

**From Conflict Generation Through Consensus-Building Using Many of the Same
Skills: A Profile of Frank Blechman**

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I graduated from college in the late 1960's so I didn't have a choice of graduate school—I had a choice of nationality or uniform color.

I grew up in the South. I'd lived through the experience of the Civil Rights movement, which had transformed my community and my life, and so I became very active in anti-war activity. I'm both a veteran and a conscientious objector, which is fairly unusual, to hold such dual status: I did two years in the Navy, and then I had two years of alternative service because the draft board would not accept active military duty as alternative to the draft.

The product of all of that was that from 1971 until 1986, a period of 15 years, I was involved in what I prefer to call "applied political science:" I was involved in issue and political organizing, mostly in the South—working at the community, at the state, at the regional, and then ultimately at the national level.

By 1986 I was working for the Lieutenant Governor of Missouri, helping her run for the United States Senate. When that campaign was over, I was offered a job with something called the Conflict Clinic, a dispute resolution organization based at the University of Missouri at Saint Louis. I liked Missouri. And after having spent fifteen years working for non-profit organizations, political organizations, and other institutions with dubious and transitory funding, the notion of working with something that was actually rooted to a state university, which probably wasn't going to move anywhere, was entirely attractive.

I had just had a baby, and I liked Saint Louis. I was hired by the Conflict Clinic as a political analyst—someone who could come in and investigate a complex of public issues, map out the parties, the issues, the inter-relationships, the coalitions, the political histories of the parties and the prospect of shifting in those alignments over a period of time and under various

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circumstances. That's something that, as a journalist (which I had been at one point) and as a political activist too, I had learned how to do quickly.

Five months after I joined the Conflict Clinic in January of 1987, I moved to work with them at George Mason University. The Director of the Conflict Clinic was offered the first endowed chair in conflict resolution in the world.

As the program in conflict resolution at George Mason expanded, they added new faculty, and they were developing a doctoral program to go with the masters' degree which had been initiated in 1982. Jim Laue, who was then the Director of the Conflict Clinic, persuaded George Mason University that they really needed a clinical component as part of their academic program and that bringing the Conflict Clinic to George Mason, along with him, even though he would be giving up the job as Director to become senior faculty, would be a valuable thing. And so [although] several of the associates of the Conflict Clinic did not move to Washington, several of us did. The effect of this was that I was transformed from being a political analyst into being a jack-of-all-trades: facilitator, mediator, dispute resolver, salesman and bottle washer—proposal writer and all the rest.

[Now] during the first couple years here, [though I was] someone who was insisting loudly at every turn that I was not a mediator, that I was not even sure I believed in mediation, and [that I] wasn't sure I wanted to be seen as such with them, I was largely in charge of developing the training programs. That was a fairly innocuous thing, [because] it was just talking about it, you didn't have to actually do it, and one of the by-products of politics, certainly, is you learn how to talk about things that you don't really do.

[But] we were very successful in developing a series of training programs for citizens and public officials in public interaction, public participation, public negotiation, facilitation of public meetings, public processes, process design and process management. That ultimately led to some materials we developed on systems design, and gradually, from 1988 to the present, I guess I moved more and more into an active interventionist role. The Conflict Clinic was a private, non-profit organization [and] because of its academic base it often intervened in complex public issues uninvited, which gave it a very special base and was a very special opportunity to learn technique.

So on January 1st 1992, the Conflict Clinic merged into George Mason University, and the Conflict Clinic Inc. ceased] operations, and I became a member of the faculty of George Mason

University. So I now teach several of the skills classes, I supervise field research, which has now become an active part of the doctoral program—every doctoral student is required to join a field research team—and we have long term research, five to seven year projects in which doctoral students have to commit at least one year, although they may commit more. These [involve] long term issues like conflict in divided societies, racial and ethnic conflict in communities, [that] then spin [off] various projects as they go along and develop materials. So anyway, I direct that field research, and meanwhile, I'm doing practice on the side.

So my entry into this field is of course backwards. I've spent most of my career as a conflict generator and still view it as my essential skill in my present work. Conflict generation is fundamentally the process of raising an issue to visibility and forcing public polarization so that fifty percent plus one will land on your side. It's essentially the opposite of consensus building processes although it uses all the same skills. The fundamental skill, understanding where people are coming from and how far they're willing to move, is certainly [also] the fundamental skill in consensus building: Getting people to feel comfortable [so] that they are willing to reveal information that they initially with-hold . . . All of those basic skills [are similar].

Sam Rayburn is alleged to have said, "Any bill that passes by more than ten votes wasn't strong enough." I think that's sort of the ultimate statement of the virtue of non-consensus: that in fact you only need fifty percent plus one to make policy, then in fact getting more than that means you gave up more than you had to. But in many of the public issues that we face today—because we have empowered, over the last generation, so many people to obstruct so effectively—fifty percent plus one is not enough; sixty percent plus one is not enough; seventy percent plus one is not enough. So that indeed you need [often] to get closer to ninety percent plus one in order to actually carry out policy. At that point the skills required to get fifty percent plus one have to be retuned toward a different objective, and it's maybe a hundred percent minus one or maybe it's just ninety percent plus one, depending on the scale. But most of the work that I do falls more into the ninety percent plus one to the hundred percent minus one than the fifty percent plus one range.

You probably ought to know—to put whatever I say into context—the intellectual framework here at George Mason University. I think whereas much conflict resolution as is practiced in this country is built on negotiation theory, theory of value, theory of communication, theory of exchange, this program does not start from negotiation theory. Indeed it starts from the

premises that the conflicts that go the longest and cause the most damage are rooted in non-negotiable issues: race, class, gender, religion, nationality, deeply held values—and that those deep rooted issues, therefore will not be resolved by negotiation. And that the end product of a resolutionary process is not, therefore, an agreement, and that creates a somewhat different framework for what we do.

[So the end product], often, is an understanding. Parties come together, parties who are deeply divided; they join in an analytical process, and they go away not having agreed about a damn thing but having come to understand their own situation and the other people's situation better. They act unilaterally in the future in ways that are less conflictual, more constructive for each, and in fact they may find that while they can not get within a shred of agreement on issue X, that they in fact have dozens of issues A, B, C, to J on which they can cooperate. Many of which are essentially negotiable.

I'll give you a classic example. Six years ago, shortly after we arrived in the area, the pro choice and pro life forces in Maryland—which is a Catholic state—had really gone to war with each other, and the state police were proposing to go to the legislature seeking new authority to interpose themselves to prevent violence.

There was a meeting arranged between leaders of the pro choice and the pro life forces, who immediately agreed that it would be very undesirable if such legislation was passed and that they should jointly oppose it on a variety of free speech grounds. As the discussions went forward they discovered, not entirely to their amazement, that they also shared strong common interest in increasing health care for at risk teenagers and pregnant teenagers. And they wound up forming a coalition which voluntarily proposed a set of rules for how they would picket each other—to lower the risk of violence, thereby forestalling the state police proposal.

Simultaneously, they formed a coalition in the legislature to increase state funding and support for prenatal health care. That coalition, despite all the wars and despite all the interventions of groups like Operation Rescue from outside the state coming in, has held up, and in every year since it has succeeded in increasing State funding for health care even at times of budget cuts—and that has, at some level, improved the civility of debate.

Now, on the fundamental issue of abortion, needless to say, the two sides did not convince each other and did not agree, and if the purpose of bringing them together was to seek common ground on that issue, they might never have come together, and my guess is that it would have

failed. But, bringing them together in a different context made it possible for them to identify very constructive things that they could do. **[Now in the years since then, things have fallen apart somewhat, but also since then, Adrienne Kauffman (one of our PhD students) did fabulous work on this issue nationwide via Search for Common Ground to create a Network for Life and Choice. This was really remarkable work that's really worth reporting on.]**

So that's a small example of a non-bargaining process. It was fundamentally an analytical process in which each side went away and took certain actions. Now there were also some agreements, but that came later, and much of the work that we do in civil wars internationally, outside the United States, is essentially that kind of work, where we are creating analytical frameworks rather than bargaining frameworks.

That's why this is the "Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution," rather than the "Program on Negotiation." There are certainly other people who [also] build a lot of psychological theory out of basic human needs theory, which we do.

Roger Fisher [of the Harvard Program on Negotiation] used to be on the Conflict Clinic board, so I mean we worked with Roger a lot. I know that for all of his literature—which if you read it casually would lead you to believe that all of life is a negotiation and that everything is negotiable—he, in fact, agrees with us, pretty much, on which sort of issues are not negotiable by traditional methods, and he just defines negotiation as any patterned exchange of information. It doesn't require any give or take or process that leads to an agreement.

So his definition, once you define negotiation that way, I guess, does apply to everything. Anyway, that's just a piece of context and without going a whole lot further about how you start applying human needs theory to human conflict, let's say that that's the context.

Let me tell you about a piece of work that we just finished—although at some level it's still in progress. In the corridor between Baltimore and Washington, there are five counties, the two major cities of course, five other independent cities, and a great many independent authorities that have little special districts [of various sorts], and planning in that corridor accordingly has historically been very fragmented.

We were asked by one of the counties to help them consider how they ought to do comprehensive planning, which is a traditional land use type of planning in their part of the county that's in the corridor.

Part of their concern was that this is an area which is somewhat more blue collar, a little bit tougher—a little less civil—than you have in other parts of the county: there was a lot of bitterness that the other parts of the county had been getting better service, and there was a feeling that there was no way to open up traditional citizen participation without getting completely out of hand and getting explosive.

They asked us, could we propose a process, do process design work, to help them to give them advice on how they might proceed with comprehensive planning. We pointed out to them that, thanks to the passage at the federal level, of the Intermodal Surface Transportation and Environmental Act, “ISTEA,” they could not do land use and transportation planning without also doing environmental planning. And in further discussions with county officials, we pointed out that many other jurisdictions in the corridor were beginning to realize that you couldn’t do land use, environmental, and transportation planning without also doing housing and economic development planning at the same time. Now each of these processes had been separate—were legally required to be separate processes at the local level, managed by different agencies and, actually, relating to different sets of citizen organizations.

[So] we said to them, “Would you be interested in considering a process that might integrate all of these?”

They said, “Well, we might.”

We said, “Would you be interested in considering a process which integrated what you’re doing with what’s going on with the adjacent jurisdictions in the corridor?”

They said, “You are out of your mind.”

We said, “Well, let’s take a look.” We then went out and interviewed about a hundred and thirty people, roughly one-third business, one-third citizen activist and political types, and one-third governmental officials. We then constructed four focus groups representing slightly different geographical areas, but each mixed in terms of the three sectors that I mentioned before. And we then constructed, out of those focus groups and out of the interviews, a team of fourteen people who represented all of the jurisdictions and all of the sectors who then formed a negotiating group to discuss process for integrated planning. That group, through us, then presented the proposal for a pretty dramatically different kind of process to the planning agencies in two of the counties and to the county council third—and it eventually won approval for that new process, which is now beginning.

We play no role. We are not going to be facilitators or managers in that process. We were agents of process design. Now it was a consensus building process in the sense that folks who, county officials believed initially, could not sit in the same room with each other ultimately sat down and came to an agreement about how the process ought to work. It was a process that included the county official who said, “I don’t think I can sit in the same room as those people.”

Obviously, this is not the same as building a consensus on comprehensive planning, land use, transportation, environmental management, growth, economic development and housing in the corridor, but it’s clearly the first step. It’s a piece of work that took us nearly eight months.

That, I think, in a traditional public process, would indeed only be the first phase. It would be presumed that the facilitators or process [designers] would then manage the subsequent phases. It is our belief, and we’ll find out whether it’s true, that because people were so intimately involved in the process design, that they will act as the agents of the process, and that they may not need quote professional mediation or facilitation.

Now built into the process is an escape clause which says if one of these things happens you may call in somebody to help you, and here’s how that process works.

So we had these people who didn’t even want to sit in the same room with one another. How did we get them to the point of finally agreeing on things? Just as you would do with an interpersonal mediation.

The first step is sharing information and helping people discover commonalties that they didn’t know existed. So we issued a series of reports. The first one was a map of issues, and there was high consensus, in all areas, about what the most important issues were, and across all sectors there was agreement. Not in exactly the same proportions, but number one issue was number one and number ten was pretty much at the bottom, you know, in the five to ten range.

The second report was then a map of process concerns, and it led to a survey, a wider survey than the people we interviewed, of people saying, “What’s your procedural preferences about how certain things ought to happen?” And that information was then fed back to everyone, and then we did the focus groups.

In the focus groups we explicitly asked people to reflect, “Here are the existing processes in each of these jurisdictions; here are the procedural preferences that an unscientific survey has revealed; what do you make of that? What do you think of that?”

So we got very constructive suggestions by asking people, “How would you bridge these gaps?” rather than “Which side do you fall on?” We pushed— we invited—them to serve in the role of consensus builders rather than in the role of advocates.

That made it conspicuous to many people (who, as always happens, had been isolated in their own circles)—when they saw the range of substantive and procedural views—that simply saying, “But I want it to be done this way,” was unlikely to be persuasive, no matter how loudly they said it. That got clearer to everybody.

And that led, in turn, in time, to people listening to each other, considering procedures that would give their point of view the best chance of being heard by people who disagreed, which happened to be the same procedures that give other people the best chance of having their point of view heard, just by coincidence—oh, by no coincidence at all; why should I say that?

So I think had we tried to do it in two months it would have been impossible; if we tried to do it in two years it would be much more difficult, [and] by allowing it to move at a reasonable, but slightly pressured pace, by saying to people, “We need to move ahead with this because, gosh, there are various federal and state mandates, funding time lines that this needs to move on” (which was true, but not entirely persuasive), everybody knew they were being pushed and they could stall it if they wanted to, but at that point nobody really wanted to. They wanted to get on with it.

They understood that the way they got on with it was to come to some understanding and to come to an agreement, which they did. What was useful about that exercise is that it mapped out both various agreements and areas of disagreement; it captured the areas of disagreement as areas of future work.

But it also gave them some floor to stand on. I think what often happens in public disputes is that people come together across a chasm and are intensely focused on that chasm, [and they] don’t realize they are standing on the same ground, underneath, on each side of the chasm.

[Often] the refocusing thing to say, “What do we have to build out from?” doesn’t happen until several people have already fallen into the chasm. So that’s one story that maybe be somewhat useful about how we do this stuff.

[Did we face] suspicion or mistrust, or feel some resistance from the parties we were working with? It was enormous, of course. How did we deal with that?

I personally, almost always, begin a conflict resolution investigation by asking what I consider to be the big question: Are you having fun yet?

If the parties say, “Yeah, [our situation’s] great, it’s wonderful, couldn’t be better,” you say, “Well, have a wonderful time.” It’s clear I’m not necessarily going to be very helpful.

But if they say, “Ugh, it’s painful, it’s stupid, it’s miserable, it’s wasteful, but I won’t give in to that son of a bitch,” then I know there’s a clear and very constructive role that I can play. Usually when you ask the people and you say, “You know, it appears to me that what you’re really asking here for is the other guy’s blood, and I’m just curious from an academic point of view: What are you going to do with the blood when you get it?” people will say, “Oh no, I don’t really want his blood, I really want his concession (on this issue or the other).”

Now once you’ve turned that corner, and folks have begun to say, “No, I really don’t want blood,” then you can begin to say,

“Oh well, that’s terrible. It really must be awful to be locked into a situation like this.”

They say, “It is.”

And you say, “Oh that’s [difficult], God, what are you going to do about it?”

Well [now] two things have happened. First of all I’ve expressed some empathy, which people appreciate, that I understand how difficult their situation is, and how, of course, they cannot be asked to give in to that son of a bitch. I acknowledge and legitimate their situation. I’ve always understood that to be the first rule of facilitation, and I think it is certainly also the first rule of complex mediation.

Once we have identified that their situation is complex and difficult and they would like to get out of it, but they don’t know how, then the question is: How do we introduce new ideas? Now, because I’ve grown up in politics and lived in the South and had experience with agriculture extension services, I’ve sort of been inclined to introduce new ideas, not from a base of academic expertise, but anecdotally, which is to say, “Gosh, you are really in a tough situation. You know I was working with a guy over in Iowa, you know, just a couple of weeks ago, who had a situation kind of like yours . . . Would you like to hear about this?”

[At that] point you are able to tell a story how somebody took a different approach and how it led to a different result. People, I believe, always learn from their peers, not from experts, and therefore, the question is: who does somebody consider [to be] a peer that they might hear a story from? It’s probably not me, so I have to at least create a voice that’s from a peer.

Maybe I actually bring in a peer, a peer who can say, “Oh this guy works for a university, but he’s ok—yeah, he’s a white boy, but he’s not a cracker,” or “He is a cracker but he’s still OK.” I mean [to say] I can’t legitimize myself. I can acknowledge and legitimate them, [but] they have to decide to acknowledge and legitimate me, and [you know?] they are not going to choose to acknowledge, legitimate, or accept me because I tell them I’m terrific.

In fact, the farther I go promising snake oil, the deeper trouble I’m in. So it’s pretty important to offer the traditional academic and mediators’ disclaimers up front. What we have to offer is not snake oil: it doesn’t work all the time. “But gosh, you know, we were working with a fella that had a problem kind of like yours. We helped him, might help you.” Once that framework is [in place], people make individual decisions. The wonderful thing about a complex public dispute is there are a lot of people involved, people who are interested in public issues . . . whether it is a matter of vanity, whether it’s a matter of power politics, or whether it’s just idle curiosity, they want to be where the action is.

So you don’t have to get everybody to buy in at the same time: it’s ideal, but in real life you try to get a few folks [first]. I mean out of twenty parties in each of seven factions, if you can get two or three of each of the seven factions to say, “I’m willing to give it a try,” you begin to build some momentum, and for better for worse there is crowd psychology that happens here:

“Well, I don’t know that I believe this stuff, but if Joe’s willing to try it I’ll give it a try. I’ll go see.”

Right?

In fact, “Joe and I will make a pact that we’ll both walk out if we don’t like what we see. But we’ll go together just to look see.”

[So] you build up from what you have, rather than wish for what you don’t have, and that’s a process of identifying possible resources, possible support, and then using those peers, to bring additional folks in. The other piece that’s crucial to me is that in a complex public process, not everybody wants to be involved in the same way, and therefore if out of a million people in a corridor I’m going to end up working with, [maybe], three or four hundred of whom I’m going to work with maybe thirty intensely, that’s not a very representative process by any measure.

But what I have to do is make the representative nature of it as visible as possible, and make it possible for people who feel they are not represented by any of the thirty or any of the three hundred to get voice by other means. So in a complex negotiating process you may have a

negotiating team of thirty people, and you have public hearings that involve an additional four hundred, and you have survey and comment processes that allow an additional ten thousand to be involved, at which point you build a whole lot more legitimacy than the thirty will ever have.

That allows people to have additional input and involvement even though they are not sitting at the table all the time. And that requires the thirty who are at the table to understand that they are representatives, and as part of process management I'm not just managing the negotiation among those thirty but among them and their constituents and among their constituents. That's all part of a large public process.

If I only manage what's happening at the table I'm missing eighty percent of the action, and no wonder I'm going to get blind-sided over and over again. So, not wishing to be blind-sided, you try to pay attention and create explicit vehicles inside the process for that other stuff to happen.

I'll tell you one more story that I'm involved with, again, in the Washington corridor. There was an attempt here by Maryland and Virginia to propose bypasses that would divert traffic off the Washington beltway. There was a proposal for an eastern bypass and a western bypass, and enough people screamed in each direction that neither one's going to happen, and gridlock will increase.

The Maryland Department of Transportation said, 'Ok, but there's this US Highway 301 that goes up eastern Maryland and east of Washington, and it was originally the route of the western bypass—and whether we call it a bypass or not, more and more people are using it, and we need to make transportation improvements there. [But] there's no way we can propose transportation improvements without people saying, "Agh, a bypass by another name. We recognize what this is."

[So] we have now built a process that brings together about a hundred representatives of the four counties and six cities in that corridor along with representatives of environmental groups, business groups, and others into a framework so that they are basically arranged into working groups by issues. There's an environmental group. There is a growth and economic development group. There is a transportation analysis group.

We've created a variety of ways that those groups interact, but we have also forced, as part of that process, geographic caucuses. Every three months, whether they like it or not, all the folks from Anne Arundel County and all the folks from Charles County are going to go off and talk to

each another—because ultimately this is going to come down to some regional politics, and I want that discussion inside the process, not outside of it.

[Now,] that's the politics of it as compared to the substance, and that's just another piece of process design. By saying to people, "I acknowledge and legitimize your needs, and I'm making a place for you to get what you want inside this process that looks more attractive than what you can get outside the process," ultimately you can bring most people in—and [even] if you never completely overcome the suspicion, you balance the suspicion with concrete offers that are attractive.

Is it difficult to remain neutral during these processes? I guess I'm never neutral. So yes, I guess, it's extremely difficult. I believe that my mere presence in a situation changes things, changes the dynamics, changes the way parties behave and that I may at best, occasionally be impartial, but that I'm never neutral. [I believe] that, in fact, my presence almost always empowers weaker parties by creating explicit ground rules and an explicit forum that allows people who don't have unlimited resources to focus their resources and it creates a framework in which they can play—where the power of the more powerful parties is somewhat moderated within a set of rules.

So my work tends, almost always, to benefit weaker parties, and I'm explicit about that up front. People say, "Can you be neutral?" and I say, "Absolutely not, I don't intend to be."

Then there's a big sigh of relief—people appreciate that. It's a lot more sensible than saying, "I'm going to put on a black robe and sit behind a bench and keep a poker face."

So the other side of that is, pretty obviously, that if at some point I become an active advocate for one party, usually that limits my credibility with others and limits my ability to play process management roles.

So one tries not to become a conspicuous advocate for any party, but I have never been in a complex process where the parties were equally skilled and where I did not wind up having to spend more time with some parties than with others in order to keep the process functioning, and that's not a neutral—either distance or time neutral—intervention.

[Dealing with imbalances in money and expertise and time] is a problem to be solved just like any other problem to be solved, and once people look at the options, many of them prefer having me act as a balancer as compared to some of the other possibilities.

So we've been involved in a police community relations situation in Des Moines for a year [at this point] and the question always is: Would you rather have these turkeys from George Mason University or would you rather have the U.S. Department of Justice or would you rather have, you know, the Aryan Brotherhood act as an intervener? Well, given those choices, we begin to look pretty attractive.

So I am not myself an interested party, and I am not myself a partisan party in the sense that I have something to gain from the outcome, [or in the sense that] from the beginning I favored a particular substantive outcome, or a particular partisan outcome. But I clearly do have very strong opinions about the process. I'm not impartial on that, and I don't pretend to be.

What did I find the most challenging in the corridor process and what was the most satisfying in the end?

The satisfying part is that in the end it came together. You never know if it's going to work; it doesn't always work. You give it your best shot, and some days you understand where you screwed up and why it didn't work, and some days you don't even understand what you did wrong. So it's always gratifying when it works, and that's a case where, for the most part, it came together, from a point where citizens were saying, "When you present this to the planning board, it's so radical it won't fly." [But] the planning board was saying, "What's new? What are we paying you this money for? It looks like a few small tweaks on the same old process" and it was approved with boringly little discussion.

So I guess there's some satisfaction that it all came together so nicely, that people said, "I'm not sure this is as big as it could've been, [or] strong enough, [it was] too easy."

The difficult part is that when we went in, what we knew, or what we had been told, in advance, was that there were real lunatics out there, [but] I think we tend to believe that it's not in our interest to treat people as clinical deviants as a starting point. There are such people, and it is possible: I've worked with them and you never know, in fact, this might be the situation where everybody is clinically looney. This is the real wacko case. You never know.

In order to do this project, as we had to do a lot of interviews very fast, we assembled a team of myself and four other people, who had never worked together as a team before. Because of timing we had to get started very fast, and we didn't clarify some of internal roles as well as we should. That made for some real working problems within our team that we then had to go back

and patch up later on. In fact, there were some really large substantive and procedural differences that had to be bridged. But I think the biggest problems were with our intra-team process.

So [we had] to have our own internal conflict analysis. I think we understood that that was going to happen, and we understood that we should take more time up front, but we didn't have it, and we knew we were going to pay for it. And we did. And when we started paying for it we recognized it, we did step back, and we did take the time, and we did sort it out, mostly.

I've worked in team negotiations and independently, about half and half. It's a matter of scale. Anytime that it's an issue that involves more than fifteen or twenty issues and more than a hundred people, because I do have teaching responsibilities and other responsibilities, I don't like taking those on alone because there's just too much to watch and I don't trust my own judgment, even if I have the time to do it.

I want somebody else who has different perspectives and usually that means not just a team but a team that's diverse: that involves someone who is a different age, a different gender, and a different race, who in some way has a dramatically different perspective than I do. And it's humiliating [humbling?] but usually helpful.

What would I have done differently in this particular negotiation?

I think I would have done more surveying earlier, before I did interviews. I would have had a stronger base, and it would have made these interviews much more consistent. As it was I had a general framework for the interviews, but because five different people are doing them, when we went to try to put the pieces together and analyze [the results], it was harder than it needed to be: again it's part of our not having gotten our act entirely clear about what information we were trying to gather and how we were planning to analyze it.

Had we done more surveying earlier it would also have been helpful. But while I love surveying, and that's my political background again, I know that for purposes of conflict resolution surveying absolutely is not substitute for personal contact. Interviewing is partially information gathering but it's it's sixty percent relationship building. You are introducing yourself and inviting people to trust you.

It's a negotiation in itself, and if they trust you to share information with you, and you treat that information with the respect that you promise, it's then not a very large leap to say, "Now, will you trust me to put together a meeting where you won't get beaten up?" So the first step in conflict resolution is that relationship building, and that's why interviewing is an important

technique and that's why it's largely individual. I don't do a lot of group interviewing in the early stages, and that's why I put focus groups behind individual interviews and not in front of them.

So, what skills and knowledge do people need to be effective mediators or negotiators or conflict generators? I think there are only three. The first one far and above [the others] is honesty. If you lie to yourself you'll get [screwed, and] you'll screw up everybody else too. And this is true in politics; it's true in life. The people who get in trouble are the people who convince themselves that everything's fine when it's falling apart. So the first skill is honesty, but I know of relatively few schools that teach this, as a skill. But I believe it is a skill which can be taught.

The second skill is patience, understanding that the first answer is not necessarily the right one, and that in public policy issues it's going to be years before you know how good the deal was. You've got to see how it plays out.

How good a President was George Bush (senior)? It depends what happens in the next twenty years. We'll find out. So patience is absolutely crucial. People who are impatient, again, screw themselves up and everybody else around them. Again that's [a skill] that often is not taught but ought to be.

The third skill is the ability to count backwards. People who take it one step at a time don't conceptualize the larger process, don't work backwards and manage their resources appropriately, go broke half way through the process. Whether they are spending money or credibility, they run out.

[How do I try and teach honesty in my classes? Well, part of the way we teach here is that in addition to the four introductory theory courses there are three introductory skills courses. One of which is called Interpersonal and Small Group Conflict, one which is called Community and Organizational Conflict, and one which is called International Conflict.

The difference is largely a question of scale and the degree to which culture plays a major role in the exercises and simulations that we thrust people into. In all three of those courses we require people to do some journaling, to take the skills and concepts that we're talking about and reflect on how it applies in their real life, how they have or not have used these skills to their benefit or dis-benefit.

It is very easy to tell, reading journals, who is finessing and who is disclosing, and we call them on it. We say to them, "I want to hear more about this. This is a very interesting story, and

I'd like you in your [entry in] next week's journal to tell me more about that. Tell me more about this part or that part, about how you made this judgment."

Some people have a very hard time doing that because it requires them to admit some things about themselves that they don't like, you know? "I was tired and so I didn't do what I knew I should have done. I was mad at that person so I didn't do what I knew I should have done." Whatever. . .

This is not a confessional process; this is not transactional analysis, and we are not asking you to confess your sins and be absolved. But in fact, by acknowledging limits, your own and others, it allows you to work around them much better than denying them. And those limits are real and. Again, that's a problem to be solved just like any other, and maybe that's not honesty but it's certainly the first step toward it.

What else would I like to add about the negotiation process or mediation field in general? The field has a terrible semantic problem, a failure to develop a common vocabulary about what is mediation, what is negotiation, what is process design, what is public participation, and what's negotiation and what's consultation, and what's an outcome and what isn't? Not only [is there that] failure, [but] we have a major problem having really been awfully fuzzy about our values, because that's an embarrassing subject: we're supposed to be impartial and [egalitarian]—and so espousing the values of our field would somehow violate all that.

That's a failure, but the much more fundamental failure is this problem with vocabulary: we don't have a standard glossary. One person can talk about a conflict, and somebody else thinks, "Oh that's a dispute," and somebody else says, "Well, no, that's a problem," or "No, that's an issue." Even those fundamental words [mean different things] to different people who are all speaking English in this country.

It makes it real hard for us to exchange experience well, or even to converse civilly. I think that [explains??] the refusal to acknowledge the conflicts between theologically-based mediators, lawyers, psychologists, and other people who are in this field.

We say. "Well, we're all in it together; we all share a certain technology," but in fact we don't. I don't think that's been confronted very well, and the competing interests that play out are usually submerged in order to make a conference work, or where they're brought out, they're brought out for entertainment value, and that comes out in snide remarks in panel discussions. So I think that's a major problem.

Two organizations were commissioned to do the first writing of a glossary: [the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution] (SPIDR) and [the National Institute of Dispute Resolution] (NIDR). [But] neither SPIDR nor NIDR have done it. I think that the new leadership at NIDR recognizes that while they spent their first ten years functioning as ADR advocates, that era is over. They have not yet said, “The next mission that we have to have is introducing America to conflict resolution as something other than ADR,” much less dealing with the term “ADR.”

Around here we of course insist that we are the mainstream, that ninety-five percent of all disputes are not resolved by litigation and therefore, we’re the mainstream, and they’re the alternative--boy do I like that, but we have a lot of fun with it.

My hope is that NIDR will play some of that role, and my colleague here is President of SPIDR this year. As international president I think he’s viewed it as his role to say, “Either we’ve got to pull together here or we’re going to get torn apart. It’s time to quit arguing about semantics and try to get back to [the question], “Do we have values that we share in common?”

So his approach has been to say, “Let’s try to identify [our] values and move backwards to the semantics.” If he’s successful in getting some of that to happen, that’ll be a real useful step.

I have a feeling that my experience is quite different [from many other mediators.] Next time I’d like to talk about Armenia and Azerbaijan, one of my other [efforts,] but that’s a long one.