

Accepting The Challenge Of Resolving Societal Conflicts

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The hills above Edinburgh, Scotland, were bursting with the splendor of bright yellow flowers when mediators from across the globe assembled for the spring conference of the International Academy of Mediators. I had been asked by the conference organizers to lead a discussion, with the goal of inspiring some of the world's most successful commercial mediators to take on the challenge of addressing larger societal disputes. To kick off the discussion, I invited Dr. Scilla Elworthy, a three-time Nobel Peace Prize finalist, to join me on stage.

Dr. Elworthy has devoted her life to being an ambassador for peace around the world. Just one of her achievements was founding Peace Direct in 2002 to fund, promote and learn from local peace builders in conflict areas. In her work, Dr. Elworthy has observed that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. She believes that many of us feel a compulsion to do something to make a difference in the world, but we just don't know how to get started.

The focus of this article is what we as mediators can do to translate our good ideas or noble intentions into action. The world so very badly needs the skillset and perspective that we can bring to the table.

Believe that Success Is Possible

What is truly unique about those individuals who are willing to walk toward conflict? Clearly, there are elements of courage and optimism that help define them as conflict resolutions' "first responders." As commercial mediators, we are often the only person in the room who believes that success is possible. That "mediator's mind," the sense of optimism and bold thinking, is an essential companion, when we set out to identify and intervene in broad societal conflicts.

Find Your Passion

There are a multitude of local, regional and international issues and conflicts in desperate need of thoughtful intervention and mediation. Begin the process of identifying the conflict you want to address by asking the simple question, "What breaks my heart?" If it is the homeless person you literally have to step over on your way to work, you may have your answer. Perhaps the neighboring offshore reef that more resembles a marine desert, due to overfishing, draws your passion. Or, maybe the myriad of problems posed by migrant, ethnic populations forced to flee their homes and families. Whatever the issue that draws you to the flame, make sure it resonates an emotional chord.

Reflect on Your Skill Set

Then, ask yourself, "What am I really good at?" Be honest in this reflective exercise. If you possess extraordinary mediation skills, you are well on your way. Perhaps you have other, equally important, skills. You may be an effective organizer, fundraiser or adept at social media. The process of intervening in conflict begins with knowing what you have to offer, and what additional talents and resources you need to support your efforts.

Put Your Plan Into Action

Once you've identified your passion and become more reflective about the skills you can offer, here is how to put your ideas into action:

1. Identify and cultivate key relationships

If you have been involved in developing commercial mediation markets, you have probably developed relationships with key decision makers in government and industry. Now, seek out those who are tasked with finding a solution to the challenging societal conflict that you care deeply about, and offer to assist their efforts with mediation. If there are no obvious leaders, find like-minded partners, and develop an organization to support the implementation of your plan.

2. Understand the issue at hand

In seeking to intervene in broader societal conflicts, it is imperative to possess a deep knowledge of the issue in dispute. Your understanding of what is truly at stake for everyone at the table will help establish your credibility, while allowing for more meaningful participation.

3. Identify all potential stakeholders

Any credible dispute resolution process begins by casting a wide net to identify all of the stakeholders who may be impacted. There are many mistakes that can lead a mediator to trip out of the starting block. Perhaps the easiest one to avoid is to not overlook an essential stakeholder.

4. Develop a roadmap to success

Strategic thinking and a specific action plan lie at the intersection of a good idea and its implementation. Developing a specific action plan is essential for any credible offer of assistance. The plan must include who will serve as the individual or panel of mediation experts, what is the cost and time frame projected for the intervention, and who will participate in the process design.

Look Inward to Strengthen Your Capacity to Assist Others

What gives mediators the strength to help others in conflict is the ability to look inward with honesty, clarity and self-reflection. By cultivating the personal skills and capacities I describe below, you will be even more capable of intervening in even the most deeply rooted societal conflicts, with empathy, compassion and equanimity.

• The Capacity for Self-Awareness

Our ability to reflect and confront our own individual issues including: fear, trauma and bias uniquely prepares us for the challenges that lie ahead. Only by expanding our own capacity for self-awareness are we capable of confronting the extraordinary demands presented by those embroiled in conflict.

• Perceiving Our Emotions

Conflicts by their nature involve the presence of strong emotions. By understanding our own emotional competencies and limitations, including the role of our individual life experiences in shaping our emotional competencies, we can be fully prepared to work in an environment of strong emotions.

• Building Empathy

Research in neurobiology has revealed the powerful role of mirror neurons in our brains that allow us the opportunity to identify and experience the emotions of those around us. The capacity to build empathetic capacity is a critical step toward serving others in conflict resolution.

• Listening with Your Whole Being

Mediators looking to assist those who are in conflict can best start by refining their own listening skills. We used to describe the target skill as "listening without judgment," although we now know from neurobiology that it's impossible to withhold judgment entirely. The best mediators are those who listen with intuition, for both what is stated and what is unstated, and with an eye toward congruity between words and body language. In essence, they've learned to listen with their whole being.

• Mindfulness: The Pursuit of Focused Attention

Unless our aim is to become a Buddhist monk, there is little chance of entirely eliminating the constant monologue we have within ourselves. What we can aspire to learn, however, is how to quiet our internal distractions, so that we can be centered and mindful about the moment we are in. By being truly present, we are most able to assist those in need.

• Checking Our Ego at the Door

While strength of ego is essential for persevering in the face of deep-seated conflict, that strong ego must be balanced by an appropriate lack of ego, reflecting an appreciation that we are intervening in someone else's dispute. As a famous coach once said, "It's amazing how much can be accomplished when no one requires the credit."

Accept the Invitation to Make a Difference

In her book, *A Business Plan for Peace: Building a World Without War*, Dr. Scilla Elworthy offers this invitation to everyone who longs to make a difference in the world: "Inevitably, in any initiative to bring new ideas to the world, there will be conflict. And you can use the energy of conflict. It does not have to be prevented or resolved, but transformed...You may not realize how profoundly you are needed in the world today, and how the world longs for you to be of service."

Let your personal journey begin.