
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Lessons in Life for Mediators?

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Sunday, June 29th, 2014

I am interested in convergence – of ideas, of behaviour, of trends, of different disciplines. The more I read, the more common themes I discern in the arts, science, spirituality, leadership and in what we do as mediators. A reflection of this is found in the African concept of ubuntu, “the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others.” These are the words of Nelson Mandela. Ironically, one of the finest books I have come across recently which encourages this idea of convergence is *Mandela’s Way: Lessons in Life*, by Mandela’s biographer, Richard Stengel.

In fifteen short chapters, Stengel captures the essence of what made Mandela special – and each one of the characteristics he identifies applies to many of us as mediators.

Stengel paints a picture of a man of contradictions, thick-skinned and easily wounded, sensitive to how others feel but often unaware of the feelings of those closest to him, not liking to take credit but letting you know when he should get it. He was meticulous, still, attentive, a charmer. He wanted to be liked and hated to disappoint. He had tremendous energy.

More specifically, Stengel identifies these, often related, “lessons” from what he observed in Mandela, which all good mediators would do well to consider:

Have courage: courage is not the absence of fear but learning how to overcome it. “Pretend to be brave” and you are brave. Maintaining integrity, challenging a decision-maker whatever the consequences, taking responsibility for that bold move which others might resist, remaining steady under trying circumstances. All attributes of a fine mediator – and not always easy to hold on to.

Be measured: lose control and you lose the situation. An impassioned reaction should be very rare – and calculated, not spontaneous. Control is the measure of a leader – and of a mediator. That is what people look for in a tense situation. That you remain unrattled and your response remains measured requires self-discipline, consideration of all the options, and having as much information as possible. Think, analyse, then act, Mandela would say.

Lead from the front: not so easy for a mediator. But, when considered as taking decisions to move things on, as changing the momentum, as facing people up to the inevitability of change, as being bold and yet doing so with dignity and humility, perhaps we see the parallel. And you need to be prepared to accept responsibility for doing so.... and to admit if you get it wrong.

Lead from the back: empowering others to act, asking for their help, listening patiently, letting

others influence decisions and take the glory, even while changing the direction of their thinking and actions. Easy for a mediator to acknowledge, but how often do we allow parties and their advisers to conclude the deal and take the credit for that success rather than assuming the role for ourselves?

Look the part: for Mandela, appearance – how he looked – mattered. For him, it made no sense not to judge by appearances. Mandela greeted people, he was not greeted by them....We have only one chance to make that first impression. To play the part, we have to wear the right costume. Do we mediators take that on board? And that how we walk and carry ourselves influences others? That wearing a mask of composure is necessary. People take their cues from how we behave.

These first five Lessons come from the first five chapters of Stengel's book. Other chapter headings, which include See the Good in Others, Know When to Say No, It's a Long Game, Loves Makes the Difference and Find Your Own Garden, should further whet the appetite. And "It's Always Both" astutely sums up Mandela's approach to life's problems..."if we cultivate the habit of considering both – or even several – sides of a question...of holding both good and bad in our minds, we may see solutions that would not otherwise have occurred to us" – or help others to see what would not otherwise have occurred to them.

Such an approach, Stengel, tells us, "takes an effort of will, and it requires empathy and imagination. But the reward, as we can see in the case of Mandela, is something that can fairly be described as wisdom." Which of us, as mediators, would not wish to be thought wise?

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