

Get to Know Laurie DeYoung, Esq.

After Spending Decades Studying Negotiation, She Found Her Calling as a Mediator: A Conversation with Laurie DeYoung

By Katy Jones



For more than 35 years, **Laurie DeYoung** represented employers and businesses in complex employment and commercial litigation throughout California. From pre-litigation counseling and administrative proceedings to arbitration, trial, and appeal, she built a reputation as a strategic defense attorney who could accurately assess risk, develop practical litigation strategies, and resolve difficult disputes efficiently. But while many litigators simply gain experience participating in mediations, DeYoung did something different—she spent years intentionally studying why mediations succeed. That pursuit ultimately shaped not only her advocacy, but also the mediator she is today.

Q: You've said your path to becoming a mediator began long before you ever served as one. Tell us about that journey.

DeYoung: Early in my career, I attended mediations without fully understanding the strategy unfolding beneath the surface. I knew the law. I understood the facts. But I didn't yet appreciate the psychology of what was happening in the room.

That changed when I began practicing employment litigation full time.

I was fortunate to develop my skills under the mentorship of a legendary mediator and exceptional litigator whose instincts and strategic insight were unlike anything I had ever seen.

Together, we studied everything—opposing counsel's body language, subtle shifts in tone, and even the mediator's tells when presenting facts or documents obtained from the other side.

Those observations helped us anticipate positions, understand motivations, and navigate negotiations from a place of deeper awareness.

For nearly fifteen years, I participated in mediations as often as five times every week. During that time, I became determined not simply to litigate—I wanted to master negotiation.

"For nearly fifteen years, I wasn't just attending mediations—I was studying them."

Q: How did that experience change the way you practiced law?

DeYoung: It completely changed my perspective.

At first, I approached every mediation exclusively from my client's point of view. Over time, I began seeing every negotiation through three different perspectives: my client, opposing counsel, and the mediator.

That shift was transformative.

Once I understood that parties who appeared to

Areas of Expertise:

- Wrongful Termination & Constructive Termination
- Workplace Discrimination (Race, Gender, Age, Religion, National Origin)
- Sexual Harassment & Workplace Harassment
- Retaliation & Whistleblower Claims
- Disability Accommodation & Interactive Process Disputes

ave completely different objectives were often driven by remarkably similar underlying needs, everything changed. Whether people were seeking certainty, financial security, accountability, vindication, or simply closure, their interests often overlapped far more than their positions suggested.

Now as a mediator, I am able to understand counsel and parties' objectives, identify overlap, and keep negotiations moving even when they seem stalled.

Q: Your litigation career focused primarily on employment and commercial disputes. How does that background influence your work as a neutral?

DeYoung: For more than thirty-five years, I handled commercial and employment matters from pre-litigation counseling through administrative proceedings, court litigation, arbitration, trial, and appeal.

As a defense attorney, one of my greatest strengths became accurately assessing a case's value early in the litigation.

I always tried to develop both a litigation strategy and a resolution strategy at the same time. By doing that, you preserve options rather than forcing the parties down a single path.

Throughout my career, that approach saved clients millions of dollars in litigation costs and exposure because we focused on realistic case valuation and practical decision-making.

When settlement wasn't possible, we were fully prepared to prevail through summary judgment, arbitration, or trial. But when settlement made sense, we pursued it aggressively.

Now as a neutral, I bring that strength in assessing

case's true value early on to my work as a mediator. I always try to be direct and honest with the attorneys about their case's strengths and weaknesses.

Q: You mention that many mediations during your litigation career initially failed—but the cases still settled. What made the difference?

DeYoung: Some of my most valuable lessons came from mediations that didn't resolve the case that day.

Instead of viewing those sessions as failures, I treated them as opportunities to gather information.

After the mediation ended, I would think creatively about what each side actually needed and continue working directly with opposing counsel. Nearly all of those cases ultimately settled without requiring a second mediation.

That experience reinforced something I still believe today: just because a mediation ends without an agreement doesn't mean the process has failed.

Q: What is your philosophy as a mediator today?

DeYoung: Every case can settle.

Every mediation is different because every group of people is different. Some parties need to feel heard. Others want a direct discussion about litigation risk and likely outcomes. My job is to listen carefully, understand their goals, and adapt my approach accordingly.

Even if today is not the right day to find that middle ground, my role is to stay engaged until we find the right day.

Flexibility is one of the most important tools a mediator can have.

Areas of Expertise:

(cont.)

- State and Federal Protected Leave Claims (CFRA, FMLA, PDL)
- Wage and Hour Disputes (Class Actions & Individual Claims)
- Executive Employment Agreements & Contract Disputes
- Workplace Investigations

Q: How do you help parties overcome an impasse?

DeYoung: I prepare for impasse before it happens. Early in the process, I ask each side what success actually looks like to them.

People often become so focused on their positions that they lose sight of their underlying objectives, and we hit a wall.

When that happens, I think back to those objectives, and I look for overlap.

Many parties who appear miles apart are actually trying to accomplish remarkably similar things—they just haven't recognized it yet.

Helping them see that common ground often becomes the turning point.

“As a neutral when parties think they are at an impasse my understanding of their goals allows us to break the impasse if their goals align however far down the road.”

Q: Your preparation doesn't stop when the mediation begins—or even when it ends. What does your process look like?

DeYoung: Preparation starts well before the session.

I want to understand the parties, their attorneys, the facts, and whether there are opportunities for agreement before anyone walks into the room.

If the case doesn't settle during mediation, I'm not finished.

I'll continue working with counsel afterward until we either reach a settlement or everyone agrees trial is the only remaining path.

Persistence matters.

Q: You've said your life as a negotiator began long before law school. Tell us about your background in negotiation.

DeYoung: That's absolutely true.

I grew up as one of four children, so I negotiated for just about everything. My father was also a lifelong plaintiff's lawyer, and I watched him negotiate settlements throughout my childhood without realizing how much I was absorbing.

Even today, I still enjoy negotiating.

I'm an excellent haggler in markets around the world. I've matched up with some of the best in Turkey, China, Morocco, and plenty of other countries—and I have great souvenirs to prove it!

Q: If attorneys who have worked with you were describing you to someone considering you as a mediator, what do you think they'd say?

DeYoung: I have no doubt they'd say I'm direct, and that I'm trustworthy.

Trust is essential in mediation. The parties need to know they're receiving an honest assessment, that I'm listening carefully, and that I'm committed to helping them reach the best possible resolution.

After more than three decades litigating complex employment and commercial disputes, Laurie DeYoung brings to mediation something few neutrals can offer: the perspective of someone who intentionally spent years mastering the psychology of negotiation from every angle. Combining a defense lawyer's disciplined case valuation with a mediator's appreciation for human motivation, she approaches every matter with the same guiding belief—that every case can settle, and she'll stay with the parties until they find the day it does.

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