

Kluwer Mediation Blog

How in tune is your mind?

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Thursday, August 8th, 2019

“If two people are in a room, there are actually six to consider: “What each person is; what each person thinks he or she is; and what each person thinks the other is.” So began a recent Guardian editorial on relations between Iran and the USA. This observation is attributed to the late wife of the UN secretary general, António Guterres, who was a psychoanalyst. It brings another dimension to the idea that there are three truths: your truth, my truth and the truth.

Both observations appear to have a lot of resonance for those engaged in mediation. They imply that not only do we need to invest time in helping build understanding of how different parties see the world in relation to the issues in dispute, but there is also a need for understanding of how the people involved are viewed. Separating the people from the problem doesn't mean that the people can be ignored as attention is focussed on finding a way forward on the issues.

This is probably further complicated if you add in the constituencies that are not in the mediation room. How and what they think and feel and how they relate to those in the room can have a significant influence on decisions taken – particularly if they add pressure or even an element of fear.

We have come to understand better, as a result of the work of Kahneman and others, the role of cognitive bias in decision making. In particular when people are afraid or tired they will tend to default to automatic thinking systems with their associated biases. When people are under pressure survival instincts come to the fore, and more rational longer term considerations are likely to be crowded out.

The role played by fear and insecurity in shaping how we think and behave is highlighted by John Bargh, in his book “Before You Know It”, who argues this has deep evolutionary roots. His experiments have demonstrated that when we are afraid we will be much less open to change and new ideas. Conversely when we feel safe we are much more open to fresh thinking.

This further highlights the importance of providing a ‘safe space’ in which to conduct mediations and finding ways to engage more considered thought processes alongside our more unconscious responses. ‘Tuning the strings of our mind’, as Bargh puts it, to play together in harmony.

One tuning mechanism that Tim Harford recently drew attention to is asking people to write down how things work, particularly if they have strong views on how they think they work! This is based on experiments two Yale psychologists did almost twenty years ago concerning practical subjects

like the working of a lavatory flush. When faced with the prospect of explaining something in writing (with drawings if needed) people's confidence in their knowledge often goes down the drain. The same effect was also seen in later experiments, which were set in a political context, when people were asked to explain policy ideas over which they had strongly held positions.

In the jargon this tendency to overrate one's own knowledge or capabilities is known as 'illusory superiority', for example, over 90% of people in one US survey considered themselves to be above average. The simple act of having to write something down can bring a little humility and perhaps help us see that there might just be something in the other person's point of view.

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