

Ten Principles of Peacemaking

by Douglas Noll

I use the term peacemaking to describe the values and processes involved in transforming difficult and intractable conflicts. Ten principles of peacemaking guide me in my day to day work with conflicts.

1. Peacemaking seeks long term sustainable solutions rather than polite agreements or uneasy and fragile truces to difficult conflicts. Many times, people avoid the difficult work of conflict by layering over the problem with a superficial, nice fix. Peacemaking takes on the painful, difficult, and sometimes frightening aspects of conflict directly.

2. In peacemaking, truth telling and truth seeking are honored, integrity is valued, and trust is given because it is earned. People learn in the peacemaking process to speak from their hearts and minds what they have personally experienced. They are honored for revealing difficult truths when they could brush over them. The peacemaker instills this value in the process and insists on a commitment to truth telling from everyone participating in the process.

3. Peacemaking offers an opportunity to explore and discover that which is as yet unimagined. In many conflicts, the conflict issues are forbidden subjects to talk about because the anxiety of dealing with them is too uncomfortable. Peacemaking allows that anxiety to be contained and managed. As a result, people sense relief at being able to talk about issues that have irked them, sometimes for years. Furthermore, peacemaking allows new visions and ideas about relationships to be explored and perhaps created. The process permits discovery of ideas and solutions that before seemed unimaginable.

4. Peacemaking techniques are creative, exploratory, and filled with the risk, fear, and excitement of discovery. Peacemaking is a fearful undertaking because no one, not even the peacemaker, knows where people will end up. Once the process is underway, however, the fear generated from the anxiety is transformed into the fear of discovery, which creates a certain excitement in people.

5. Peacemaking is a refuge--a safe haven from the incivility and outright nastiness of conflict. Conflict can be nasty and brutal. Very few people enjoy the emotions invoked by conflict situations. Peacemaking processes create an environment of safety and security where the conflict issues can be dealt with carefully and respectfully.

6. The peacemaker is charged with the sacred duty of creating a refuge where people from different backgrounds know they will be heard and understood, where their needs and ideas will be respected, and where they can safely do the difficult work of reconciling their differences. This is a primary value difference between peacemaking and other forms of conflict resolution. The peacemaker takes on the obligation of protecting everyone, seeing that all are given equally high respect and dignity, that all may fully express themselves or not as they wish, all in a place where there will be no personal attacks, insults, or other emotional or physical violence of any sort.

7. The peacemaker must create a place where people are able to approach, rather than freeze, flee, or fight. Peacemakers, knowledgeable in the neuropsychology of fear, always recognize the importance of the environment on preconscious brain processes. Peacemakers are therefore charged with the duty of controlling environments that allow people to approach one another, rather than to defend against one another.

8. Peacemaking seeks to disenfranchise, or confront in a process of controlled escalation, those who seek unfair advantage, who exploit racial or class or gender differences, and who prefer to maintain disparities that favor themselves. Justice is a core value of peacemaking. Resolution without justice does not resolve conflict; it is simply a demonstration of which party holds greater power. A peacemaker's values and integrity may require that the process be shutdown. Some conflicts are such that they must be escalated before peacemaking will be possible. The peacemaker recognizes this and therefore does not sacrifice justice for expediency.

9. Peacemaking involves risks, not the least of which is failure. No guarantees can ever be made that peace will be restored between parties. Every conflict contains the seeds of further escalation that may take root despite the best efforts of everyone. However, the risk of failure is never a deterrent to the attempt at peace, especially when peace seems hopeless.

10. Peacemaking requires tremendous courage by those faced with difficult conflict. Conflict causes people to fear others as well as themselves. What people detest in others is what is inside of them. Thus, to confront others is to confront the same thing within. People know this intuitively, but cannot articulate it. This fear is why so many people avoid peacemaking—they do not have the courage to face themselves, their secret inadequacies, and their deepest fears. Peacemaking is not easy nor is it soft.