

Kluwer Mediation Blog

When Conflict Can't Be Resolved

Charlie Irvine (University of Strathclyde) · Tuesday, March 12th, 2013

Last Sunday in Edinburgh I took part in a panel on the subject of Intractable Conflict. The principal speaker was Oliver Ramsbotham, Emeritus Professor of Conflict Resolution at the University of Bradford, and author of 'Transforming Violent Conflict: Radical Disagreement, Dialogue and Survival' (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010). He described a familiar, if depressing, phenomenon in which the best efforts of all parties, including mediators, negotiators and politicians, appear to leave conflict untouched. Indeed, in the case of Israel/Palestinian it seems to get worse every year.

I make no claims to expertise regarding that conflict. However, listening to others with great passion and knowledge got me thinking. Even as an interpersonal mediator, dealing with apparently prosaic employment, family and business disputes, I face intractable conflict on a daily basis. Contrary to popular myth, mediators don't only deal with "nice" situations. We also meet those who are too scarred, intimidated or enraged to contemplate "resolution". Sometimes they come close to engaging, only to decide that the cost is too great, or more often that the only language the other understands is force/threat/litigation. The crucial question for third parties is this: is it better to intervene or not? In the face of intractable conflict, should we simply walk away, or can we provide meaningful help?

So I started to wonder if lessons from the interpersonal sphere could be applied to inter-group conflict and vice versa. The answer may be no. Below I describe two ideas that have come my way as a jobbing mediator in Scotland. I offer them in a spirit of enquiry. They may not be applicable to large-scale, historical conflict. On the other hand, it would be surprising if there was no commonality between the collective and the individual level.

1) **Unconditional Negative Regard (UNR)**

Parodying Carl Rogers' "Unconditional Positive Regard" this term describes a common stance, which with practice becomes a lived reality, in which a person assumes the worst possible motives of the other, irrespective of available evidence. This renders the other stable and predictable, thus increasing one's self-efficacy. The key idea is "we know how to deal with these people". Viewed through this prism, even ostensibly conciliatory acts are reinterpreted: "what are they up to now?" or, faced with a concession: "It can't have been worth anything to them anyway."

Rogers set out five characteristics of the fully functioning person, which unconditional positive regard is intended to support. UNR seems to work against them, in the following ways:

- a) Openness to experience – severely constrained because of the harmful intentions of the other;
 - b) Existential living – "living for the moment" – high risk because of the possibility of harm.
- Stories of the past are rehearsed to ensure that allies (particularly the younger generation)

understand the baleful nature of the enemy;

c) Trust feelings: strangely these can be reinforced, not in the sense of trusting the other but rather in trusting our instincts. This induces a kind of gullibility of cynicism, where only the worst result is imaginable;

d) Creativity – diminished because of the predicted malign intentions of the other. It is safer to stick to the known;

e) Fulfilled life – the defended state of UNR is unlikely to spell happiness, joy or openness. We have to maintain our guard.

Depressing stuff. My main observation is that UNR harms victims as well as perpetrators. In seeking to reduce its hold, it is vital to stress that one is not attempting to condone the actions of the other side. Can anything be done? At the individual level, the only tonic to UNR is repeated contrary evidence. In mediation I often use the term “trustbuilding” to emphasise the tentative, incremental nature of agreements. This is painstaking and difficult, and often requires at least one adversary to take a risk and make a unilaterally generous move. It is important to understand that, when UNR takes hold, one contradictory episode is unlikely to be enough. People need time to heal, and if we see UNR as a traumatic response to conflict we might understand that it will not dispel easily or entirely in the rational realm.

2) Conflict Spirals

Interestingly, interpersonal mediators often draw on Friedrich Glasl’s work on large scale conflict (see Thomas Jordan (2000) ‘Glasl’s 9-stage Model of Conflict Escalation’ <http://www.mediate.com/articles/jordan.cfm>). Glasl set out nine steps in the development of conflict, each increasing in seriousness as behaviour is driven by the ineluctable logic of responding to the other side. They are:

1. Hardening
2. Debates and polemics (arguments stated in extreme terms to force either/or choice)
3. Actions not words
4. Images and Coalitions (other side seen as uneducable: “Such people are unable to change”)
5. Loss of face (retaliatory acts are justified)
6. Strategies and threats (mutual threats harden into ultimatums; parties lose control over events)
7. Limited destructive blows
8. Fragmentation of the enemy (try to destroy the enemy’s vital systems – tends to suppress internal opposition)
9. Together into the abyss (“The drive to annihilate the enemy is so strong that even the self-preservation instinct is neglected”)

In intractable conflict, people may live for substantial periods in steps 7-9. This is likely to have neurophysiological effects. When I see the other as an imminent existential threat I am likely to find myself triggered into defensive responses. What has been described as the “reptilian brain” now drives my behaviour (see Jeremy Lack, “The Neurophysiology of ADR and Process Design: A New Approach to Conflict Prevention and Resolution?” in Arthur W. Rovine (Ed.) *Contemporary Issues in International Arbitration and Mediation: The Fordham Papers*, 2012, pp 341-382). The only logical response is to lash out and repel or even annihilate the enemy. This condition has two effects. First, it is not healthy for the individual. The hormones (such as cortisol) and neurotransmitters (such as epinephrine and norepinephrine) associated with stress and threat can have a harmful effect on our nervous system when they endure over long periods. Secondly, any attempt to explain the enemy’s behaviour will be met with resistance, even hostility, as a sign of weakening and thus renewed threat.

For conflict interveners the implications are intriguing and counterintuitive: the most constructive intervention may be to empower conflict behaviour at levels 4-6 or even 1-3. In other words, the conflict intervener may actually help people to do conflict better. If someone moves from destructive blows to debates and polemics, we attain certain goals (non-violence, reduction of stress) without asking people to surrender their deeper, longer-term principles or aims.

And here it turns out that experience at the interpersonal level maps onto group conflict. One of Professor Ramsbotham's core observations is that, in intractable conflict, the very idea of peace is not only unthinkable but an insult. For those who have invested time, energy, money and, worst of all, the lives of their loved ones in resisting the other, the idea of setting their ideas side by side, as equivalents, is to miss the point. Each side is in effect making a truth claim. Their explanation is not trying to compete with the other: it explains everything, including the other.

So the conflict intervener must first go with the grain of the parties. I see it (perhaps showing my ignorance of martial arts) as judo, not karate. It is only when I show that I have genuinely understood the perspective of the wronged that I earn the right to accompany them. Then we can talk, not about resolution, but about advancing their cause by less destructive means.


To make sure you do not miss out on regular updates from the Kluwer Mediation Blog, please [subscribe here](#).


Profile Navigator and Relationship Indicator

Includes 7,300+ profiles of arbitrators, expert witnesses, counsels & 13,500+ relationships to uncover potential conflicts of interest.

Learn how **Kluwer Arbitration** can support you.

Learn more about the newly-updated *Profile Navigator and Relationship Indicator*



 Wolters Kluwer

This entry was posted on Tuesday, March 12th, 2013 at 5:37 pm and is filed under [Causes of Conflict](#), [Conflict](#), [conflict coaching](#), [Developing the Field](#), [International Mediation](#), [Mediation Practice](#), [Neuroscience](#), [peace negotiations](#), [Uncategorized](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.