

Leading Through Conflict. How Successful Leaders Transform Differences into Opportunities

By Mark Gerzon. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006.

What makes the world today different from the world before? Is it that the means of communication are faster than ever, when in one click of the computer mouse we can speak or communicate with anyone around the globe? Is it because a network of airports, railways and highways can take you across countries and continents in a fraction of the time once needed a dozen years ago? Is it because continents, namely Europe, are integrating and their inhabitants can enjoy freedoms hardly seen in such extent before?

Probably all of those aspects are part of the answer. Enormous technological developments of recent decades supported by some relevant political decisions have brought people closer to each other than ever experienced in the history of humankind.

Unknown, by masses unexplored countries, continents, capitals and civilizations with their cultures, habits and religions are becoming part of our lives thanks to TV, internet, cell phones and cheap flights. What few realize is that their conflicts are also becoming part of our lives. Conflicts related to religion, lifestyle, culture, politics, faiths, and also to business are being

discussed and explored in geographic areas which have traditionally been unfamiliar.

The author of *Leading Through Conflict* does not only ask why is today's world different from the 'old' one? He admits this new situation is a fact, and he is rather asking what kind of leaders a world under these changed circumstances needs.

The principle idea of Mark Gerzon's book is that a new age and a new globalized world where everything is interconnected brings people closer to conflicts and problems previously never experienced in their respective areas. It brings situations that were, until recently, rather unknown and distant. Leaders of the old world are not able to cope with these new conflicts. Therefore the new world needs new types of leaders – leaders who will be able to transform these conflicts into opportunities for the whole of society, leaders who are able to cross borders – hypothetical ones or physical ones – leaders, who will be able to make individual parts of a system work so that they would lock together and bring benefit to this system as a whole.

Gerzon calls such a leader the Mediator. He points out the difference

between the Mediator and the other two types of leaders he identifies as the Demagogue and the Manager.

There is a rather clear distinction between all three types of leaders. The demagogue is a leader who reflects on the existence of conflicts. But, instead of using them to build a united whole he exploits groups in society to play against each other thus polarizing it, creating the atmosphere of fear, threats and intimidation in which his position is hardly questionable. One does not have to go far for examples which start with Hitler's Germany and finish with the demagogic and populist leaders of today.

The second type of leader, the Manager does not have initially bad intentions. He is productive and efficient if he feels secure on domestic soil. The difference between the Manager and the Mediator is that the former one focuses on "us" and "our people", without being concerned with those who stand outside of "our" circle. Thus the Manager pursues the self-interest of his and of his group, but he is not able to deal with cross-border issues and conflicts.

To demonstrate the managerial way of acting, Gerzon uses the example of the European Union (Gerzon uses also other examples e.g. from business environment showing that today's responsibility of companies is no longer only to produce and deliver good and services, but they also have become social agents responsible for its own stakeholders, employees, customers,

community, government, environment etc., they simply have also social responsibility. Gerzon 2006, p. 38.), where during the summit meetings the majority of country leaders act more in the interest of their states than in the interest of the EU as a whole. Those leaders are more concerned with getting enough votes in the coming election than with the real situation in the world in a decade or two. What they concentrate on are short terms goals, not balanced sustainable long term policies (Gerzon uses the quotation of Stephen Byers, Labor member of Parliament, saying 'most politicians on both sides of the Atlantic care more about getting votes this year or next than the state of the world ten to fifteen years from now'. Gerzon, 2006, p. 37).

And here we are coming to the principle point of the book. Leading through conflict according to Gerzon does not mean leaving the self-interest and interest of one's organization or state aside. It rather means finding the means of how to satisfy one's own interests as well as the interests of the others. As the author writes, the conventional use of the term mediator refers to a person who serves as an intermediary to reconcile differences, particularly in political and military conflict (Gerzon, 2007, p. 47). In his book, when using the term the Mediator, he is referring to a leader who is able to act on behalf of the whole, not only on that of the part, who can think systematically, who build bridges across dividing lines searching for innovation

and opportunity to transform conflict (Gerzon, 2007, p. 50).

Readers can recognize three levels of examples on which Gerzon applies his theory where new leadership is needed. One level is that of the community level such as teachers between quarreling children or local politics in town or village. The second level is that of business where he uses examples of companies such as Benetton or Ford or the World Economic Forum in Davos, but also smaller companies. The third level is the level of international politics, EU summits, the United Nations or relations between political parties such as Democrats and Republicans in the United States. Case studies used for demonstration of his theory vary from inter-religious conflicts to civil war in Rwanda to decisions that Mr. George W. Bush took before and after 11/9 and war on Iraq. One of the Mediator examples that Gerzon uses is Nelson Mandela, who after being freed from prison in South Africa while abolishing apartheid, acted not only on behalf of his own group, but also on behalf of white Africans as well.

On the basis of his own experiences from various conflicts in most of the world's countries, as well as on the experiences of his colleague and co-workers, Gerzon identifies eight tools which a leader should use for acting as the Mediator. The good news is that most of them can be practiced and learnt; the bad news is that not all of them can be. Certainly systematic thinking, inquiry, conscious conversation,

dialogue, bridging and innovation can be practiced and mastered. With each tool he describes, Gerzon also offers detailed steps on how to reach the aim and also examples in which the right action is demonstrated. However, another important tool such as an integral vision and presence is a bit harder to achieve with only practice. Integral vision means that in the case of conflict leaders, before taking any action, must be able to see the larger picture of a given situation, gather all relevant information and they must be able to take into account all pieces of the game. The only borders set in that moment are the borders of the leader's imagination. Integral vision is exactly the tool which questions dividing lines separating 'us' from 'them'; it prevents turning those lines into walls of separation and rather makes 'us' aware of those webs that connects 'us' with 'them' (Gerzon, 2007, p. 52).

Another tool which can hardly be mastered is presence. Presence means giving the whole person to a solution to a conflict; the whole human being. It means being there not only physically, but with the full extent of the leader's mind and heart and personality. In this way other sides of the conflict are also involved in finding solutions, not only to have blunt discussions which do not lead anywhere. Presence means that the leader must put the solution of a conflict and its transformation to opportunity first, before personal opinions, preferences, feelings, and fears.

At the very beginning of the book Gerzon writes that if there is something he can promise, it is that after reading it the reader will be able to change conflicts in his life so that they will enrich it. Differences between us and the others will become productive and they will bring real advantages for us, our organization or community and all the sides involved. But this change occurs only if the principle condition is met. And that is the commitment to finding solutions.

The author has been active in mediation for most of his life and the reader can feel from the text that Gerzon does not speak from out of the blue, but from his own experience. He cites works of other reputable authors who write about leadership and conflict resolution. He is not forcing the reader to agree with him, but with carefully chosen examples he leads the reader to understand the principle points of his theory. Those points keep repeating throughout the whole book. They are also found where someone inexperienced on the topic would not find them at first sight.

Gerzon puts the fragments of opinions about today's world and leadership that can be occasionally heard on TV and read in newspapers, but which are mostly discussed as revolutionary ideas behind the closed door of international institutions, CEOs' offices or Prime Ministers' cabinets, into one complex theory.

As many people who are behind that door would agree, the most

important factor of leadership is vision, but it cannot be realized without will and commitment. This is what Gerzon writes in last chapter asking questions "what if" about things which could be done to make our world a better place. But the very same chapter also contains the answer to why it all is not done. This is because all good intentions, all the tools and advice and strategies about becoming the Mediator are only technical instruments which can be forgotten if three key factors are lacking: vision, will and commitment. Without identifying those three factors, Gerzon's book could be another toolset for improving communication skills and a toolbox for resolving quarrels with the company boss, not the theory of new world leadership.

Who should read the book and what will it give to the reader? Certainly anyone in a decision-making position should read it if for nothing else, at least to learn about all the options of conflict solutions. Each individual chapter brings knowledge about dealing with different types of conflict based on years of experience. As the description of tools is rather detailed and is demonstrated with examples, the reader can understand the points quickly and can choose what could be interesting and convenient for his/her use in their personal and professional life.

But definitely those who have intentions to work in the highest positions either in business or in politics should read it, too. One of course does

not become a leader – the Mediator – after reading Gerzon's book. That would be a big expectation. But it can make future leaders think about their leadership and about the choices they have. Maybe then he or she will come to this book again. And maybe he or she will start putting it to practice.

After all, Gerzon made a point. Call it old world or new world, but if there is something the world lacks and needs today, it is responsible leaders with vision, will and commitment.

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