
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Musings on Fostering the Collaborative Mindset

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I should state at the outset that I have a confession to make. Not quite yet but soon.

As a long term practitioner and teacher of negotiation and mediation, it has occurred to me on many occasions that much of the conflict, trouble and strife that we experience, whether at an interpersonal level or international level comes from the mindset that we hold. And as mediators, one of our biggest challenges is to assist the parties in seeing and acknowledging that defining the problem in terms of a win-lose competitive mindset is not the most productive. When we succeed in shifting parties' mindset to a more cooperative or collaborative one, then we increase the chances of helping them identify a solution and outcome that is sustainable for both parties.

This led me to musing: Why the prevalence of the competitive mindset? Is it genetic? Is it cultural? Are those that inherit western philosophical and legal traditions more prone as a result of Aristotelian "either-or" thinking? Or does the modern notion that we are separate mean that I am really not concerned with your needs and wants, only with my needs and wants?

Without going into the nature versus nature debate, the writer would like to believe the collaborative mindset can be fostered. There is a story going around the internet about an African tribe and the concept of Ubuntu. It goes:

"An anthropologist proposed a game to African tribe kids. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree and told them that whoever got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run they all took each others hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying their treats. When he asked them why they had run like that as one could have had all the fruits for himself they said: UBUNTU, how can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?"

UBUNTU in the Xhosa culture means: "I am because we are"

I have been unable to authenticate this story so it could well be untrue. But it is a nice story nonetheless and perhaps something to aspire to.

In more modern contexts, we are beginning to see pockets of collaborative activity. For example, collaborative writing was the backbone of the "[Rethinking Negotiation Teaching](#)" project, which saw the publication of four volumes. The development of Linux, an operating system for various computer platforms, is a prominent example of free and open source software collaboration. These are but two examples. It is possible.

How then do we foster the collaborative mindset? My sense is to start this process with our children and what better way to do this than through games and activities? This is where that confession comes in.

I remember reading a book years ago which reframed popular competitive games in a way that was cooperative. I was quite excited about revisiting that book and sharing some of those games here. As life would have it, when I returned to that book, I could find no evidence of the games that I remember! It was either a different book or my anti-hallucination medication is losing effect. So I am left here with no games to share.

As it is said that necessity (and desperation) is the mother of invention, I have identified two personal examples of games that can be used to foster a collaborative mindset.

The first example is something that you might have encountered before in conflict resolution trainings. It is essentially arm wrestling. Participants are paired up and have their arms placed in the standard position for arm wrestling. The instructions are to maximize one's points and a point is scored when the other party's hand touches the table. Typically, pairs will score fairly low if they play this game in the traditional competitive way. However, this game has made enough rounds that some pairs will score extremely high points. The point, of course, is that if the pairs adopt a collaborative mindset and help each other gain points, there is much to be gained indeed. A simple game and a powerful message that can be delivered in a training or workshop.

The second example occurred some years ago when I was playing a computer game with a boy named Sean. The game involved the two of us, each flying an airplane with our mission being to destroy whatever enemy planes and mother ships were thrown our way. Our points were calculated on an individual basis. Along the way, we could collect power ups that made our planes stronger. A strange context, I admit, to teach collaboration but we take what life gives us. As we were playing the game, I asked Sean to let me have one of the power ups and he refused stating curtly that "we were in competition". He proceeded to take the power up even though he did not need and indeed could not use it.

As they say, Karma's a b****. Shortly thereafter, Sean's plane was destroyed and he had to start from scratch. Then came the fateful words from Sean "Can I have that power up?". Much as I would like to report that I did, I said no and took the power up instead. I then paused the game and asked "Are we in competition or do you want to work together to get as far as we can in this game?" It was a learning moment. And we got pretty far in that game.


I apologise if these examples far from perfect. The point is that if we can plant the seeds of collaboration at an early stage, we may be able to make our future jobs as mediators a little easier. I would welcome suggestions as to other games or activities that readers have encountered that could be similarly used.

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This entry was posted on Saturday, September 14th, 2013 at 12:01 am and is filed under [Causes of Conflict](#), [Conflict](#), [Developing the Field](#), [General](#), [Training](#), [Transformation](#)

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