

Reflections on Critical Moments as Transformations

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It seems to me that the notion of critical moments is of concern to all of us because, first and foremost, we want to be better negotiators. We want to have a deeper understanding of what we do. Secondly, we want to be able to teach and train other people about what we do. With those goals in mind, let me touch on the highlights of the articles in this section where critical moments are seen as potential transformations.

In her essay, Kim Leary talks about critical moments as relational moments. She alerts us to the stance of flexibility these moments require. Kim demonstrates the utility of remaining flexible to the emergent features of the conversation. Who we are in negotiation, as in any other conversation, is always emergent. Who I am in a particular negotiation is dependent upon who I am with, and so my taking stock of the ability to use certain actions from within my repertoire in a particular relational configuration, in a particular moment, is of central importance. It is this notion of the emergent self in negotiation, as opposed to the well-defined, predictable self that brings an innovative, relational quality to negotiation.

As professionals, we are reminded that negotiation is not a formulaic process. It is a responsive process. Participants in negotiation are intricately interdependent with one another. We must, therefore, remain open to the ways in which 'the other' collaborates in the construction of our own identities and abilities. Leary's article highlights the need to take a stance towards self and other. She proposes a merging of the self/other discourse.

This approach can be problematic in standard models of negotiation. It becomes very difficult to say "I am this kind of facilitator or this is my approach to facilitation" if we don't know until we are in the moment what our style or method will be. I think the case that Leary describes vividly captures this emergent sense of identity.

Leary also introduces the notions of intimacy and action. How is it that we can be present in the moment when we are negotiating with others? How do we put a human face on this thing we are trying to study (as if it was a science)? Where do we give ourselves freedom to draw on the resources that are already familiar to us? We can not know ahead of time. Yet, we can prepare and prepare like a good musician has to prepare in order to improvise.

Most important, Leary reminds us that the relational is not a component, it is the essence of the process of negotiation. Most of our models of negotiation—and certainly our pervasive cultural understanding of the general process of conflict resolution and negotiation—are born out of the tradition of persuasion. The tradition of persuasion emphasizes that the goal of conversation (argument) is to decide which "side" has the facts straight. Who is "right" and who is "wrong." The idea is to persuade the other side that you have the truth. But, whose truth, whose standards are we using? When we shift our attention to the ways in which the meaning that emerges in negotiation is constructed relationally, we shift our central question as well. We move from "who has the truth?" or from "who is right" to "how do we go on together?"

In my work, I have discussed this shift as the difference between an emphasis on making incommensurate belief systems commensurate (i.e., consensus models) and an emphasis on bridging incommensurate belief systems. The latter focuses on ways in which we can coordinate the multiplicity of views on any given issue. It is in the processes of coordination that “going on together” become possible.

Our attention is focused on discursive practices – on what people are doing together – in each of the three articles presented in this section. Leary, Putnam, and Winship, in their focus on discursive practices, center our attention on the way in which meaning is a relational achievement. One person alone can not control meaning. While one’s intentions might be interesting, in the end, it is in the pairing of one’s actions and the other’s responsive actions that meaning is born. I act. You respond. It is in the joint action (Shotter 1993) that what we do takes on meaning. Linda Putnam’s article illustrates this point well.

Like Leary, Putnam talks about transformation as a process, not an end goal. Critical moments set the stage for this kind of transformative process to emerge. Putnam addresses the conditions for transformation – curiosity, connection, recognition, and trust – all common themes to which this volume gives a good deal of attention. She raises crucial questions: How do we engage in that stance of curiosity? How do we connect? How do we enact recognition of each other and of our difference perspectives? How do we build a sense of trust? Central to Putnam’s piece is the idea of holding tensions together at a level of abstraction that prohibits participants from having the same old familiar conflict. One way to hold different positions in tension is with circular questions. Circular questions are relational questions. They put people in relation to ideas, to beliefs, and to each other. They are about relationships.

Putnam also proposes appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider 1996) as a different kind of dialogue. Rather than begin by assuming that conflict is a problem to be resolved, appreciative inquiry begins the conversation by assuming that relating is a mystery to be embraced. Thus, questions focus on what people do well, moments of success and high points. In this different dialogic space, tensions can be held at a level of abstraction that allows participants to engage in transformative dialogue. Here, people talk from the position of their resources, the things that they do well. How is it that I can do these things well and still not solve this conflict? How is it that I can appreciate or value what you do well but still see you as my enemy? The idea of holding tensions together in an abstract context becomes a generative image; one of embracing complexity.

Drawing on Erving Goffman (1959), Christopher Winship introduces the relationship of veneer and underlayment in the manner of front stage and backstage. When we talk about our performances in negotiations this way, we could fall into the trap of assuming that the underlayment is the reality, and the veneer is just the performance. Similarly, we could lapse into viewing the backstage as who we really are, what we really think, and how we really behave, while the front stage is just for show. The performance metaphor is generative because it takes us outside of the bounded individual and puts the focus on the interactive moment (or joint action). However, as Winship suggests here, the performance is as real as it gets. We are reminded that the veneer and the underlayment, the front stage and the backstage require one another: one is no more real than the other.

All of the articles in this section raise the issue of meaning. Leary, Putnam and Winship present, in a radical way, the idea that meaning is not in the private recesses of the individual mind. It is created between us in what we do together.

I have a colleague who gave me a beautiful metaphor. He studies the transfer of heat from one object to the other using special apparatus. Using this apparatus, you no longer focus on independent objects. Rather, what you see is their confluence – the “space in between.” If we think about this metaphor in relation to negotiation, we can see that we are not focusing on independent

parties, or independent groups of people. Rather, we focus on what they do together. Ed Sampson (1993) has written cogently on this topic. He refers to this as the distinction between a monologic approach to social activity and a dialogic approach. In the former, we make the other our “serviceable other.” In the latter, we recognize that we need the other in order to make any meaning at all.

The implications of this vision for conflict situations and negotiation are radical. Essentially, there is no formula for success. There is only responsiveness to the engaged performances with others. This is why critical moments in negotiation are both transformations and relational moments. There are significant implications for critical moments when we think in these terms because we recognize that there is always a location, a community within which certain ideas have emerged. There is always a place, a location of coherence and rationality. The problem is, of course, that each party in the negotiation does not necessarily have access to the other’s community of meaning. (If and when a party assumes s/he has access to the other’s community of meaning, it is never certain that this understanding is the same.)

We can never be certain of the relational locale of the other’s rationality. Very likely, we are not familiar with the community where the other’s values and beliefs are granted currency. Thus, the critical moment in negotiation is not necessarily a moment during the negotiation, but is often the moment of preparing for the negotiation. It is the moment we create a context where different conversations can take place. Kim Leary’s case study gives an excellent example of a moment when traditional negotiation was too dangerous. Yet, bringing people together for a workshop was something different. It required a different preparation; which in my point of view was the most critical moment.

The common aspect of critical moments, as honed from the articles in this volume, is the bridging of what I term incommensurate discourses. As suggested earlier, the emphasis here (and distinction from many consensus-driven models of negotiation) is not on making the incommensurate commensurate. Rather, our interest is in creating conversational contexts that allow participants to go on together (Wittgenstein 1953). When we take this as our task, we are emphasizing bridging. This shift in emphasis constitutes a critical moment.

In order to perform this bridging, Putnam suggests that we move the conversation to a level of abstraction that allows us to hold tensions together. One way to do this can be seen in the work of the Public Conversations Projects (1992) where participants with strongly oppositional views are first invited to speak from their own personal relationship to the issue at hand. This is markedly different from public debates where participants speak first from their position. The tension of difference can be held when the conversation shifts from debate about one’s stance to a more abstracted story about one’s life experiences and the ways in which they connect to the issue at hand. Queries that invite this move to an abstract level might include: How has this become important to you? Tell us a story about how you came to see this issue as you do. What’s happened in your life to bring you here? In such questions, we see that every rationale, every set of actions, has some locale of meaning, some place where it is coherent. Such a move resonates with Leary’s idea of intimacy. She suggests the need for creating a space for acute listening to other people’s stories so that they are not just representing a position that is oppositional. It also connects with Winship’s recognition that we must acknowledge how our underlying beliefs and values (the underlayment) support our positions and our actions (the veneer) but that both the underlayment and the veneer would not exist without the other.

Another move would be to engage in reflexive inquiry. Very briefly, let me suggest two kinds of inquiry: self-reflexive and relationally reflexive. Self-reflexivity is a form of self-inquiry such as: How else could I say this? How can I be certain? What other possibilities might I have? Another way of talking about self-reflexivity is to encourage ourselves to continually entertain

doubts about our own positions. Are there ways, in preparing for negotiation, to invite participants to hold their own deeply held beliefs in a space of temporary doubt? Can we invite participants to “speak as if” or to not be too quick “to know?” These might be useful avenues to encourage self reflexivity. Can we, in other words, generate that sense of curiosity that Putnam raises?

Relational reflexivity, on the other hand, requires less preparation for negotiation and more attention to the interactive moment. Can we, in the midst of a negotiation, step aside and say, “You know maybe what we’re doing right now is not very useful, what do you think? Is this moving us along?” This is a moment of inviting all participants in the negotiation into the process itself – a theme that is threaded throughout each of the articles in this section.

What typically prevents us from asking such questions during a negotiation is our entrenched notion of who we are as professionals. If we are good professionals, we need to know what we are doing. Ironically, in order to be the kind of professionals we want to be, to move people towards transformation, one of the most generative things we can do is involve all participants in reflection on the process itself. Such a move recognizes the relationship between the veneer and the underlayment and is also a holding of differences and tensions in a more abstract domain.

These articles suggest that training negotiators is not about skills or tools. Rather, it is about relational processes – processes of meaning making. If we work with the conversational resources that trainees bring to their practice, and help them use those resources effectively, creatively, and in ways that are responsive to those with whom they are engaged, we might see the many facets of critical moments and recognize that we will never know how to “make” one happen. In saying this, I am not suggesting we should not train ourselves in multiple models and skills. We need the background, the methods and models so that we can then improvise in the interactive moment. The central question these articles raise is one of preparation. How do we prepare ourselves for negotiation? How do we invite other people to have a different conversation. We can not simply bring them together and expect it to happen. We have to prepare people for the difference. That is the critical moment.

It helps to think of meaning as contingent on the participants, their traditions and communities of relevance. Meaning is never fixed. We want to understand how to proactively create critical moments and generative moves. Yet we are always learning and it is an ongoing process. Our concern might be well placed in a form of interested inquiry for the other and how we might incite them into this same stance.

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