



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING LECTURES

Leading Through Conflict

Transform Differences into Opportunities

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Introduction

As the world grows smaller, the opportunities for conflicts multiply. Political and personal, religious and ethnic differences drive people apart - with potentially disastrous consequences and it's the task of the visionary leaders to bring them together. The world renowned mediation expert Mark Gerzon opines that the leaders have failed to rise to this challenge. **Mediation as a concept and practice has become the central theme of today's leadership theory. The quality of mediation is directly proportional to the skills of the mediator.** These skills once perfected by the practitioners would facilitate every leader to deal with conflict of his life effectively and creatively, which with minor extrapolation means his professional world and the world at large.

The Backdrop

The momentous and transformational terror attacks of **9/11** and **26/11** are sufficient to give a fair idea of the world we live in. **9/11 threw up a great leader who rose to the need of the hour in Rudolph W. Giuliani.** India couldn't match that response when faced with a similar predicament in Mumbai. The story beyond that is another story. The handling of these two situations at the leadership level also throws open a Pandora's box. With the simple addition of national, regional and sub-regional issues, the leaders task is very neatly cut out. Besides this, there are numerous other critical issues which divide us in a manner unimaginable. The history of mankind stands testimony to inherently contradictory trends in human development. **Today's world main contradiction is globalization and global village and simultaneously a fragmented world, the worst so far in human history.**



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This concept and practice has been enunciated by Mark Gerzon with over three decades of international experience in this field, which primarily revolves around **eight soft skills which either in totality** or in different comprehensive permutations and combinations can lead to resolutions which are one its kind, being both innovative and transformational and thus sustainable over time and space.

Need

The increasingly growing challenges of global economics and politics needs a new kind of leadership typically different from the yesteryears. This would be a part of the silent, yet very effective revolution taking place around the world, which is termed as the **negotiation revolution**. It has become a dire necessity and not a fancy or luxury which it was thought out to be, till recent times. The pyramidal systems are slowly giving way to horizontal systems, the orders of the today would be the negotiated decisions of tomorrow, made through a non-hierarchic decision making process. **Organizations and societies flatten from pyramids to networks.** The new model of leadership which ought to emerge, should have the capability to deliberately put the conflict at the center and resolve in a manner where whole is the critical issue, a multidimensional, holistic, all stakeholders satisfying resolution.

Jim Collins in his book Good to Great talks about the kind of leadership needed for greatness which is not charismatic larger than-life leadership of brilliant individuals; rather, it is what they call “ **Level 5 Leadership.**” Level 5 leaders “**are ambitious, to be sure, but ambitious first and foremost for the company, not themselves.**” **Personal humility is rightly blended with high inspiring standards for the system.** Level 5 leaders, thus, lead from the whole. This model of leadership is not only needed on the larger stage but in our work organizations as well and moving further at the micro level, in our families and personal lives.



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Structure

After this brief introduction including the backdrop and the need, I would be introducing the topic in detail inclusive of new model of leadership, also discussing the three faces of leadership, the demagogue, the manager and the mediator. The critical component of eight tools of the mediator follows next: integral vision, systems thinking, presence, inquiry, conscious conversation, dialogue, bridging and innovation. After going through leadership soft tools, I will discuss learning for transformational change and then a simple but sophisticated check list, when conflict erupts - guidelines for in times of crisis and then the final conclusion.

Reality Check

Each of us leads a life of conflict, may it be home, organizations or countries. Conflicts can either be eruptive or hot or can be subdued/simmering or cold. The impact of either of the two can be equally devastating. The intermingling has reached a point that someplace is infused with everywhere and someone is connected to everyone. The world plays host to 63,000 transnational companies and 800,000 subsidiaries accounting for 25% of the world GNP. Around 40 years back, 60% of the top global companies were American, today it is only 1/3. **The borders are in the process of coming down, may it be tariff, political or ethic borders.** Senior executives of the private sector are forced to be responsible to all the stakeholders today. Leading as if the world stops at the edge of one's tribe, religion, nation or corporation has become both impossible and impractical.

Diversity and change have become the URLs of the day and technology is literally morphing everything under sun, decision making is becoming more and more complex with every passing day and world is forcing us to get over us VS them mentality and get into a functional model where the reigning mindset is of collaboration and innovation.



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New Approach

The hammer story best exemplifies the new approach wherein a handyman carries a tool box full of hammers of different shapes and sizes; as he pulls out one hammer after another, the customer gets both nervous and angry as he was convinced that instead of the job being done, the house would be a wreck. Unless he invests in new tools and learns how to use them, he should be fired for sure.

This is the story of the modern day leaders in general more so in countries where leaders don't belong to higher academic levels. The yearning for new leadership tools is apparent in many organizations today and communities both large and small. Thus, there is the urgent need for a new model of leadership, the one which takes dealing with conflicts and differences as the central goal.

The goals for the new leadership is neatly cut out: improve workplaces which are under unprecedented external and internal pressures, revitalize communities which are more diverse and fragmented, strengthen schools by restoring health and vitality of the educational process, fostering relationship between political parties leading to better government policies , facilitate creation of positive, productive and non-suspicious attitude towards difference in groups and constituencies. **Martin Luther King Jr. says, " The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."**

Three Faces of Leadership

The three faces of leadership in the present day world are of the demagogue, the manager and the mediator. The **demagogue** leads with fear, threats and intimidation and has the urge to turn opponents into scapegoats, uses lies and propaganda to dehumanize the other and resorts to violence to dominate and destroy the other.

The famed **manager** leadership model is mainstay of businesses worldwide operates based on an exclusive , limited definition of "Us." The purpose is defined in terms of the self interest of his or her own group and will not deal with issues,



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decisions or conflicts that cross boundaries and is productive and effective only on the home turf.

The Mediator

The sought after leadership model, futuristic in nature is that of the mediator. This goes way beyond the conventional use of this term as an intermediary to reconcile differences particularly in political and military conflicts. Today the meaning of the term has exploded beyond the original use. Beyond the headlines we encounter regularly, we will encounter another, much wider dimension of mediation.

Nelson Mandela on his leadership as a mediator says: “ My hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people... I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away (another) man’s freedom is a prisoner of hatred and locked behind the bars of his prejudice...Both are robbed of their humanity. When I walked out of prison, that was my mission: to liberate the oppressor and oppressed both.”

The mediator strives to work on behalf of the whole, thinks systemically and is committed to ongoing learning. **He builds trusts by building bridges across the dividing lines and finally seeks innovation and opportunity in order to transform conflicts.** The number of such leader and the momentum these movements take would decide the destiny of the world and the quality of life which is assured to every single citizen of the world.

Eight Tools of the Mediator

Integral Vision

Integral vision is defined as committing ourselves to holding all sides of the conflict, in all their complexity, in our minds and hearts. Nadal al-Nashif, an Arab woman, UNDP Country Director, posted a Baghdad got seriously injured in a bomb attack outside UN office on 19th of Aug 2003. After months of



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convalescence, she returned to a desk at UN headquarters in New York. She manifested commendable level of grit, dedication, determination and hope and was dedicated to bring peace and prosperity to the Arab world. She continued to hold fast to her vision, despite her loss of innocence. Nadal was torn by competing impulses but to the best of her extraordinary skills was holding to the whole. UN strategy committed herself to identifying with all the constituencies. Integral vision is where it all begins. **The challenge is to recognize that while each of us reside in a “part,” we can nevertheless seek to identify the whole.**

“In this transformational age, we learn to adjust our vision in order to see the whole the way our predecessors in the previous eras saw the part.” Community leaders should be blessed with a vision by which they can view the whole community. Social and ecological context should become an integral part of the corporate thought process. National leaders become capable to see the nation as a whole and global leaders can visualize the world in the true sense. **Simplistically, it means including and transcending different viewpoints.**

Power of integral vision is beautifully articulated thus: faced with silence: do everything publicly, faced with fear: be sincere and dialogue, faced with violence: talk and negotiate with everyone and faced with exclusion: find support in others. The tips to make this soft tools successful can be summarized thus: check your vision, don't replace one border with another, watch your language, take a long shot, develop maturity of mind and learn to see through the wall.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is the capability of identifying all or as many as possible components of the conflict and understanding the relationship between them. One of the most critical questions of leadership today is where do you define the boundaries of the system which you are a part of? **Our very survival depends on being a better systems thinker in this modern globalised world.**

Current leadership is leading different sectors apart from each other says Daisy Ncube Gwanda, one African homemaker. Politics has political leaders, the



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economy or the business sector has its own leaders, commercial farmers their own and so do academicians, researchers, NGO's etc have their own leaders. Each of the sectors have different goals. The politicians wants voters and followers. Business people aim at profit maximization and want us to be used as markets and workers. Commercial farmers want us as farm workers and for their market. The churches and the NGO's want us as members and as project leaders.

All these leaders want us to follow them. As a result of fragmented leadership the world has polarized on those lines, not as watertight as they want it to be. As a result jealousies and tensions grow and then tensions turn into conflicts and fights over resources and territories. The people are tired of being led apart. The issue is of selecting "better boundaries" means learning to think and to lead systemically, that is, not limited to boundaries, borders or cultural and personal "blind spots."

The concepts emanates from the thought that ultimately there are no parts at all, hence the properties of the parts can be understood only from the dynamics of the whole. What we tend to call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships. The tips of improving this skill is to keep it simple, think systematically about your role, view yourself and your organization from "outside the box," practice asking and then what? And think twice before you call somebody as "enemy."

Presence

Presence means applying all our mental, emotional and spiritual resources to witnessing ourselves to which we are now a part. The human tendency is not to give its best in a natural manner. Most of us are stuck, to varying degrees in less than present behaviors. "**Being Awake**" is an excellent, down to earth way of describing the quality of presence that we need when dealing with a conflict. It is less about what the Mediators know or can do than about who they are. **Describing the experience of presence is like commenting on the taste of wine : words are inadequate; you still need to taste it.** One has to be present in both time and space. Dag Hammarskjold, former Secretary General, UN, says "



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The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside.”

This tips of this soft skills are: finding your own path, practice as a reliable witness, be present even in the face of fear, pay attention to energy, clarify your motivation, promote presence in meetings and cultivate quite presence.

Inquiry

Asking questions that unlock essential and spiritual resources to witnessing ourselves and the conflict to which we are now a part. The power of questions is unfathomable! What else can we learn about this situation? If there are some useful, perhaps vital information what one lacks? Does the person truly understands the way others see the situation? Should the person consult before he intervenes? And under no circumstances one can allow for what is called as the Inquiry deficit as it can lead to suicidal consequences. The beginning of Bangladesh’s Grameen story can be traced back to Mohd Yunus’s spirit of inquiry.

The tips to get proficient with this soft tool is to make you make your question count, remember that interrogation is not an enquiry, lean your questions towards the light, instead of blaming; try listening more deeply, practice inquiry with those you hate/love, take a simple listening test, listen to master mediators and listen particularly to those who have no voice.

Conscious Conversation

This is art of developing our awareness of the full range of choices about how we speak and listen. As leaders and as individuals we have a choice between how we speak and listen. It is observed that most of the time, conversation turns rather arbitrarily and unconsciously. What actually distinguishes conscious conversation from mere communication is that we are mindful of the how, at what moment, we are choosing to speak and listen.

At least couple of us have the dreams of changing the world, if we intend to do that, first we have to change ourselves including how we talk and how



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we listen. The ground rules to create safe environment for open conversation are: respect, fairness, listening, openness, privacy and commitment. The range of discourse in the mediator engages himself are: debate, presentation, Q&A, discussion, negotiation - interest based and position based, council, dialogue - transformational and inquiry oriented and reflective silence.

The tips that would make you master this art are: go beyond the Robert's rules, set ground rules before you need them, make rules that everyone owns, let go of winning arguments, replace abstractions with relationships and most importantly get out of your comfort zone.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a way of conversing that enables wide range of feelings to be expressed than in debate and it inspires more honesty and forthrightness than other methods. It also avoids superficial compromises. Dialogue has the capability to generate learning, new options and innovations and seeks deeper truth in each perspective.

Dialogue should be applied at the level of mistrust as it prevents getting necessary work done. That fundamentally different frameworks are causing chronic misunderstanding. The changes to be made really effective need to be made throughout the organization or a community. A new strategy or project requires building shared ownership and commitment and when you and your colleagues are recovering from a crisis, the only way out is a dialogue, lack of which will stall the recovery process, if not fully throwing it out of gear.

Dialogue is not about physical act of talking at all, it is about mind unfolding. To make its usage easy in life: seek the ripple effect, uncover assumptions, make hidden agendas visible, and equalize power relationships. Other factors that smoothen this process are: when necessary combine dialogue with action, when trust is low rebuilt it, challenge arrogance with dialogue and use respect to dissolve stereotypes.



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Bridging

Bridging is building actual partnerships and alliances that cross the borders that divide an organization or a community. This is the process of generating more information that has the capability to reframe the conflict more constructively and also helps forge a new integration that creatively synthesizes two or more positions. The analogy would be launching a joint inquiry that finds a previously uncharted path through conflict. **“We” is the critical word in the bridging process, at least in some aspects, “them” and “us” in the conflict must be transformed into a credible and durable “we.”**

In the days to come, leaders who are mediators would outperform those who aren't because they know how to build partnerships and alliances, that are key to enduring success. Equity, transparency and mutual benefit tremendously increase the chance that bridging relationships would lead to innovations. The proficiency of this skill depends on making one step at a time, bridge idealism and practicality, build from the middle and not from on top, think like a minority, raise the level of the game, learn bridging by doing it and think in terms of webs, not walls.

Innovation

Innovation means catalyzing social or entrepreneurial breakthroughs that foster new options for moving through conflicts. Innovation is more than a tool. Innovation is a potential breakthrough emerges out of careful and creative application of all the seven preceding tools. **Innovators are bridging between otherwise separate, insulated worlds in order to create breakthrough innovations.**

What can call as an innovation? To become innovation, something must change the way people in a conflict situation think and act. It should not make incremental but transformational difference in their lives. Innovative idea, plan or process must be adopted by those driving the conflict. Innovation as a end of the linear process of mediation would mean developing new and more reliable information, coordinating of a joint inquiry, integrating competing approaches, creating



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bridging organizations, launching collaborative projects, designing better contracts, agreements and legislation, renewing atrophying institutions and finally changing the game altogether.

Innovation in this mediation model broadly work on not seeking the limelight, practicing collaboration as well as preaching it, emphasizing co-leaders and teams rather than individuals, fixing the process and not just the problem, ensure that rules are fair and learning to dance. Dance is the final synthesis of every effort to perfection.

Learnings for Transformational Change

The understanding of today's world, the need for the mediator model of leadership and the tools which help achieve the goals brings us to the question of learnings for transformational change. The learnings are: raising a conflict literate generation, learning how to turn conflict into an asset, using mediator's tools in public forums, running healthier political campaigns, forming mediation teams for conflicts, creating an UN Inquiry Council and working together for a sustainable, equitable future.

When Conflict Erupts - Guidelines

The world loves the standard operating procedures, the checklist, the guidelines and the like and Mark Gerzon has not disappointed the reader and presumably the practitioner. He provides guidelines which would stand the test of time and would make you a mediator - leader who would earn respect, can command admiration and would not have to stoop low to demand it. The guidelines are: make time for the ally, breathe - protect yourself, determine your goal and focus on it, speak to who are present, avoid name calling and blaming and beware of self - self righteousness.

The guidelines continues with the important ones being: keep your shadow in front of you, listen to everything but respond selectively, first inquire and then fire, consider calling a third side, take stock before you take sides, listen more and



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Speak less, learn the adversary's "language," let your adversary know you and last and but not the least at all, observe the sacred rules.

Conclusion

The causes and nature of the conflicts are known and also known is the fact that the conflicts are bound to stay, become more complex and indomitable with the passage of time. **The final frontier is to transform these conflicts into opportunities, all that is needed for this purpose is people like you and me, who are willing to become mediators.** Nothing that we do matters more than leading through the conflicts of our time towards a human future that truly honors the magnificent creation to which we all belong.