

## **Making Sense of Conflict: Leadership in Complex Times** by Julia Menard, B.A., Certificate in Conflict Resolution

Robert Kegan, Ph.D., is a developmental psychologist, the William and Miriam Professor of Adult Learning and Professional Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of many books on consciousness and learning, including In Over Our Heads and How The Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work (with Lisa Laskow Lahey).

His developmental perspective and ideas on consciousness are becoming known in the dispute resolution field in Canada primarily through the work of dispute resolution practitioner Richard McGuigan, Ph.D., principal of Diamond Management Consulting, Inc (DMC Inc).

DMC Inc recently brought Dr. Kegan to Victoria B.C. to co-lead a workshop on the relationship between conflict and consciousness. Over twenty conflict resolution practitioners and others interested in this groundbreaking approach participated in the two-day event.

A key theme that emerged from the gathering is the idea of “meeting people where they are.” One of the participants, a former hostage negotiator, military man, and now ombudsperson, spoke most pointedly to this theme:

“What I learned as a peacekeeper and later as a hostage negotiator was that trying to talk with someone to determine "interests" when you are on the edge of extreme violence will get you, or someone else, hurt or killed. Rather it was imperative to start where they are and take immediate action to de-escalate the conflict. Once the risk of immediate violence has passed then there is room for mediation but not before. And there are times when we walked a very thin line moving from mediation back into de-escalation or, in some cases, rapid disengagement. And sadly at times we had no choice but to respond with violence. When people are shooting at you with a variety of very deadly weapons it is hard to find space for dialogue.”

Kegan’s work brings a “constructionist” and “developmental” model to the question of how to meet people where they are. For “constructionists”, and Kegan in particular, all humans strive to make meaning out of the events of our lives, which we can call our “mindset” or “consciousness”. The theory goes that we construct our realities because we are meaning-making creatures. In narrative theory, we are all storytellers.

For the past thirty years, Kegan has been conducting interviews with people, asking them about their stories and about how they “make meaning”. His research is academically rigorous and involves a semi-clinical interview with people, taping and transcribing the interview, and then conducting a structural analysis of their in-depth comments. He has based several books on his work and has influenced the adult developmental field profoundly.

What his research detected is that development continues takes place in adults and is not just the purview of childhood. The narratives he listened to started to take shape. What he detected was there seems to be categories of adult consciousness, which are groupings or clusters of the ways in which people explain what they experience.

In addition, these categories are not static. People seem to be at different levels and also appear to travel along a trajectory (albeit a wavy one) towards ever-more complex ways of making meaning in the world. He has charted an evolving upward movement of consciousness across our life span, revealing how the Self transforms throughout life.

Becoming more aware of these levels of consciousness help us see how people make sense of their experiences and hopefully help us to meet them there and help them continue on their developmental journey.

In our workshop, Kegan spoke about four distinct stages (of five major stages, with four sub-stages between each) of developmental growth people can be in or pass through.

When discussing where one might be situated in these stages, it's important to remember that Kegan speaks of humans having a "central tendency" in how we organize meaning. That is, we tend towards one of these categories at any given time. This central tendency evolves over time and each previous stage of development stays with us like building blocks. Just like the acorn that has an awareness of its own potential in the mighty oak tree, so too we can catch glimpses of our "higher" selves.

Kegan identified several "adult" stages of development. They are as follows.

### **The Imperial or Instrumental Mindset**

This stage of development is called "instrumental" because people at this stage tend to see the world as a place to "get their needs met." With this lens, or worldview, other people are seen as either helping or hindering them in this quest.

The world is a place with clear rules – no greys. This perspective sees the world in the way this motto reflects: "You are either with us or against us!"

Typically, this is the domain of teenagers and young adults. One person in our group spoke about being attracted to the military in his youth because of the clear rules. After a few years however he felt like he no longer fit. His perspective had changed.

According to research gathered by McGuigan, between 13 and 36% of adults aged 19 to 55 (depending on the study population) make meaning at this stage.

### **The Socialized or Inter-personal Mindset**

This next mindset takes a broader view of relationships. There is more to the world than my own arena. There is also the arena of others, for the first time the individual has joined a community. This is what we hope our children will turn out to be like: attentive of others' needs and feelings and also able to take their perspective into account.

It's the mindset that can "walk in another person's shoes." With this way of seeing the world, we move from thinking only about ourselves, to also being able to think about others. We gain empathy for others' perspectives.

Although this perspective can see multiple points of view, it is limited to groups the individual identifies with: my family, my community, my nation. I look out onto my world and bring in its values. I need the values of my group to tell me what values I stand for because you and I create mySelf.

Differentiation is low, and individuals at this stage tend to feel responsible for the feelings or experiences of others. There is no developed internal system of reference within which to generate values and beliefs.

Kegan estimates about 70% of the adult population in the United States are at or below this stage of consciousness.

### **The Self-Authoring Mindset**

After coming to see others with empathy, the next evolutionary step is to take responsibility for the world we have created through our perceptions.

People at this stage are able to take responsibility for how they respond to the events in their world. They can step back from their surroundings and come to generate an internal seat of judgment or personal authority. They can effectively set limits and regulate its boundaries on behalf of its own voice.

People in this stage generate their values internally and seek guidance from within. They are natural leaders in a position to create group values, instead of being held captive by them.

The self-authoring perspective has a great degree of confidence in his or her own ideas; he or she can set personal goals and take responsibility for evaluating progress; she or he is not unduly thrown by differences.

Kegan estimates only 20% of adults reach this stage.

### **Self-transformational Mindset**

People at this stage have learned the limits of their own inner authority. Adults at this stage see themselves and all as part of a larger community - the community of human beings, perhaps, or of members of our planet. The view is very broad.

Kegan used Gandhi as an example of someone who exemplifies this mindset. Kegan described a few scenes from the movie – one of them being the moment

when someone asks Gandhi if he was a Hindu. Gandhi responds that he is a Hindu. And a Muslim. And a Christian. And a Jew.

The self becomes completely identified with the world. Kegan estimates only about 3 to 6% of adults creating meaning with this worldview, and rarely before mid-life.

### **How do these mindsets affect how we experience conflict?**

This is the central question that Richard McGuigan addressed in his recent doctoral research. As a veteran mediator, educator and writer in the field of conflict resolution, McGuigan is passionate about applying Kegan's theory to our field.

Here are a few implications:

In our field, we tend to emphasize "needs" or "interests." Yet, depending on which mindset we bring to the conversation, we understand what "needs" or "interests" are very differently.

For someone equipped with an *Instrumental* lens to make sense of the world, they hear "needs" and they think "mine." They want "do" interests so that they can get their own needs met.

They haven't generated much compassion or caring for another, but are simply hoping they can mimic enough of the behaviours required to "win themselves a hearing."

Teaching someone with this perspective conflict resolution skills or asking them to participate in a mediation will be limited by what they are capable of seeing: their own perspective.

For someone with a *Socialized* lens, they hear "needs" and they are not sure what to think until they check out the opinions of others. They are not anchoring their experiences in their own values. Our field seems to be comfortable with this mindset, and much of traditional "assertiveness" training is in fact encouraging those with a socialized lens to start to dig around inside for self-authoring anchors.

Not everyone in a mediation or negotiation session comes from a socialized mindset. Yet we tend to bias our approach toward this perspective.

Kegan says, "Conflict is a challenge to our pretence of completeness." He sees the impetus to grow towards a higher order because of challenges to the current form of meaning making. What a liberating way of looking at conflict! It's an indication that there is an opportunity for growth as it challenges the illusion that I am a finished piece of work.

What is most hopeful in Kegan's perspective is the hope that developmental

growth holds for the world:

“I think if we are to overcome the tribal hostilities and the big lesions in the human family, then more and more people need to develop self-authoring consciousness. That is the modal growing edge of the species as a whole.”

Interview with Kegan in issue 22 of “What is Enlightenment” magazine  
(interview by Elizabeth Debold; <http://www.wie.org:80/j22/kegan.asp>)

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This article was first published in the conflict resolution magazine “Interaction.”

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