
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Think big. Act now. Together.

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Wednesday, April 8th, 2020

So ended a recent article in the FT by Martin Wolf on the economic response needed in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. In it he argues that Governments acting in the collective interest must be the buyer of last resort as well as the lender of last resort to prevent the economy imploding as both demand and supply contract and business and individuals go bankrupt.

It is somewhat paradoxical, as we sit in isolation or at least at some social distance from each other, that the virus has reminded us how inextricably our fates are bound together. To address the challenges we face as a species, be it a pandemic or the climate emergency our actions have generated, requires coherent, collective action both within places and between places. As Martin Wolf also argues, it will be vital to move away from the increasingly zero-sum approach of today's politics to rebuild a co-operative and healthy global order.

It perhaps takes a crisis to remind us of how much we are all in this together. At the conclusion of the Bretton Woods Conference, convened to establish a new international economic order at the end of the second world war, the US treasury Secretary said: *“There is a curious notion that the protection of national interests and the development of international cooperation are conflicting philosophies... We have come to recognize that the wisest and most effective way to protect our national interests is through international cooperationthe peoples of the earth are inseparably linked to one another by a deep, underlying community of purpose.”*

Individual states acting alone and in concert have a key role to play in organising the collaboration needed to solve collective action problems. In their recent book ‘The Narrow Corridor’ Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson explore the relationship between the state and society. They conclude that the maintenance of liberty requires a balance between states having sufficient power to moderate inequitable social arrangements, while not becoming so powerful that they become despotic. This balance is achieved through an ongoing struggle between state and society to prevent either becoming too dominant and overwhelming individual liberty.

In a similar vein, Colin Woodard's book ‘American Character’ charts the history of the relationship between the objectives of individual freedom and the common good in the context of American politics He contends that a well-functioning society needs to balance sufficient personal freedom and agency with the benefits of a society that works together and looks after each other when needed.

The balance between freedom and common good, between the state and society and between the

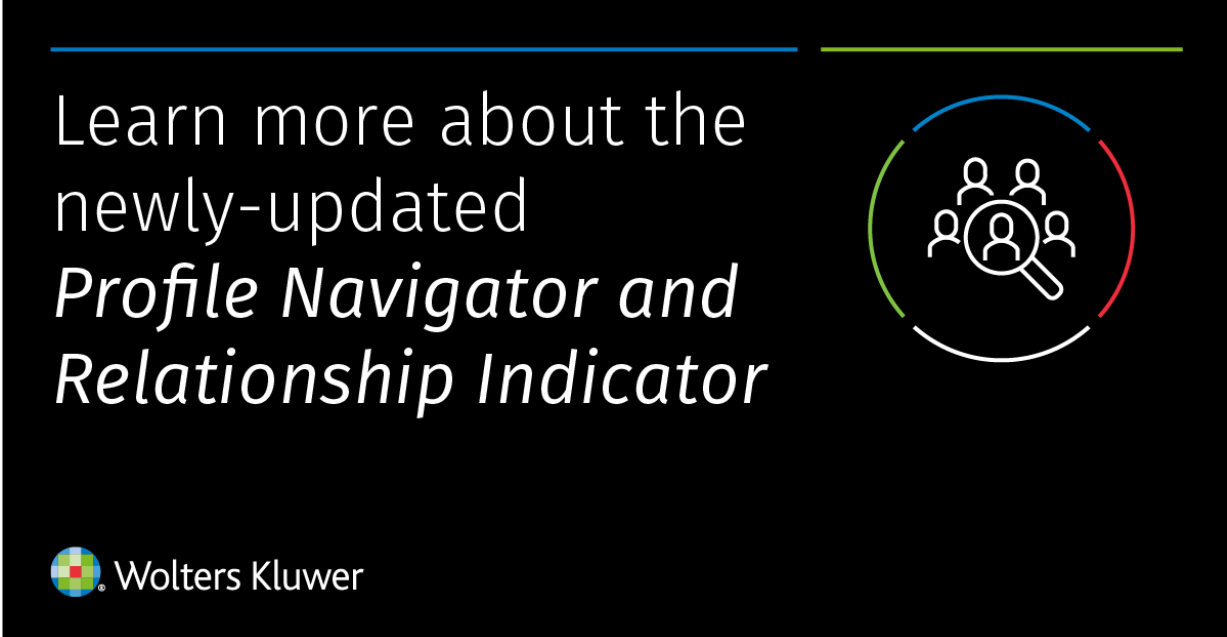
interests of individual states is very fine. It is continually in tension and without the right sort of dialogue can break down and result in a zero sum mind set. This is where mediation has such a vital role to play in helping foster positive and respectful dialogue that can help build real understanding of underlining needs, avoid positions becoming entrenched and develop positive sum options, which address mutual interests.

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