors point out that they are supporting the first approach, examining various "principles and theories underlying effective mediation skills and techniques" (p. 9). So, the book introduces concepts to new students and also "serves as a reference or practice guide" for reflective practitioners. The detailed Table of Contents gives newcomers an overview of a process, and helps experienced mediators find comments and suggestions about a particular issue or difficulty they may be having.

The ideas and suggestions in this book work at a number of levels: we are first led to appreciate the significance of the topic at

hand; we are given frameworks for expanding our thinking about it; and then we are given examples and “case illustrations”. Many of these work particularly well for me when they include detailed examples of actual verbal moves: “However, Ned might also reject the second reframe, with greater insistence than before, for example...” The advice seems sensible and nuanced, too: “Alternatively, with some risk of losing Ned’s trust, the mediator might try with the softest of reframes...” (p. 131).

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## When the bottom falls out of a mediation and bile floods the table...

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Just to be clear: this book is a repatriation of Boulle’s earlier work of the same title (Butterworths, Sydney, 2001). The additional co-authors, Colatrella and Picchioni, are faculty members of Southern Methodist University, Texas USA, and their task has been to adapt the text for the US context.

Australians may well prefer to track down the earlier version of the book; you may also want to check out Boulle’s earlier work,

*Mediation: Principles, Process, Practice* (Butterworths, Sydney, 1996). However, if that proves difficult, then this one should satisfy: there is little that is particularly American, and the cultural similarities seem strong enough.

There is no way of avoiding unpleasant learning experiences, like the one that my mate and I suffered in his garage. There is no avoiding learning by observing and by doing. But when the bottom falls out of a mediation and bile floods the table, that is the ideal time to slink back to my reading chair, scan Boulle’s Table of Contents, and reflect on how I will do it better next time.

### About the book

*Mediation: Skills and Techniques*  
By Laurence J Boulle, Michael T. Colatrella Jr, Anthony P. Picchioni

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### About Phillip Hart

Phillip Hart specialises in mediation, facilitation and workplace education. He has many years experience in a wide range of contexts in the private, public and non-government sectors in: resolving issues that have arisen amongst staff and with clients; communicating more effectively; and helping people get the most from difficult negotiations.

An Accredited LEADR member and nationally accredited mediator, Phillip is on the LEADR Editorial Team of *Update*.