

# **The Role of the Peacemaker: Adaptive Versus Technical Work**

by Douglas Noll

People often wonder what a peacemaker does. Is it mediation, or is it something different? What distinguishes peacemaking from other mediation processes?

A successful peacemaking process consists of several principles. First, peacemakers must identify the adaptive capacity of the parties in the conflict. Second, the peacemaker must decide whether the conflict poses an adaptive or a technical problem. Third, the peacemaker must ascertain the extent of the adaptive challenge—the gap between the parties' aspirations and their perceived reality and focus attention on specific issues created by that gap. Fourth, peacemakers must regulate the level of distress caused by confronting the issues. Finally, peacemakers must devise a strategy that shifts responsibility for the problem to the primary stakeholders.

When the peacemaker first meets the parties, she must quickly and silently diagnose their adaptive capacity in the conflict. Adaptive capacity refers to the ability to change views, values, behaviors or assumptions. Usually, conflicts are escalated because the parties' have a very low adaptive capacity. If the conflict will be transformed through some type of reconciliation, the parties generally must be engaged in adaptive work. Diagnosing adaptive capacity allows the peacemaker to formulate a plan of action to engage the parties constructively.

Peacemakers must also ascertain the difference between technical and adaptive situations. The differentiating question is: does making progress on this problem require changes in people's values, attitudes, or habits of behavior? If people recognize the problem and can repeat a well-worked solution, then normal mediation processes are efficient. For example, lawyers who have experience negotiating the settlement of automobile accidents are engaging in technical work. The mediator simply acts as an honest broker to facilitate the distributive negotiation. There is no adaptive problem because no views, values, behaviors or assumptions need to be changed.

In situations that call for adaptive work, however, the parties must learn their way forward. This is the work of peacemaking, not generic mediation. Even when a peacemaker has some clear ideas about what needs to be done, implementing change often requires serious and substantial adjustments in people's lives. Adaptive problems typically involve partnership disputes, turf wars within large organizations, family business conflicts, employment conflicts (harassment and discrimination), marital dissolutions and other relationship or identity conflicts.

In adaptive work, the peacemaker must not give answers. Instead, the peacemaker must hold people in the process of adjustment and learning. The peacemaker thus serves as a repository of pain. He controls the pace of giving those pains back—not so fast that people are overwhelmed and not so slow that they would be unprepared to be changed. The peacemaker uses his relationship like a containing vessel for the learning process.

The peacemaker must regulate the level of stress to keep it within a tolerable, yet productive range. The peacemaker can let pressure out by buffering news, temporarily focusing on technical remedies, and organizing action. When the peacemaker raises hard questions, leaving the

adaptive work to the parties, the pressure will rise. By deciding what to bring to their attention and when, the peacemaker not only sets the agenda, but also regulates stress. This is a subtle art and is never easy. Allowing too much pressure to build may cause a re-escalation of the conflict. On the other hand, not forcing the parties to confront the difficult adaptive work will result in the conflict issues being brushed over, but not resolved.

With adaptive problems, the peacemaker must not suggest or impose her own solutions. The peacemaker may usefully provoke debate, rethinking, and other processes of social learning, but provocation becomes a tool in a strategy to mobilize adaptive work toward a solution, rather than a direct means to institute one. When using provocation as part of a strategy, the peacemaker must be prepared for an eruption of distress in response to the provocation and to consider early on the next step. One has to take the heat in stride, seeing it as part of the process of engaging people in the issue.

In contrast, those mediators who view their proposals, evaluations or opinions as solutions to adaptive problems often view escalated conflict as an extraneous complication. They would not see de-escalation through adaptive work as an inherent part of making progress toward reconciliation. Instead, they tend to focus on their own evaluative solutions. Operating with that mindset, these mediators may respond defensively and inappropriately when the parties retaliate with emotional outbursts and intense conflict behavior. Peacemakers, on the other hand, expect this heat, are trained to withstand it, and recognize its utility in conflict resolution.

A successful peacemaking process thus consists of four principles. First, peacemakers must identify the adaptive challenge—the gap between aspirations and reality—and focus attention on specific issues created by that gap. Recognizing that they are working with a problem that existing technical expertise cannot solve, they develop a plan for managing people's adaptive problem-solving.

Second, they regulate the level of distress caused by confronting the issues. They pace the rate of challenge and give structure to the process. This is not just a matter of planning and then implementation by force of authority. Peacemakers must improvise as each of their actions generates information about the capacity of people to engage the issues and learn.

Third, attention must be focused on relevant issues. Finally, peacemakers must devise a strategy that shifts responsibility for the problem to the primary stakeholders. In so doing they must change people's expectations of each other and create conditions for a new basis of trust.