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# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Process and Empathy are Critical for Success in Political (and other) Negotiations

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Tuesday, May 28th, 2019

“In negotiations of all kinds, the greater your capacity for empathy – the more carefully you try to understand all of the other side’s motivations, interests and constraints – the more options you tend to have for potentially resolving the dispute or deadlock.” These are wise words from negotiation guru, Deepak Malhotra of Harvard Business School. He goes on to conclude that “a lack of empathy usually guarantees failure.”

If these observations were merely academic, we might nod sagely and agree. But they are not. We are hearing more these days about a lack of empathy at senior political levels. Sadly, Malhotra’s words may provide at least a partial diagnosis of what has gone wrong with the UK’s Brexit negotiations.

In his book, ‘Negotiating the Impossible’, Malhotra describes three central components of effective negotiation: framing, process and empathy. Another notable writer in this field, Kenneth Cloke, in his latest book ‘Politics, Dialogue and the Evolution of Democracy’, emphasises the criticality of these components, which he describes slightly differently as content, process and relationships.

Cloke points out that nearly all of our focus in solving political problems is on content while comparatively little time is spent on process and relationships. This may be fatal to solving seemingly intractable issues – like Brexit. Ironically, working hard to build trust and goodwill, being careful with language and showing respect for contrary viewpoints, enhances rather than diminishes the prospects of success. Obvious perhaps. But, to an observer, this doesn’t appear to be the experience in Brexit negotiations and we in the UK may suffer the consequences.

As Cloke says: “when we act unilaterally, in our own exclusive self-interest, in matters that directly and significantly impact others, they feel disrespected and more inclined to resist.” He suggests that if we added up the costs we incur as a consequence, the results would be “staggering” and would vastly outweigh the cost of learning how to talk and act together. Think of the costs already incurred in the UK economy because of the uncertainty arising from Brexit. £600 million per week according to one report. Staggering?

Where does this lead us? Any new negotiating approach to Brexit must, it seems, address these issues of process and empathy. The associated field of neuroscience now reveals much about how we act and react in difficult situations\*. Surely we need to apply this understanding in the political world? Adversarial, binary approaches which stimulate the fight or flight response (and yes/no;

in/out; right/wrong; right/left) may no longer be fit for purpose. We must find ways to deal with complexity, volatility, uncertainty, and ambiguity. We need leaders who understand and can work with these ideas.

This leads to the question of political leadership. The UK's political leaders may have years ahead of difficult negotiations about our future relationship with Europe. Who, of the possible candidates for Prime Minister, has the intellectual and emotional range to handle these negotiations in a way which will ensure constructive political, economic and social relationships?

(\*I am re-reading Oregon mediator, Tim Hicks' ground-breaking book, Embodied Conflict, at the moment. It really is excellent. Tim is speaking in Edinburgh, Dublin, London, Berlin and Salzburg in early June – catch him if you can!).

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