

Kluwer Mediation Blog

The art of the possibilist

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Wednesday, June 8th, 2022

I recently had the pleasure of taking part in a workshop led by William Ury in which small teams of participants were invited to apply his **BB3** framework to challenging situations they were confronting. BB3 brings together a number of ideas and approaches that Ury has contributed to the field of mediation and negotiation over the years. It draws deeply on his experience of helping with so many seemingly insurmountable conflicts around the globe.

The first B relates to the **balcony**: a place to go to pause and find time to reflect, consider different perspectives and better understand underlying needs and interests. The balcony offers the opportunity to zoom out to consider the bigger picture, including what the best and most realistic alternatives to a negotiated agreement might be. It also offers the chance to zoom in and dig deeper to really understand what's at stake for all involved.

The second B is for **bridge**: to better connect the parties in a conflict, deepen understanding between them and help them work together to solve the problem they face. Bridge builders will listen carefully, nurture trust, work with other's ideas and have an eye to perceived fairness. They will aim to move beyond zero sum thinking to try to increase the size of any pie before trying to divide it and be very creative in the search for possible ways forward.

Ideas to build bridges include: helping those you are negotiating with write their 'victory speech' to constituents to make it easier for them to meet your needs; and using a single negotiating text on which parties work together to engender a sense of joint problem solving

3 is for the **3rd side**: this includes mapping and understanding the different constituencies who have a stake in any conflict, these can be formal, if approval of a potential deal is needed, or they might be more informal but no less influential on those involved in the negotiation. The 3rd side can also be a source of ideas with which to 'swarm' an issue with collective intelligence greater than the sum of the parts. It may also provide a source of added value to help resolve the issue (like the wise old man in the 17 camels riddle!).

The different elements of the BB3 framework don't stand alone, they overlap and form a coherent whole. For example, 'Wizards' could be considered both bridge builders and 3rd siders within teams. These are subject matter experts who support but don't lead negotiations. Knowledgeable yet 'disposable', wizards in each party can more easily generate 'what if' possibilities, which negotiation leaders (with face to save) might find it harder to broach.

At a time when events in Ukraine remind us daily about how destructive conflict can be for all involved, the BB3 workshop demonstrated the potential of tackling disputes through creative negotiations founded on the underlying needs and interests of participants. No matter whether you are directly involved in a negotiation or helping facilitate one, taking time to go to the balcony, build bridges and engage the 3rd side can make a real difference to seeing, creating and grasping possibilities for a positive way forward.

The economic importance of being able to respect and deal creatively with difference is emphasised in a recent [book](#) by Oded Galor, an Economics Professor at Brown University (The Journey of Humanity – The origins of wealth and inequality). After reviewing global human history he concludes that there is a sweet spot for economic development in levels of diversity in society – too much and this leads to conflict, less trust and insufficient cooperation to produce public goods which support development, too little and innovation and the cross fertilisation of ideas and experience is stifled. As technology has developed this sweet spot has increased as innovation has become ever more important.

“any measures that successfully enhanced pluralism, tolerance and respect for difference would further elevate the level of diversity that is conducive to national productivity. And given the likelihood that technological progress will intensify in coming decades, the advantages of diversity in societies that are able to foster social cohesiveness and mitigate its costs are only set to grow.”

Approaches like BB3 which help us deal more effectively with inevitable differences are important in their own right in directly improving wellbeing – and they can also have important indirect benefits through their impact on productivity and economic prosperity. As the level of cohesiveness in many societies appears to be increasingly under strain for various reasons this work becomes ever more vital.

For more information about BB3 please contact Liza Hester at liza@williamury.com

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