XII. Change Agents in Labor-Management Systems

Labor Mediator as Internal Change Agent

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My mostly misunderstood myriad meandering mediator musings:

As a labor mediator, I find myself frequently injected, for very short but intense durations, as an internal change agent. We mediators seldom seek to establish ourselves as part of the furniture—we much prefer to make a strong initial impact and then leave (returning if necessary)—and even less frequently do we permit ourselves to become a part of the permanent landscape. As such, our greatest asset is our ability to quickly find acceptance among the parties, offer conduits for discussion and debate, and establish pathways to achieve resolution. Further, we must achieve all of these without damaging the ongoing relationship between the factions within the organization. We are servants of the mediation process, not the two (or multiple) sides, and we firmly believe we will be able to discern only some, but certainly not all, of the facets and politics in play.

So we are neither fish nor fowl. We are not employed by the organizations with which we work, nor are we hired on a contractual basis as external consultants. Rather, we work with all of the legitimate parties—often the same characters in a variety of settings—to aid them in attaining their own contract. We may return in a facilitative role to help them initiate or develop a "labor–management committee" of permanent status, provide one to three or even five days of training to enhance their communication or skill set (e.g., contract administration), or to them resolve an internal grievance prior to an EEO investigation, or very frequently an arbitration hearing.

Within the above framework, and immersed in this context, we have a variety of choices to make concerning not just our role and methodology but our long- and short-term goals as well as we seek to find common ground. We attempt to both gain labor and employment peace and to shape expectations around dialogue going forward. Thoughts concerning perceived problem perception areas, key points about conflict, and a tool that has proved useful follow for those who find themselves on a similar journey with the challenges inherent in such a quest.

I make the assumption (I know that we have all been taught just how dangerous those are, but I revel in some of them anyway) that most people, most of the time, will forgive their own reasons for engaging in conflict and concurrently accuse others roundly. We remember competitive acts by others but choose not to notice our own aggressions. We do not modify, ameliorate, or mitigate our demonstrations around power until the relative status between us and others is roughly even or of potentially strong negative consequence, and, conversely, collaboration is most likely when parties are roughly equal in power.

In short, change agents, temporarily employed to ply our trade as neutrals, tread a precarious path wherein we have enhanced status—since we are obligated to no one for our daily bread—but concurrently we must not abuse our authority with behavioral bias. We generally bring both a wide breadth of experience from the world of conflict to a particular environment and a deeper understanding of the motivations behind the actions that are taking place. And because we have no proverbial "dog in the hunt," we have no personal stake in outcomes. Thus we occupy the unique position of floating above the fray and working dispassionately for the greater good of the many who reside in the organization.

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The ability to speak to people in a language they understand and to establish an initial comfort level creates a connection and a bond that strengthens and sustains the participants when uncomfortable change may be required. The change agent's talent to be heard may rely upon his or her ability to transition among three broad regions of mediation: the directive/evaluative, the facilitative, and the transformative. The directive/evaluative style obligates the mediator/change agent to provide substantive ideas for resolution, occasionally pushing and prodding participants to conclusion even at the expense of the relationship links. The facilitative style is more interrogatory, enabling participants to come to their own conclusions and establishing options based on their particular life experiences, preferences, and ideas; it really is a balance between doing the deal and preserving personal bonds. The third style—transformative—pays little heed to a settlement or conclusion and emphasizes the accommodation among the individuals in the extreme.

Just as the change agent fluxes between and among styles, placing the problem in the proper category may provide a fresh perspective for the participants and allows them to rest upon an anchor of stability. These problem categories are the following: relationships, values, interests, bureaucratic, and data/informational. It is understood that not all problems are relationship oriented. But we all know of some problems that exist because we just don't like each other. This is the most complex problem category. Value is the next one in complexity. Sometimes we really don't share the same values as others (e.g., work ethic, sense of mission, etc.). Oh, we like them well enough, but perhaps we don't trust them. Next are the interests: those we share, those we oppose, and those that don't matter to us at all. Often these are reflected in organizational needs in the distribution of its resources. The fourth category is the bureaucratic, or the rules and policies by which we live. This type of problem area deals with structure and reporting, rules and regulations, span of control, and how we manage work. Too few rules, and there is chaos. Too many, and we choke off both creativity and productivity. And, finally, the simplest type of problem area to address is the quantifiable: data and information. It is the only one that is objective and readily observable. It answers the root question, Are we even on the same page?

A major challenge for the internal change agent is to discern when and if the problem at hand has moved from the fifth area of data and information all the way to a relationship controversy at the top through the process of attributing a malevolent intent to the transition. In other words, has the lack of clarity concerning data carried with it an inference on the part of the initial receiver and a negative connotation that has now damaged the relationship because of a reticence, reluctance, or inability to address a conflict? Where this has occurred and been allowed to flourish like a noxious weed, the relationship often becomes a downward, warring spiral, wasting time, money, energy, and good will. The good change agent, as mediator, redirects this flow and clarifies between the parties what the actual intent of the action was and what the impact of the resultant behavior is in each case.

An important secondary tool to achieving this is the Three R's of communication: restating, reflecting, and reframing. The first of these requires the change agent to encourage the initial communication around a dispute or question, a sharing of a restatement in each party's own words around what has been said to obtain accuracy and the certainty that each has been heard. The second R, reflecting, resides in the emotional knowledge that the intensity of feeling has been recognized and that each party can then empathize and value what has been shared. Finally, the third R, that of reframing, provides assistance and support in expressing ideas so that they too can be heard with an open and nonprejudicial mind as the parties seek to move forward in their relationship and collaboration around option expansion.

Thus far in these musings, I have touched upon three of what I call the "Rules of Three":

- Three styles of mediation and change: directive, facilitative, transformative
- Three R's of Communication: restate, reflect, reframe
- Three types of interests

I have also lightly hit upon the five problem types: relationship, values, interests, bureaucracy, and information.

There are additional "threes" that I challenge and encourage mediators and other internal change agents to consider, in other forums, for additional study and reflection. These have also served me well as I flit from confrontation to dispute to conversation to planning and partnerships:

- Three areas of the brain: neocortex problem solving, the limbic emotional, and the often hijacked amygdala (the visceral area for survival, fight or flight)
- Three types of listening: empathic, for connection; "catalytic"—asking questions and providing the catalyst for change; and prescriptive, for offering options
- Three personality areas: values, which are hard-ingrained; attitudes, which may change with circumstance; and beliefs, upon which we take our actions
- Three ego states found in most communication endeavors (from transactional analysis): child, adult, and parent (corresponding to id, ego, and super-ego), which often determine our mindset as the communication process forever flows
- Three time frames for credibility: prior assumptions, based on information about a speaker before the interaction commences; process, from the moment the nonverbal happens until the persons disengage; and post, for what is remembered until the next communicative event
- Three types of trust: calculus trust—literally based on a calculation, exchange, or quid pro quo; knowledge trust—based on experience, positive or negative, between the parties over time; and identification trust, wherein one party truly can speak for the other, on the others' behalf
- And finally, for now, the concept of power, achievement, and affiliation, focusing on basic human needs to control ourselves and impact our environment and vision, our need to gain commensurate respect and tangible goods for ourselves and our family, and our need to be liked and appreciated—in short, to give and get love among those with whom we work and reside. We have all three of these basic human needs, and we have them in infinite amounts and proportion—hence the simplicity and complex conundrum all in one (very Zen-like).

To sum up, the luxury of entering the universe as a change agent in order to make some small contribution to the human interaction in an enterprise cannot be overestimated and is humbling. To be positioned to play a positive role in the lives with whom we come in contact is an honor to be cherished. To take the experience we have hard-won and apply it in real world settings is a joy to be undertaken with a notion of responsibility and ethical obligation that it is important work. And while it is certainly taxing at times, it is also a fascinating way to invest one's time while we are here. At least that's my opinion.