

Star Trek and Mediation - To Boldly Go Where No One Has Gone Before

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I have a confession to make. I am a Trekkie. For those who are unfamiliar with the term, that means I am a fan of the television series and movies relating to Star Trek. To be geekily more specific, a fan of the television series and movies relating to Star Trek: The Original Series (with William Shatner as Captain Kirk, Leonard Nimoy as Vulcan First Officer Spock and DeForest Kelley as Dr. Leonard (Bones) McCoy). And since 2015 is the 50th anniversary of Star Trek, I thought I would devote this month's entry to Star Trek and Mediation.

Star Trek was ground breaking when it was first created. Its creator Gene Roddenberry had a vision of an utopian reality. Earth was at peace. It was (or, since it is set in the future, I should say, it will be) the headquarters of the United Federation Planets (UFP) which was a grouping of planets to promote cooperation in trade, research and defence.

I'd like to focus on 2 aspects from Star Trek which might inform our ideas or practice about mediation.

First, is the notion of inclusion. Roddenberry's Star Trek was a world where there was no discrimination based on gender or race or species. Differences, both physiological and mental, were appreciated and accepted. This is best expressed by the Vulcan philosophy IDIC (Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination). Or as the French would say "Viva la difference". A high aspiration indeed.

Parties to a mediation will be in conflict. Which means that differences between the parties exist. It could be differences in the facts, perceptions, positions or personalities, just to name a few. While one of the goals of mediation is to achieve agreement between the parties, I would submit that as mediators, we should also have the aspiration of helping the parties appreciate and accept (but not necessarily agreeing with) the differences that exist between them. Strangely enough, if this philosophy of IDIC is achieved, parties may no longer feel they have to be defensive and keep their shields up and may then be more willing to agree.

The second aspect of Star Trek I would like to refer to is the notion of the Prime Directive. In an age of space exploration, it is inevitable that space-faring species will encounter species which are technologically less developed. These technologically less developed species may not even be aware of the existence of other species. The Prime Directive is a rule that provides for non-interference with these species and which members of the United Federation of Planets commit to and comply with. Another high aspiration. In some cases however, the Prime Directive became a straight-jacket which prevented members of the United Federation of Planets from acting to prevent interference by non-members of the UFP. Therefore in some cases, exceptions to the Prime Directive needed to be made.

As mediators, we have our own Prime Directives. Of course, different mediators will have different Prime Directives depending on what model of mediation they operate out of. For example, a mediator may hold as a directive that "A mediator should not suggest solutions" or that "A mediator should not be directive". While Prime Directives are important, it is also important for us as mediators to keep in mind the original rationale for the establishment of that particular Prime Directive and to be willing to revisit it in appropriate circumstances. One should not be straight-jacketed by dogma.

Before I conclude this entry, I'd like to make 2 points. First, there is a saying commonly used on the Internet. "Haters will hate". Detractors from Star Trek will point out that in Roddenberry's utopian world, war, conflict and strife had not been eradicated. They have also pointed out that women and minority races were marginalized. Some have gone so far as to say that Roddenberry's vision was not that radical by today's standards. I do not consider it my job to defend the vision. Haters will hate. I will however recommend highly a piece written by Smith & Smith titled "Pragmatism and Meaning: Assessing the Message of Star Trek: The Original Series" that explores these criticisms and analyses the issue through the perspective of Pragmatism.

Related to pragmatist theories of education is that Roddenberry's vision can allow those who identify with that vision to set the wheels in motion for that vision to become a reality. Put another way, Roddenberry's vision is a normative reality to aspire to.

And this leads me to the second point. The pioneers of mediation were the early explorers. They boldly went where no one had gone before. And we have them to thank. Today, we as mediators are often so caught up in the day to day settlement of disputes that we may lose sight of the normative statements that we should also be making. And while it is probably easier to go along with what everyone else is doing or doing what the market or parties want, it is my hope that some will be the next generation of explorers and to boldly go where no one has gone before.

Live Long and Prosper!