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Keynote Address

Robert Benjamin: Summary of Address

The election of Barack Obama reflects a change in how we view our leaders and our expectation of them in how they engage in difficult and challenging times. How leaders lead - their style and approach to managing problems - sets the tone and directly influences how the public responds to and deals with conflict in every context. People take note of how the President of the United States operates. If he or she is prone to acting unilaterally, quick to take risks and decisive without a process of deliberation, the message is clear that negotiation is of lesser importance. There is no question that this style serves to intensify the considerable, natural hesitancy and resistance to negotiation which most people in conflict already possess. Leadership style in matters of state, be they domestic or geopolitical, directly influences the willingness or hesitancy of people to consider negotiation or mediation as a viable approach to their disputes.

Looking to the global economy, there should be good business available for conflict mediators in the current financial mess. The current recession appears to be shaping up as a long and deep one and banks, businesses and people may be a bit more disposed to consider creative ways to solve financial problems, especially when legal remedies are largely unavailable or ineffectual. But mediation is not mainstream – it is institutionalized. As mediators we sit with our safe models supported by our self-imposed constraints and limitations expecting people to ‘engage’ cognitively and intellectually. Conflict is not a cognitive state - it is emotional. Intellect and cognitive theories should not be set aside, but they do not work in isolation. As mediators we must engage the emotion, at gut level.

People are predictably irrational in conflict, and yet as mediators, we expect parties in conflict to work with a structured model and to engage in a reasonable and rational way. People in conflict do not elect reasoned negotiation as their first option. The very language of mediation sets us to fail: ‘Win-win’, ‘mutual gain’. The person in dispute wants revenge, they want the ‘other’ to feel injury and pain. ‘Conflict resolution’ – as if we can make it all better. We do not ‘solve’ conflicts, at best we can expect to enable people to manage their conflict. As mediators we must look at what it is we are doing

and how we do it. We must examine the models we work to and challenge where they do not deliver. In order to broaden our vision of what mediation could be we need to release ourselves from notions of what mediation is supposed to be.

Mediation has as much to do with peace-keeping as courts have to do with justice. In mediation is not enough to be committed to peace and peace-building, we are in conflict terrain - effectively dropped behind enemy lines. We engage with people who are feeling hurt and injured and expect them to respond rationally and to embrace the mutual gain theory. They don't want justice, they want revenge. You can't change the people but, if you acknowledge and engage their emotion, you can give them alternatives as to how they will manage. In martial arts you take your opponent's energy and use it to your advantage. In mediation you must engage with the energy if you are to redirect it. Don't abandon the rational, but instead of imposing a rationalist notion, take the energy and make it work for you.

Leaders and conflict mediators are more similar than dissimilar. In purpose, thinking and practice, to be effective, both must viscerally appreciate and be well studied in what some consider the unseemly art of politics and deal making. They must both recognize that people are seldom the 'cool headed reasoners' we would like to think they are. (See Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 1994; Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational*, 2008.) The best leaders realize they can not lead by edict and must be well versed and proficient in negotiation and the best know they must observe the underlying politics if agreement is to be obtained.

Both leaders and mediators must operate a clear awareness of the sources and nature of conflict, and appreciate that it is almost always inextricably personal and business at the same time. They both must know how to manage and convert the raw energy of emotion into constructive action and how to appropriately "name, tame, and frame" issues so that they are susceptible to creative problem-solving. (See Peter Adler, "Leadership, Mediation and The Naming, Taming and Framing of Problems," 2004.) Also, they both must realize that logic is only a small part of decision making and the shortest distance between the problem and the outcome is seldom a straight line. The best mediators are more than mere third party 'neutrals.' Especially in working with complex and difficult matters, they are activist leaders that advocate, not for a particular result, but for the pursuit of a durable agreement. Similarly, the best leaders, while they necessarily advocate for particular outcomes, must also know when and how to negotiate a workable deal.

Early observations of President-Elect Obama, admittedly still

unproven by action, appear to display the basics of those skill sets. If they are highlighted and given prominence, there is reason to believe their value will seep down into the culture of daily life and support a more constructive way of managing conflict. Specifically, much as an effective mediator does, intuitively or intentionally, Obama appears to think in a systemic frame, as opposed to a linear frame, and he operates from a more flexible protean perspective, un-tethered to any particular ideology or orthodoxy. The systemic perspective allows him to present issues realistically and to establish the necessary awareness of the inter-connection between such concerns as the management of energy resources with global warming, without losing sight of economic ramifications, or the corresponding need for education and health care reform. Likewise, the design of his campaign incorporated a sophisticated understanding of the principles of complexity and in particular, the concept of 'self-organizing' systems, all of which was super charged by the 'state of art' use internet technology and innovation to create a synergy that spread virally nationwide.

Obama's personal history, being from a multi-racial and cultural background, offers him up as the embodiment of the 'protean self' suggested by Robert J. Lifton in his book of that name. (*The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation*, 1993). He reflects the diverse background and experience of the soon to be majority of the U.S. population. He appears to have applied his innate sensibilities toward becoming a protean leader, as Peter Adler terms it. ("Protean Negotiation: Rejecting Orthodoxy and Shifting Shapes," 2006.) Obama is seemingly at once a sharp strategist and competitive warrior, a pragmatic and technically proficient problem solver, a headman able to hear and coalesce a 'team of rivals', and, finally, a shaman, eloquently setting a moral vision that calls upon our best instincts instead of our worst fears.

Obama's leadership style offers a model for the highest quality of negotiation and mediation practice and invites emulation and application in other areas. Obama demonstrates a clear recognition that ultimately, his substantive ideas are only as good as the process used to bring them about and that requires negotiation skills, consensus building and inclusive problem solving strategies. His example of pursuing thoughtful agreement is the best advertisement available for mediation and conflict management services in any and every context.

If Obama proves to be an effective a leader, professional mediators and conflict management practitioners would be well advised to take full advantage of his lead and capitalize on the example he sets in their work.

Too often, mediation is about us, the mediator - our values, our

understandings. We present as experts who know better than the person in front of us. We are committed to people making their own decisions once we agree with those decisions. For mediation to be about the parties, as mediator you must become egoless, you must know yourself, how you negotiate, how you yourself engage in conflict.

We bring our life experience into mediation.
