

From the Mah Jong Table to the Mediation Room: Practical Lessons for Attorneys

By Judge Marina Corodemus (Ret.)

National Mediator for Federal and State Cases.

COPYRIGHT 2025

As an experienced mediator, I work with attorneys daily to help resolve disputes across various practice areas. Each case presents its complexities, legal, interpersonal, and emotional—and it's my job to help navigate through those layers productively, creatively and with the purpose of issue resolution.

Upon reflection, many valuable skills I bring to mediation are not limited to law school, CLE programs, or years of legal practice. Each day, each case presents an opportunity to learn more and enhance mediation skills. But an unexpected new source of expanded skill sets came from my latest learning experience, playing AMERICAN MAH JONG.

Mah Jong is a tile-based game of strategy, skill, and timing that originated in China and is played worldwide today¹. A standard game involves four players drawing and discarding Chinese characters tiles, working toward assembling a complete hand—typically four sets of three and one pair. American Mah Jong is a popular variation of the traditional Chinese variety requiring players to conform to preset variations to a yearly Official card issued by the National Mah Jong Society. The game rewards patience, pattern recognition, adaptability, and keen observation. These traits are essential in mediation—both for mediators and the attorneys participating. Who knew our grandmothers and mothers were experienced mediators in training?

Let me explain. Several years ago, after the pandemic isolation indoors, I decided to fulfill a life goal of becoming a consummate snowbird. Off I went to Florida for four months to get out of the sleet, snow, short days of sun, and dismal gray days. At the same time, the office was a two-hour plane ride, zoom, or phone call. Enter Florida, the sunshine state, with warm winters and an aqua, blue-colored ocean. A friend had bought me a Mah Jong set for my new digs. I am still unsure if this was a spoof or a gift to relax with a socially interactive board game. Nevertheless, it has turned out to be a GREAT gift.

¹ Mah Jong is played with tiles broken down into three suits: Dots look like circles-BLACK, Bams which look like Bamboo sticks-GREEN and Craks which are Characters-RED. In addition, there are Honor tiles-NORTH EAST WEST SOUTH, Dragons-RED GREEN WHITE, Special tiles-WINDS and SEASONS and FOUR JOKERS.

As was my daily habit, I went to the pool and made friends with long-time residents of the building. I casually mentioned I had a Mah Jong game but was clueless about playing. One of the swimmers piped up and said she was a retired 4th-grade teacher, played Mah Jong her entire life, and would be happy to teach me. Before the conversation closed, 8-10 more pool women requested instruction. Thus, the condo's, meeting weekly Mah Jong club was formed on Thursdays from 3-5. We all learned, and we're all hooked. God bless GOOD teachers - they NEVER STOP TEACHING.

The more I played, mistakes and all, familiar patterns of behavior, observation, analysis, and skills emerged. I tried to figure out what it was about this game I took to so quickly, enjoyed, and excelled at. Then it came to me, Mah Jong had many of the same skill sets I used in mediation. Let me explain.

Here are a few concepts from Mah Jong that I find directly applicable to mediation:

■ Reading Subtext and Pattern Recognition

Mah Jong is more than simply managing one's hand². Success depends on noticing what tiles others discard or display on their racks, observing subtle tempo changes, and predicting opponents' likely strategies. It is a game of incomplete information and careful inference.

Mediation is similar. Beyond what clients and counsel express explicitly, there are often underlying dynamics, unspoken concerns, and quiet shifts in tone or behavior. Mediators attuned to these signals are better positioned to identify real interests, defuse tension, and recognize windows of opportunity for resolution.

Like the game player, the mediator must know the official rules—the yearly cards, relevant statutes, case law, and players. The mediator must also read the room—each lawyer's strategy—and speculate on what lawyers indicate they have versus what they really have. So must the clever Mah Jong player. Know your hand, but read what others seem to be planning, collecting, or discarding.

■ Strategic Patience

A defining feature of Mah Jong is that the path to a winning hand is rarely linear. The right tile may not arrive immediately, and prematurely discarding a valuable piece can undermine long-term strategy. When you look at yourself firsthand after the initial selection, going

² General terms: Wall: The stack of tiles players draw from. Draw: Taking a tile from the wall. Discard: Placing a tile into the discard pile.

through Charleston³, a bit of luck helps as you'd get what you need from your co-players on a discard or after breaking their respective walls⁴.

Patience is equally essential in mediation. Meaningful movement often takes time, and non-pressure to rush the process can be counterproductive. Counselors who approach mediation with a steady hand—allowing space for reflection, dialogue, and incremental progress—often achieve better and more durable outcomes for their clients.

Listening to all counsel at mediation is like watching your board game opponent's hands. Are they seeking craks, bams, or winds, versus are the lawyers looking for contribution or dismissal? Are the attorneys looking to resolve the issue by seeking a global resolution or forcing the opponent to frustrate any resolution by pure defensive plays? Waiting, watching, and analyzing the player/attorney's strategy must be methodical.

■ Adaptability in Real Time

Mah Jong requires constant recalibration. A player may begin with one strategy and then shift entirely based on the draw of a tile or a competitor's discard. Rigidity leads to missed opportunities.

The same applies in mediation. No matter how thoroughly a case is prepared, new information often emerges during the process. Attorneys who remain flexible—open to reframing proposals, adjusting expectations, or considering alternative structures—are better equipped to pivot when the path to agreement changes.

How often do Mah Jong players doom themselves by starting by committing to a strategy by selecting a line on the card without watching how the tiles are running or watching what other players/lawyers are committed to resolving the dispute? Only to hear your opponent Announcing Mah Jong! So, the attorneys with one plan do not alter when new information is shared- calamity will result.

■ Balancing Advocacy and Process Awareness

Although Mah Jong is competitive, it rewards a calm and focused approach. Emotional reactivity and aggressive overplaying often lead to mistakes. Instead, success comes from playing strategically within the game's flow.

In mediation, effective advocacy includes presenting your client's position and doing so in a way that invites collaboration. Mediation is not litigation. Counselors who understand how

³ Charleston-a structured series of tile passes between players designed to help players improve their hands by exchanging unwanted tiles.

⁴ Wall: The stack of tiles players draw from.

to use tone, timing, and process awareness in concert with advocacy tend to build credibility with the mediator and opposing counsel. Inexperienced counsel will be intransigent, aggressive, and inflexible resulting in no resolution. They leave mediation feeling good about themselves, prideful on being tough, but never realizing they lost because a resolution was not reached.

You can effectively exercise defensive plays and mind games in Mah Jong. However, if you are hotheaded and obnoxious with your colleagues at the game or the mediation, you have forgotten that Mah Jong is a game, and mediation is NOT litigation. Cooler heads should always prevail, and strategic fair play will get you Mah Jong or Resolution.

■ The Importance of Timing

In Mah Jong, timing is everything—when to hold, play, and adjust your tiles. A hand's rhythm can shift quickly, and experienced players sense when the right moment arises.

Similar instincts apply in mediation. Sometimes, the most impactful intervention is not a compelling argument but a well-timed silence. Attorneys who sense when to pause, when to propose, and when to let the process breathe, help keep negotiations moving forward without unnecessary friction.

■ A Shared Goal: Resolution

Ultimately, Mah Jong and mediation involve moving pieces toward alignment—within a framework, under evolving circumstances, and with partial information. Both require focus, flexibility, and respect for the process.

My experience at the Mah Jong table has shaped how I should better mediate calmly, strategically, and attentively. I invite attorneys who work with me to bring the same qualities to mediation as advocates and as participants in a problem-solving process. When we approach mediation with awareness and adaptability, we give our clients the best possible chance of resolution.

Who knew I would love Mah Jong as much as I love the Law and Mediation? But it's worth remembering that Mediation affects real people's lives, while Mah Jong is just a game.

So, next time you play Mah Jong, enjoy the game. But remember to bring your enhanced skills to the Mediation table.

About the Author



Email and office locations:

JudgeMC@ccadr.com

Corodemus & Corodemus
33 Wood Avenue South, Suite 600
Iselin, NJ 08830

14 Cliffwood Avenue W, Suite 300
Matawan, NJ 07747

Judge Marina Corodemus (Ret.) is a former New Jersey Superior Court Judge and the managing partner of Corodemus & Corodemus. She now serves as a national mediator, arbitrator, and special master, handling complex civil litigation nationwide. Judge Corodemus is known for her broad experience with mass torts and many forms of environmental and complex litigation in federal and state cases, as well as her strategic insight and commitment to resolving disputes with clarity and fairness. Judge Corodemus is a Past President of the Academy of Court Appointed Neutrals. The Judge can be reached at JudgeMC@ccadr.com.

She is also a dedicated American Mah Jong player.

