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Paddling against the Current: Embodied Conflict

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Saturday, July 28th, 2018

"I've been trying to tell you, but you didn't listen. You've got to go down more deeply and take more time, you're rushing it and it's too superficial. You're hardly disturbing the surface. You'll make no progress that way. And you are using so much effort. Relax. When you get into difficulty, you are expending too much effort trying to change course. It just takes a little adjustment, just row back a little without making such a fuss. It is amazing how quickly you'll adjust to the flow."

"I've been trying to tell you, but you didn't listen". The words came back to me, floating in the air. Familiar words, spoken with kindness and also a hint of frustration. I realised that I hadn't heard them. I was amused by the irony of role reversal. I am usually the person who needs to remind others to listen. But I'd been struggling upstream for what seemed like an age, though it was only about fifteen minutes. I had started off unsure about my position and reluctant to take any risks. As a result, I had not only played safe but tightened physically and mentally, so much so that I felt like I was clinging on just to stay afloat. One or two others tried to help me to regain my poise, but I was reluctant to appear less than wholly competent, even if it was obvious that I was performing like an amateur on his first stage.

One of the group suggested it might be better for me just to stop now as it would get even more difficult further on. I was unsure, knowing that I was already tired and yet reluctant to admit defeat so soon. So, I was grateful when a senior figure, who had seen it all before, reminded me that perseverance was critical at a time like this, when giving up would have been an easy choice. "You should go for it, I am sure you can do it", he said. Only later did I discover that he was a world expert not only in this field but in another pursuit, even more arduous and demanding of much more courage.

By sticking in and acting on the advice, my first experience of Stand Up Paddle-Boarding became a little more enjoyable. The current was still strong and the wind picked up a little. I got blown about a bit and ran aground twice. But I made it to the end. Indeed, I could have gone on and was disappointed to be told it was time to haul the board out of the river. This, I reflected, is what it feels like to be a beginner in most things. How easy it is to forget where we started out when we have, apparently, become "experienced" and "skilful". How easily our assumed "mastery" can degrade into unconscious incompetence.

These observations will resonate with most of us as we grapple with unfamiliar tasks or feelings of inadequacy. Our reactions under pressure are the result of deeply embedded psychological responses over which we have little control, and which are designed to protect us from danger,

however imaginary. My tightening up was borne of little more than fear of getting wet but mirrored the responses that would have been triggered automatically if my life was actually in real danger. Added to the fear of physical threat was the embarrassment of social failure, triggering similar responses. Knowing all of this, theoretically and intellectually, I still could not behave "rationally". And I couldn't hear the very advice offered to save me.

That same day, I found myself exploring a book which helps to explain all of this (and much more) and which could, for me as a "conflict resolution professional", be one of the most important I have read recently. ***"Embodied Conflict"*** by Oregon mediator Tim Hicks (published by Routledge) is, I suspect, a masterpiece. Sub-titled *"The Neural Basis of Conflict and Communication"* the book's theme is the growing awareness of how our brains work, through many disciplines which include in particular neuro-psychology and neuro-science, and the fundamental importance, to our collective and individual survival, of understanding all of this – and of improving our ability to prevent destructive conflict in all its forms.

He offers a brilliant reframe: *"It's interesting to think about the violence we see in the world, whether at the level of interpersonal relationships, or at the societal and global levels, as a public health issue."* Could this be the missing link in our conflict resolution field? We've often wondered why what seems obvious to so many of us about how we can better manage and reduce conflict hasn't had the kind of impact we feel it should. Arguably, we have mis-defined it, not fully understanding the depth and breadth of both the challenge and what is needed to resolve it.

Some of us have elevated processes like mediation to ends in themselves. They are, however, merely important examples of means to achieve highly desirable goals. We probably need a much clearer diagnosis and understanding of the underlying conditions, while offering a wide range of remedial steps.

Hicks' recognises that "the success of the conflict resolution field has not only been limited but has not achieved its full promise." He says that "what we call "interest-based negotiations" and "collaborative problem-solving" or, more simply, mediation, can be perceived by parties as risky or threatening for a number of reasons." His exploration of this is too comprehensive to do more than offer an inadequate summary of the main themes here. Indeed, his Preface, in and of itself, is one of the best summaries of the issues I have come across.

Recognising that perceived self-interest, difference, group affiliation and poorly managed conflict is everywhere, the author acknowledges the reality of this and comments that it is our response to differences that create waste and harm, with apparent short-term gains more than offset by longer term and aggregate loss. We struggle with the balance between trust and suspicion, cooperation and competition. Perception, meaning and identity often lie at the heart of conflict.

Our human biography charts our efforts to live more harmoniously in the face of our evolutionary tendency towards fear-based and dominance-seeking responses. Our unique capacity for self-reflection comes with the responsibility to work to change behaviours which are inimical to healthy social life, however we define that. Hicks quotes a philosophy professor: we need to "understand the deep history and tragic complexity of political situations", and with deeper understanding of ourselves, and particularly how and why we behave in response to differences, we can better prevent or manage inevitable conflicts.

This Hicks offers to do by linking "conflict resolution theory and practice to the basic

physiological function by which perceptual experience is encoded in neural structures of meaning." In other words, how the brain works, combined with the experience of the whole body, determines how the mind experiences self and other and how we behave in relationships – and in conflict. The primary question of the book is thus: "How might an understanding of the neural workings of the brain help us work more effectively with parties in conflict?"

In case we are concerned that the author is about to descend into a neuro-psychological black-hole, he reminds us that: "We are biology and chemistry, but we are also our lived experience. In understanding the neural roots of cognition and behaviour, we have to continue to work with people at the level of their and our lived experience. We have to maintain a balance between the science and the humanity of life."

It seems, humbly, to me that, however much some of us in the conflict resolution field may see ourselves as mere brokers of deals, shuttle diplomats or bangers of heads together, such a limiting approach is no longer good enough. If we are to add real value and take this field to where it needs to go, we simply must keep paddling, persevering, trying to acquire greater mastery of the difficult stuff, and overcoming our fear of social failure or appearance of technical incompetence.

For starters, Hicks' Appendix digests specific practical approaches discussed or suggested in the book. But the book as a whole is likely to be essential reading for those who really want to get under the surface and make a real difference.

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Tim Hicks' book is a really helpful guide if we choose to listen and go deeper. It will help us to disturb the surface and make progress against the current. We must do so.

This entry was posted on Saturday, July 28th, 2018 at 3:28 am and is filed under Bias, Cognitive Bias, Commercial Mediation, Decision making, Developing the Field, Dispute Resolution, Future of mediation, Mediation and Society, Mediation Practice, mediation process, Mediators' Conduct, Neuroscience, peace negotiations, Personal Development, Policy, Practical Challenges for Mediators, Promoting Mediation, Public Policy, Reflective Practice, Scotland, shuttle mediation, Skills, Social intelligence, Success in mediation, The role of the mediator, Tips, Transformation, Trust, Uncategorized, Understanding mediation
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