

In an excellent examination of Nelson Mandela's leadership style ("Mandela's Way: Lessons in Life"), his biographer Richard Stengel writes:

"Shades of grey are not easy to articulate. Black-and-white is seductive because it is simple and absolute. It appears clear and decisive. Because of that, we will often gravitate toward yes or no answers when a "both" or a "maybe" is closer to the truth. Some people will choose a categorical yes or no simply because they think it appears strong. But if we cultivate the habit of considering both – or even several – sides of a question, as Mandela did, of holding both good and bad in our minds, we may see solutions that would not otherwise have occurred to us. This way of thinking is demanding. Even if we remain wedded to our point of view, it requires us to put ourselves in the shoes of those with whom we disagree. That takes an effort of will, and it requires empathy and imagination. But the reward, as we can see in the case of Mandela, is something that can fairly be described as wisdom."

These words reflect the philosophy and insights of one of the greatest political leaders of any generation. They have great resonance for those of us who are mediators. We recognise the wisdom in the narrative. Black-and-white, categorical assertions, the paradigm of right/wrong, fault and blame, are familiar to us. They underpin many, if not most, of the disputes we are called upon to help resolve. The culture of adversarialism is familiar and often destructive, to business and professional relationships, commercial initiatives, joint ventures, partnerships, workplaces, boardrooms, neighbourhoods and families.

Mandela could see that it was also destructive to a nation: "I never sought to undermine [the president] Mr de Klerk, for the practical reason that the weaker he was, the weaker the negotiations process. To make peace with an enemy one must work with that enemy, and the enemy must become one's partner."

The idea that many of the world's problems are much more complex than dualist thinking (yes/no) permits is not new. In reality, many of the conflicts within and between nations, whether political, economic or social, are multi-dimensional, finely nuanced, layer upon layer. There are no easy, right or wrong solutions. There are, literally, several sides to most stories, many vantage points and differing perspectives. The dirty filters of assumption, history, culture, (mis-) perception, bias and all the other cognitive illusions, abound. What is "good" to some is "bad" to others – and vice versa. That is the reality, and we know that no one side is ever as clearly "right" or "wrong" as others may think.

"You never really understand things from another person's point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it," said Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. How often do we mediators encourage parties in mediation to do just that, using a variety of techniques designed to induce different thinking, help a party to acknowledge a different point of view, break a deadlock or unlock impasse? "It's not our differences that separate us but our judgments about each other" writes Margaret Wheatley. We know how hard it can be to shift judgment, to challenge assumption, the "effort of will", "empathy" and imagination" it requires...and yet we also know how valuable and transformative viewing

matters from your protagonist's perspective can be. It can result in solutions that would "not otherwise have occurred". Helping people to do these things is what mediators do.

It seems obvious, therefore, that the skills and techniques we use as mediators ought to be ideally suited to helping to address political issues. Doug Noll, in "Elusive Peace", argues as much. But, generally, mediation skills are not sought in political controversy. To be fair, we do hear of mediators in international conflicts. And, sometimes, they have heroic achievements. However, as Noll has argued, these individuals seem often to lack the deep training and process awareness which many professional mediators would regard as essential. If we turn more to domestic issues, such as allocation of scarce resources, inter-departmental or local/national government disputes, trades union/management uncertainties, large-scale development projects, scrutiny of public expenditure.....how often is highly professional, top quality mediation a resource on which decision-makers as a matter of course rely? Rarely? And yet helping other people to untangle complex problems and find extra value is what mediators do.

It's not easy of course. Politics, or a certain style which we might describe as Westminster-politics, thrives and indeed is sustained by confrontation, partisanship, the finding of fault, personal attack, party discipline and a largely binary system. Careers are made and broken by this system. Whole structures exist to maintain it, and are dependent on it. And it is said that this system is necessary to hold those in power to account. However, all the anecdotal evidence and some good recent writing ("The Blunders of our Governments", by King and Crewe, and "Conundrum: Why Every Government Gets Things Wrong", by Bacon and Hope) suggest that this is not so. Indeed a common expression on the back cover of these two books is "cock-up". As we often see paralleled in the commercial, family and community worlds, the adversarial model produces simplistic analyses, defensiveness, a culture of right/wrong and unattractive politics. Worse than that, it leads to some pretty disastrous policies and decisions, and a culture of cover up and hubris.

The great lateral thinker, Edward de Bono, captures well the alternative of maximising gains, in a way which addresses mutual interests, in his principle of "co-opetition". Transcending both competition with its zero sum connotations and the kind of cooperation which results in compromise, de Bono challenges us to think differently as we seek to find added value in a way which literally expands the notional pie and builds on the real underlying needs, hopes and aspirations of people, most of whom will welcome encouragement and recognition. This approach requires those involved to move away from simply building up their own arguments while knocking down those of others with whom they (apparently and perhaps only superficially) disagree – as classical politics necessitates. That should no longer be the name of the game. We need to move on from "right" or "wrong", "either/or" solutions. These are not, says de Bono, efficient. Helping people to understand these ideas is what mediators do.

The same theme is picked up by leading Harvard mathematician and biologist, Martin Nowak, in his powerful book about altruism, *Super Co-operators*. Survival is not of the fittest with their selfish genes, but of those who find ways to collaborate successfully. But, through its apparent inability to evolve in this way, politics runs the risk of extinction, or at least of wholesale indifference, in the minds of those to whom it should matter most, the electorate.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest, tells us that the contemporary mind has almost no training in how to think paradoxically, being stuck with dualist thought and locked into making seemingly clever distinctions, while devoid of wisdom. Hence, he says, our angry politics - and our angry religion. So, reflecting the reality of complexity, how do we help politicians and others to build on their "opponents'" suggestions and look for multiple options where "both" - or many - ideas may be valid? How do we find common criteria to help them assess their choices and make decisions together and imaginatively? Well, that is what mediators do.

As we have already noted, a shift in culture to an interest-based, collaborative approach in politics would not be easy. Indeed, many of you reading this now will be saying to yourselves: "We have heard all of this before" "This is the usual fantasy stuff", "Even if some did this, he/she/they would not", "It will never work".

And, of course, these are all true if we allow them to be. Nelson Mandela faced similar choices. He decided - and had the character and willpower - to do and be something, someone, different. These paradigm shifts need exceptional people doing and being just that, different. That is what mediators are....or should be.

Consider the utility of the following questions in modern politics. Questions like: What are the real needs and objectives underlying this policy? How can these be achieved realistically? What are the alternatives to such and such a course of action? How much will each cost? What other risks are there? How can we add value? What in the "opposition's" criticisms might be valid? How could we involve "them" in improving this policy? How do we achieve the desired outcome in a complex world? How can we build on our counterparts' suggestions and look for multiple options, where "both" - or many - ideas may be valid? By what criteria can multiple options be analysed? What common criteria can we find to assess our choices and make decisions rationally and imaginatively? How can we set boundaries and hold people properly accountable and, at the same time, acknowledge their humanity and imperfection? We all make mistakes, don't we? How do we minimise the risks and maximise the potential?

These questions are not easy to ask and answer if you live and die by the point-scoring ritual of the dispatch box. Arguably, the only people who can ask these sorts of questions are those without a stake, genuinely disinterested in the outcome but committed to a world-class process or, perhaps, those who learn the skills to do so because their positions in the political system require it. This hints at the kind of process where "debate" in the classic meaning ("to resolve by beating down") carries less weight, and is understood to be less effective, than

genuine dialogue, which enables multiple ideas to flow, seeking meaning in relationships which are built and maintained in the common interest. Helping people to engage in this sort of dialogue – or learn to do so - is what mediators do.

My own work has taken me into the legislatures of many of the assemblies and parliaments in the countries of the United Kingdom (still a unitary state as I write this!), to train and coach members in “scrutiny skills”. I believe that many politicians do understand the real value of this training at an individual level. I believe that they wish to move away from the time-consuming, energy-depleting, morale-sapping and often futile game of positional politics. They sense that this change is what their constituents want too. The whole mood was summed up by an elderly lady, as she passed me on her way out of a public meeting which was part of a mediation process in which I was engaged. The issues were heavily political, and also social and economic. “We should have had this meeting two years ago, before.....”.

I have also been privileged to work with many of Scotland’s business, political and public sector leaders in the activities of Scotland’s 2020 Climate Group, which I facilitated for four years. While not strictly mediation, the role was, in a light touch way, to help the disparate players to work together and find common interest in addressing this most pressing of human problems. The work of the Group has become a beacon in a world where self-interest and posturing still dominates - and threatens our very survival as a species.

From these and other experiences, I know that many politicians and civil servants have an inclination to be, and an aptitude as, interest-based negotiators. The so-called “Edinburgh Agreement” between the UK government at Westminster and the Scottish Government at Holyrood, governing the conduct of the independence referendum in Scotland, is a fine example of Getting to Yes (or, for balance, The Power of a Positive No!) in practice. Much which is done behind the scenes in politics does reflect good practice in collaborative problem-solving. But it is not the norm, nor are most people sufficiently skilled in the genre. Indeed, as with any other difficult problems or crucial conversations, people in politics suffer the same stresses and strains as those others with whom mediators regularly mediate.

We now understand that, in straitened circumstances or when feeling threatened, many of us will tend to resort to “fight or flight”, evasive, behaviour, just as our predecessors would when they faced unpredictable predators. For example, the success of Nobel-laureate Daniel Kahnemann’s “Thinking, Fast and Slow” has brought to our living rooms many examples of what have become known as cognitive illusions or “traps”. Reactive devaluation, attribution error, confirmation bias, over-reliance on intuition, risk aversion, missing the obvious – all of these ways in which our brains can “trick” us wait for politicians, perhaps especially politicians given the febrile atmosphere in which they operate, as they do for the rest of us. This understanding helps us to appreciate why, in a tense, binary, political debate, proponents of different views (“yes”/”no”, “right”/”wrong”) might behave in ways which seem unattractive and evasive.

This can all be understood, acknowledged and managed. Helping people to understand, acknowledge and manage these sorts of things is what mediators do.

In the charmingly-titled “The Dance of Opposites”, one of the great heroes in our field of conflict resolution, Kenneth Cloke, sums all this up eloquently: “Successful political decision-making and conflict resolution require not silence or rage but dialogue, not aggression but collaboration. ...Indeed, it is arguable,” he says, “that in the absence of improved conflict resolution skills it will prove difficult, if not impossible, for us to survive as a species. ..[it is not] utopian or presumptuous to imagine that we can expand and evolve dialogue techniques in ways that will allow us to discuss and resolve contentious political issues without resorting to violence or coercion.”

So, what can mediators do?

- Challenge our own assumptions about what we do and how we do it
- Be prepared to move into other spheres
- In particular, transfer our thinking about mediation to the political sphere
- Consider our language and attitudes and how we can engage with politicians and those who serve them - and us
- Offer to help - nor presumptuously but with humility and with the same understanding we would extend to others to whom we offer our skills and services
- Be realistic, shaping what we do to the real world of political decision-making in tough situations
- Explore the underlying needs of, and tensions within, the political systems
- Help politicians and others understand the benefits of moving from the win/lose paradigm of political power to interest-based, collaborative decision-making
- Challenge the idea of right/wrong, single truth outcomes
- Encourage dialogue rather than debate wherever possible
- Identify the gains which could be made with such changes
- Talk about choices, opportunities and responsibility
- Write, talk, train, coach, whenever and wherever opportunity arises
- Build relationships, get to know people and remain independent
- Continue to be bold, exceptional and different

After all, these are all things that mediators can do..... and the reward, to paraphrase Richard Stengel, as we saw in the case of Mandela, might just be something that can fairly be described as “wisdom.” That, at least, is an aspiration worth aiming for.

Note:

The work of Collaborative Scotland (www.collaborative-scotland.org) in promoting respectful dialogue in the campaign on the question of Scottish independence has revealed a deep-seated desire among many in my country for

a new way of doing politics. This initiative seeks to engage ordinary folk in discussing politics in a different way, valuing uncertainty, paradox, and non-dualist approaches to decisions, encouraging consideration of *how* we do things as much as the outcome and moving towards a more “interest-based” context.