

Introduction

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I've been very lucky. I've been able to talk to exceptionally creative, down-to-earth, practical people who walked into messy and contentious public conflicts and emerged with peaceful and productive solutions. It sounds too good to be true, but it isn't.

Public conflicts about place—about land use and the environment, for example—make news all the time. We hear righteous claims on many sides: Protect! Develop! Forever wild! Highest and best use! So we can't help but wonder what resolutions might be possible. Hardly inspiring our confidence, we hear about public failures of environmental governance all too often. Along this contentious way, we don't learn much about the skills of facing passionate conflicts over place and working through them to emerge with real resolutions: outcomes that allow neighbors, developers, environmentalists, community organizers, and government officials to satisfy their interests and to go on with their lives. So this book will show that much more is possible than we ordinarily think, and we have a great deal to learn from an emerging, if not well publicized, group of experienced community problem solvers.

This book presents the stories of these “facilitative leaders,” as we can call them, in their own words. The work they present, the moves they've made, the strategies they've used—none of these are rocket science, none is esoteric, and all in fact are simple enough that many of us will read and say: “I can see myself doing that!”; “I could apologize and erase what I'd written so that I could listen again and get it right”; “I could map a group's concerns on the wall, sure!”; and so on. In the face of public disputes, mediators, facilitative leaders, and self-styled community builders turn out to be both ordinary folks and extraordinary practitioners too.

In a uniquely practical way, this book presents inspiring and instructive stories of dealing with our differences in tricky and contentious public cases—

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those times when, as citizens or community members, our “sense of place” conflicts with that of others. We examine new possibilities that emerged even after neighbors, residents, or interest groups had been at loggerheads for years, in situations in which few people thought that they could settle their differences, and in cases where neither politics as usual nor the courts nor other means of coercion or persuasion had been successful. In wide-ranging cases concerning land use and the environment, as well as rights and identity, we shall see that community building and peace making in the face of conflict involve surprising and sometimes quite simple practical moves that can help to resolve the divisive issues at hand.

At times, as I have argued in *Dealing with Differences: Dramas of Mediating Public Disputes*, these moves mean refraining from talking about the theological, theoretical, doctrinal, or ideological issues that divide people, but talking instead, in this case, in this locality, about where we should put the stop signs, where we should do very particular, practical, and specific things to address our concerns. Learning what not to talk or argue about and what not to say or do can be every bit as important as learning about techniques or skills that can help us to live together peacefully with those different from us. These cases present practical insights and theory too.

Consider the cases presented here. How did Mike Hughes bring together in the same room—under the auspices of the Colorado State Health Department—sex workers, religious fundamentalists, gay activists, public health workers, community organizers and others in a bottom-up effort to produce HIV/AIDS-focused recommendations to guide public health efforts and programs? How did Lisa Beutler step in after 20 years of political, legal, and media battles dividing environmentalists from off-highway vehicle enthusiasts, hunters, and others to bring the parties together to produce policy-relevant results as well as a standing state-sponsored roundtable to address related issues in the future? How did Shirley Solomon draw upon lessons of South Africa to build bridges and do multistakeholder land-use planning in the Pacific Northwest when trust between Native Americans and county officials was virtually nonexistent?

In these and other cases, when our senses of good places conflict, we shall see that a good deal more can be possible than we often believe. Of course, our initial skepticism can be in itself a substantial problem: if we ordinarily believe and presume far less to be possible than we can actually achieve, we set ourselves up for failure without ever knowing that we’re doing so. We believe the door to peaceful, community problem solving stands there locked, and as a result we’re all too reasonably ready to believe we cannot walk through it—even if, in actual fact, that door is not locked. We hardly know how often we have been the un-

witting prisoners of our own presumptions, however convinced we've been that the others involved were just naysayers, were skeptical of our intentions, were committed to ideals that left us cold, and so on. "They" don't trust us apparently, and so we don't trust them—and we seem to have little together that we could productively discuss. So, for such self-deceptively comforting "good reasons" as these, we may often fail to explore unlocked doors to better futures, and we all pay the price.

This book explores contentious disputes over space and place—how they arise in cities and neighborhoods over environmental and cultural issues, and how we can resolve them practically and creatively. Through a unique collection of insiders' "practice-stories," the accounts of experienced facilitative leaders or intermediaries working on public disputes, we see complexity and conflict, interests and values, technical expertise and personal preferences all woven together. We see how they went about facing anger and distrust, building relationships, enabling learning, fostering creative solutions, transforming problems, and much, much more. The practice stories provide far more than eyewitness accounts but still less than full case studies: in each case, we explore practices of conflict resolution with guides who have been working the territory for decades. We are in the hands, then, of experienced elders, not naïve initiates, and if we read and listen closely, we will find that, indeed, doors will open if we know where to look, and we will find fresh and substantial material for guiding planning practice as will practitioners in diverse fields and students in universities seeking to solve seemingly intractable problems.

So What?: Listening to Learn, Solve Problems, and Plan Together

The methods described here have both moral and ethical implications. They draw upon expertise but go further to invent and to craft possibilities that few parties to disputes might initially have thought possible. For example, these accounts show us "respect" as a practical accomplishment, not simply as a vague value, and we see how deeply committed parties working across boundaries of class, ethnicity, value commitments, and territorial identities can transform thoroughly suspicious and contested relationships into ones enabling mutual learning, growth, and actually useful practical outcomes.

Politically, these striking accounts can make us smarter about power and interdependence, about the distance from abstract claims to concrete gains. We see in case after case how despair and frustration yield to fresh and surprising new perspectives on problems and, crucially, of course, to new options and new opportunities. We see clearly a practical politics of relationship building in the

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face of difficult and painful histories. We see the creative politics that Hannah Arendt saw—as new moves and actions in settings of conflict enable wholly new relationships to come into being.

Not least of all, to be sure, these profiles provide a scholarly payoff: they give us fresh and rare material with which to examine micropolitics in practice—politically situated performances in passionately contested settings. Critical studies of professional practice have run aground too quickly and for too long on the rocks of overdrawn presumptions of social control (all planning, for example, a priori, must serve those in power; little else is possible) or on the naïve presumptions about dominating good intentions (as if all planning were oriented to the achievement of open communications, power inequalities notwithstanding). As a result of such overly simple, if popular, views of practice, we know far too little about the actual practical challenges that community planners or placemakers really face. These accounts help to provide far more detailed, and far less facile, pictures of practices that can be helpful for communities facing diverse conflicts.

More provocatively, this book upends the traditional rationalist assumption that first we learn, and then we act. These accounts do not suggest that knowledge must precede action nor that research must precede planned change. Rather, they suggest the reverse: what seem to be contrary claims about outcomes—to develop or to maintain open space, to allow off-road vehicles in the parks or not to allow them, and so on—grow out of a pattern of past actions, and so only by dealing with the conflicting agendas of those past actions and demands can we learn actually what we can and ought to do in this or that place.

These practitioners work not just on public conflicts: they work *in* those conflicts. These men and women work in between conflicting and disputing parties. Not only do they listen to these parties' views and perspectives and their anger and demands, but they actually bring multiple and conflicting parties together in the same room to work through their differences—to find real opportunities to serve their various interests.

This means that their practice stories deal with conflicts over land use but much more than that, too. These accounts illuminate the prospects of local democracy every bit as much as they illuminate narrower, conflict-resolution-like work. So these practitioners' accounts teach us about facilitative leaders, for they not only show us ways of settling spatial conflicts, but also providing leadership and facilitating problem solving too. They take traditional community mediation, for example, to a new level of complexity: the numbers of players are bigger, the venues are bigger, the resources at stake are typically bigger, and the level and depth of emotional intensity can be greater as well.

These practitioners are problem solvers, but they are not calculators. They know that when good information is scarce and distrust is abundant, almost everyone can learn. So they know that passionate demands today can, with more information and expertise, become practical proposals tomorrow. In everyday language, these facilitative leaders have to be good listeners. They have to be sensitive to emotion and not run from it. They have to be able to pay attention without being easily distracted, either by appeals to fact or to emotion when either one turns out to be irrelevant in the case at hand. They have to be keenly alert to all the ways that disputing parties can hurt or provoke one another, not working through but escalating tensions by being dismissive or disrespectful or arrogant or overly aggressive or humiliating or racist or sexist.

Especially within liberal democratic politics, where public disputes ought to be decided less through authoritarian decree and more through the will of affected people, through some semblance of participatory and representative processes, we all have a great deal to learn from the real practice of the peacemakers and facilitative leaders among us—in part because so many of us seem either so ready to avoid conflict or so clumsy that we aggravate conflicts despite ourselves. Many of us shun anger or simply respond in kind—as if stupidity evoked by stupidity made us all more intelligent. Many of us feel uncomfortable or impatient with others' emotions, and we risk appearing dismissive, as if others might miraculously welcome our telling them what and how to feel, in a way we would never tolerate ourselves. Many of us think that emotions threaten rational understanding rather than aid it, even as we might be passionately committed ourselves to ideas of objectivity or equity, ideas of justice or freedom from bias. Indeed, many of us embrace a thin view of professionalism that suggests that our cold detachment might often aid our understanding rather than alienating the very people with whom we need or might wish to work.

But even the most basic notions of democracy or citizen involvement, of course, imply not only plurality, the involvement of different people, but people with different views of good spaces and places. So even our ordinary hopes for some nonauthoritarian politics already and inescapably imply that we will always have to address competing and conflicting desires about better and worse land uses, better and worse ways of producing spaces and creating good places.

So, too, do ideas of “participation”—whether direct or representative—imply difference: spatially diffuse parties with differences must learn, in a functioning democratic setting, to work out their differences together, and that means in some ways articulating, perhaps arguing over, those differences of commitments, values, interests, perspectives, backgrounds, or priorities as they promise differing spatial consequences. That's easy to say, but when people's homes and

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health care and identities are at stake, those differences of perspective and values and interests can matter a great deal: Can I keep this land protected?; Can I fish or hunt where my grandparents did?; Can I get the best health care for my illness here, whether or not you like my sexual preferences?; Can I get better transportation in or through my community?

So the work of those wrestling with public disputes—mediators, facilitators, facilitative leaders, de facto peacemakers, and coalition builders—can teach us very directly about making democracy work, especially when senses of place and space, neighborhood and community, conflict. The work discussed here doesn't itself solve our problems, but these creative and at times surprisingly simple struggles take us to the heart of what we can call “democratic culture”—how we can meet the challenges of dealing with our differences face-to-face, dealing with differences respectfully and very practically, even productively, transforming both our senses of outcomes and our relationships as well. This public work shows us how true democratic politics can be inclusive and can encourage real learning by many parties—instead of encouraging what skeptics always expect from participatory processes: a down-and-dirty, minimalist culture of “let's cut a deal and get out of here.”

Method: Exploring Practice Stories

We wanted to learn from practice and perhaps find useful insights, and maybe even better theory, in the fine-grained details these experienced and astute third parties identified as important. So we set out to gather grounded, detailed, and dramatic “practice stories” from practical insiders, but not just from anyone. We searched for practitioners of a certain kind—not people who talk a good game about public disputes and conflicts, but rather those who had walked the walk and had reputations for being thoughtful and experienced and for having been deeply and skillfully involved in working through public disputes structured by passionate differences of race, ethnicity, class, ideology, deep values, cultural background, or deeply vested interests.

We found, curiously enough, that these experienced and thoughtful third parties quickly resisted or even repudiated the label of “mediator” as being far too simple, far too reductive, much too narrow. That made us all the more curious about what these practitioners, working face-to-face in the middle of deeply contested spatial conflicts, really did in the face of passionate urban and environmental claims.

We asked each of our interviewees to walk us through a case or cases that revealed both the messy challenges and the surprising opportunities of their work. We wanted to learn, of course, about the challenges (distrust, anger, lying) that they faced so we could get a feel for the settings and the difficulties,

the complexities and the threats, that confronted them. We wanted also to learn about the opportunities they faced—because we wanted to understand much better than we do how in the “real world” these men and women, these practical peacemakers, made sense of what they could actually do about the complex and messy, politicized and often bitterly contested cases that they were working in and on.

The results are striking: Larry Susskind tells us about “light bulbs” that go on in the process. Peter Adler suggests the power, the opportunities and risks, of naming. Lisa Beutler helps us to see anger as fuel for change rather than as an irrational obstacle—and so on. The stories that follow are often moving, memorable, surprising, instructive, even all in all, inspiring.

We have here no simple recipes, but much practical guidance. We have in our repertoires now no technical fixes, but many tricks of the trade. We have uncovered and evoked practical knowledge, and much more, too, for in listening closely to these accounts, we can tap into what we might call “the wisdom” of facilitative leadership, if not also the wisdom of mediation. “Wisdom” here means “good, practical judgment”—situated, not ephemeral, on the ground, not idealistic, alertly engaged, not abstract, not vaguely theoretical, but offering us through the complexity and detail of these practice stories an abundance of practical tips and cues in the face of emotional intensity, political posturing, cultural difference, and real differences of interests or value commitments.

Attentive to process and outcomes both, mediators and facilitative leaders sometimes sense possibilities even when frustrated and distrusting parties in the grip of conflicts might not. These intermediaries don’t typically discover solutions themselves (and they don’t worry if they don’t), but their experience has taught them lessons that too few others of us have learned: if you can create a space in which adversaries can learn together, they can then often invent together and craft solutions together because their learning, about one another and about real options, will have subtly transformed their senses of what’s really possible. Despite the adversaries’ well-honed distrust and suspicion of one another, they can come to see each others’ priorities in new ways, and so they see new opportunities to make moves, in effect to trade, to help others here in return for help there. They come to see, as I discuss in *Dealing with Differences*, that they can maintain, not compromise, their deep value differences with others, and nevertheless they can come to see that even with those differences intact, they can still decide together where the stop signs should go. They come to see more clearly, too, not just what their own independent alternatives really are good for but also what new options they can craft if they work together and negotiate astutely with their neighbors or adversaries. So, we see that informed,

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expertly advised, accountable parties can make their own agreements, assisted by facilitative leaders or mediators: or to put it more bluntly, mediators don't make agreements any more than midwives make babies.

My *Dealing with Differences* began to explore what facilitative leaders and mediators might really teach community leaders and urban planners—who are all the more expert in the subject matters at hand—about public disputes and conflicts. We need to consider closely, for example, why might planners in many cases scope out a contentious situation and think that little is possible when mediators with exactly the same information might still see many possibilities that promise more for everyone compared to the status quo? When mediators like Adler or Beutler face apparent value conflicts, for example, and still somehow work to bring parties together in situations where planners might otherwise have thrown in the towel, we need carefully and soberly to ask how they were able to see practical opportunities where planners saw only insurmountable obstacles? What can we learn about not quitting too early, about not assuming too quickly that there's nothing we can do?

No other book focuses so clearly on what it is like to work directly on contentious conflicts with government officials and citizens, with community activists and tribal representatives, with environmentalists and developers—to face difficult governance disputes as senses of place and space conflict. The insiders' accounts here are richer than mere war stories, in part because we have been careful to ask a distinctive set of questions so that we could explore lines of practical response. We were careful to ask How did you do that?, not What did you *think* about that?, so that a discussion of attitudes would not preempt our learning more about courses of action and conduct, what happened on the ground. Here we learn about experienced practitioners' moves and practical judgments—how they responded to the surprising details of unique situations—and about these skillful practitioners' own hunches, maxims, and rules of thumb, not least of all their own “practical theorizing.”

This book presents in the insiders' own words not just stories of obstacles and opportunities, of do's and don'ts, but perceptions of cues and clues, possible moves, and offers and queries. This book shows us vividly and self-reflectively, even vicariously, what we can do when our senses of good spaces and places conflict.