

From the Editor

John Paul Lederach's Peacebuilding Theory: A Reflective Essay

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When John Paul Lederach theorized that the nature and characteristics of contemporary conflicts suggest the need for a set of concepts and approaches that go beyond traditional diplomacy, he was promoting a paradigm shift away from customary conflict resolution practices, which typically emphasize short-term, top-down efforts. Instead, he advocates a holistic approach that encompasses not only peacebuilding, but also peace keeping. Since many conflicts are identity conflicts, which are fundamentally relationship-based, Lederach contends that conflict resolution specialists should begin the process with an exploration of shared meanings, perceptions, and responses to conflict based on social realities, experiences, and cultures. The foundation of this constructive process is transforming relationships to sustain a peaceful existence, and the cornerstones of this structure include truth, mercy, justice, and peace. With a solid base, the building and sustaining of peace is a realistic aspiration.

In his effort to understand identity conflicts, Lederach searched for patterns and common characteristics of deeply divided societies, and discovered that identity conflicts occur when individuals disrespect essential needs, refuse decision-making participation, and deny an equitable distribution of resources. As a result, the conflicts are rights-based, with the conflicted parties fighting for a fair distribution of scarce resources and their collective rights. Their reality is based on a zero-sum mentality, which promotes a “For me to win, you must lose” attitude. Some other interrelated commonalities of identity conflicts that intensify them include:

- Narrow lines of solidarity and identity
- Multiplicity of coalitions and distribution of power
- Intractable animosity rooted in long-standing feuds

The narrow lines of solidarity and identity result from a propensity to seek one's uniqueness by associating with culturally similar groups within a family, race, spiritual or religious community, neighborhood, or some combination of each. When disagreements and resultant divisions occur, the groups become narrower and even more cohesive, and a breakdown in communications occurs. Battle lines are drawn. If measures are not taken at this point to resolve the issues, distrust, fear, and paranoia, fueled by animosity and apprehension escalate the disagreement to the next levels, antagonism and hostility. In turn, when one group feels threatened by the other, solidarity of the groups is strengthened, factions are prominent, and intractability increases. The escalation of contemporary identity conflicts is exacerbated by the immediacy of the experience due to the close proximity of the conflicting groups, their shared experiences, and the perceptions of one another based on their common histories. Further, although class or ideology differences are not at the heart of these conflicts, leaders of the conflicting parties use those emotional concepts as propaganda to widen the schism.

As a result of the dynamics of solidarity and identity, diffusion of power occurs. Contemporary identity conflicts are not infused in hierachal power. Moreover, in conflict settings where there are groups of individuals, each with their own agendas and each competing for influence, positions of regional authority are blurred, causing alliances to continuously shift. As a result, assessing leaders' abilities to control the actions of the group and determining their ability to influence the group becomes increasingly difficult. When the leader's identity, power, and authority are unclear, establishing systems and procedures to resolve the conflict is a challenge for conflict resolution specialists because this diffusion often contributes to short-term, rather than lasting resolutions.

In addition to the power dynamic, effective conflict resolution specialists must fully understand the social-psychological forces behind identity conflicts. Since they are deeply rooted in perceptions, emotions, and subjective experiences that are completely removed from the original issues, conflicted groups are easily manipulated by fear from the group's leader, who may use fear as fuel for accelerating the dispute. Further, the close proximity of the enemy (across the street, instead of across the world) makes retaliation much easier and that perpetuates the cycle of violence. The consequences are entrenchment and propagation of the conflict. As a result, many identity conflicts are generations old. Additionally, the group leaders advance their causes, strengthen their positions, and increase the infrastructure by playing on the emotions of the members. When a dominante or be dominated state of mind prevails, the group becomes even more cohesive and vows to fight for survival. As a result of this intensive group identification, it is increasingly difficult for people to see or admit that the conflict is oppressive, not progressive.

Historically, conflicts have been power-based in nature, and rooted in the formation of structural systems. Consequently, traditional resolution approaches focus on identifying and working with clearly defined authority figures. While these processes work well when historical relationships are nonexistent, when there are clear lines of authority, when there is no immediacy of retribution, and when the conflicted parties are literally worlds apart, the very nature of contemporary identity conflicts render traditional methods ineffective.

Given the emotional, immediacy, and entrenchment dynamics of contemporary identity conflicts, standardized, traditional resolution procedures based on statist diplomacy formulas are not as effective. Further, contemporary conflicts are not only dynamic, but they also have the psychological elements of long-standing animosity that has its roots in a perceived threat to the group's and individual's identity and survival. These cultural and psychological elements drive and sustain the conflict. Since culture is not a neutral participant in any conflict, a one-size-fits-all approach that does not involve the disputants at all levels exacerbates the conflict.

Therefore, an effective process encompasses a frame of reference that focuses on the restoration and rebuilding of relationships and advances the peace building efforts. The conceptual framework Lederach espouses is a marriage of traditional (realism) and contemporary (innovation). Further, he posits that since the relationship is both the basis of the conflict and its long-term solution, giving the conflicting parties a voice and an opportunity to express their pain and acknowledge the other parties' distress is an inherent component of reconciliation.

In addition, a holistic approach involves understanding and forgiveness. Lederach quotes a Psalm that metaphorically outlines the cornerstones of reconciliation and the peace building process. It is "Truth and mercy have met together; peace and justice have kissed". In order to tear down the walls of fear, hatred, and mistrust built by the conflicting parties of identity

conflicts, the parties need truth and opportunity to look at the world through the others' lens. That requires a clear, honest dialogue wherein the groups are empowered to share their experiences, to be heard, and to collaboratively work through feelings, emotions, and positions. Although acknowledgement and accountability for past transgressions moves the process forward, truth alone leads to vulnerability.

Therefore, mercy strengthens the process of building healthy relationships, and it requires compassion, forgiveness, acceptance, and rebirth, which is no easy task. Empathy requires communication free of misunderstanding. In addition, open communication can dispel stereotypes. When both parties are given a voice and empowered to not only be heard, but also to understand the view through the others' lens, the grip of destructive leaders loses its power. Unfortunately, standing alone mercy only provides quick, shallow, short-term resolutions.

The process needs justice to correct past wrongs and make restitution, and this enhances long-term reconciliation. Without justice the underlying issues fester and true reconciliation is unlikely. The final cornerstone, the one that solidifies the structure, is peace. True resolution and relationship transformation are dependent upon harmony, security, respect, and unity, which are the byproducts of peace. Just as a house's structure is weakened and will eventually crumble without the solid cornerstones to sustain it, the peace building process requires truth, mercy, justice, and peace for a solid foundation. If one is missing or defective, the peace building and reconciliation process is in danger of collapse.

Lederach's suggested process differs from traditional models in that it is not a means to an end, whereby when the assumption that peace has been attained, the conflict resolution specialist can move on to the next project. Rather, it is a dynamic process that is analyzed and dissected as it moves through the stages of latency, escalation, and confrontation towards a sustainable peace resulting in reconciliation and relationship transformation. It views the system as a whole in relationship to its parts. Thus, not only the process, but also the interdependent resources, training, and evaluation procedures are considered.

In addition, traditional conflict resolution processes rely on compromises, wherein neither party is fully satisfied. This dissatisfaction promotes a short-term resolution, but not sustainable reconciliation and transformation. As a result, the vicious cycle of escalation, confrontation, violence, and negotiation continues. While the short-term goal of ending the violence should not be discounted, Lederach suggests that the transformation process should look to the future, require social changes, and embrace all aspects of the relationship between the conflicted parties, including psychological, spiritual, social, economic, political, and military.

Rebuilding relationships and sustaining the transformation takes resources, both financial and cultural. And it requires education. While money is an important aspect of the transformation process, simply throwing money at problems does not eradicate them. Educating the people and utilizing their cultural resources is crucial to the peace building efforts. Since conflict is a search for shared meaning, drawing on the experiences of others enriches the training process.

Additionally, the transformation process differs from traditional approaches in its time frame, in that it allows the parties to work together and at their own pace. Since time constraints are not an issue, and the parties are encouraged to carefully and considerately think through the issues group leaders who promote propaganda and encourage stereotypes, fears, and hatred have less influence. As a result, the likelihood of resolving the problem for the sake of resolution is lessened. Long-term resolutions of reconciliation and transformation are attainable.

Reference

- Lederach, J.P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies.* Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace