

Mediation and Leadership

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Ever since I took a course developed by Ronald Heifetz on Exercising Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School of Government, I wanted to reflect on how much mediation and leadership have in common. As I sat down to write this blog, I was happy to discover that Joel Lee had reflected on this topic in his 2015 blog *Leadership Challenges and Mediation*. The blog describes very well how Heifetz' model of leadership translates into mediation at a macro level. I will address the same from a closer, skills and approaches, perspective. The skills and concepts described below are required for exercising leadership, which in Heifetz's model is needed only when we are dealing with "adaptive challenges". Those are challenges to which solutions are not known (so many in today's world!); solutions to them require adaptation and new learning, i.e. change in the "attitudes, values, habits, [...] and hearts and minds" of people. In contrast, when problems can be solved with existing/expert knowledge - those are "technical" challenges and for their resolution good management suffices.

For leading an adaptive change, Heifetz emphasizes several concepts, which I will analyze *vis a vis* some of the skills we apply in mediation:

Managing the conflict. This is probably the most obvious similarity which is broad and covers a number of concepts:

Heifetz talks about leaders managing people's "differences in a way that diminishes their destructive potential and constructively harnesses their energy". This requires orchestrating the clash of views so that the different factions learn from one another. To do this, a leader should create a "holding environment" where people can discuss values, perspectives, and ideas without feeling threatened. This requires trust - a critical factor in holding people's attention to difficult problems. All of this applies equally to mediation. A mediator builds trust and creates safe environment for the parties to share what happened, what is important to them, what their concerns and fears are. A mediator then helps the parties engage in the perspective of each-other.

A leader should also control the temperature: "Overload them and they will avoid learning. Underload them and they will become too dependent or complacent". Besides, people often resort to "work avoidance", i.e. they divert attention and resources from what is difficult and what really matters - the "work in the center". Leaders have to identify and deal with it. Similarly, a mediator paces his/her interventions according to parties' readiness for self-determination and capacity to make progress. Mediators identify ineffective arguments and focus the parties on the issues, opportunities and interests at stake.

"Giving the work back to people". Leaders are often expected to have and provide solutions to existing problems. If that happens in the context of adaptive challenges, those solutions will be ill-suited or unsustainable; that is because, by definition, adaptive challenges are those where solutions are not known (sometimes even the problem itself may not be known/defined); they need to be developed by those who own the problem - the people. Therefore, leaders should be asking questions rather than giving answers, says Heifetz. This way they also develop people's capacity to deal with adaptive challenges. This is directly applicable to mediation. The beauty of mediation is the opportunity it gives to the parties to determine what is important to them and then find their own solutions to the existing dispute. This not only gives ownership of the result to the parties, but ensures that the solution meets their interests and also, develops parties' capacity to deal with their differences in the future.

"Getting on the balcony". This is a metaphor for mental activity of stepping back and asking "What is really going on here?" While being engaged in the problem-solving (i.e. being on the "dance floor"), leaders should not lose perspective of a larger picture. Being "on the balcony" gives the leader a larger picture and the time to listen. Based on what she/he sees and hears, she/he intervenes again. That resonates with mediators, who along with facilitating the process, should be checking: where are the parties, emotionally, physically, mentally? Is anything missing/ unaddressed? What intervention would help make progress?

Listening. It is essential for leadership. Why things matter to people is often not on the surface of what they are saying. Leaders need to engage in some sort of diagnostic search process so that they understand what people are really saying. But Heifetz, also talks about inward listening. A person who leads needs to understand his own ways of processing and distorting what he/she hears. He/she needs to know enough about own biases to compensate for them. Listening, to the parties and to oneself, is at the core of mediation as we know it.

These are only some concepts shared by mediation and leadership. The purpose of this comparison is not to assert that mediation is leadership. The name does not change the essence of what mediators do. The purpose of this comparison is to show that: 1. Leaders can benefit from the micro-skills used by mediators; similarly, mediators can get new insights from the concepts of leadership (personally for me, Heifetz's concepts, both, on outward leadership and on personal challenges, have been extremely insightful and made me see and analyse many examples, including my own experiences, from different lens); 2. How important it is, especially in today's world, that we keep teaching and practicing the skills used in mediation not only for conflict resolution, but as skills and tools for better leadership as well.