Blessed are the peacemakers
Mediation and peace

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Mediation is a technique for preventing or ending conflict. The core principle is that of parties appreciating and respecting each other, and appreciating and respecting each others’ faith, background, interests, etc. Ultimately this is about achieving good relations. The prerequisite for appreciation and respect is at play between people. But what about, for instance, the relations between nations and organizations? Can mediation be of use in the prevention and ending of conflicts which supersede the individual? These questions are the focus of this article.

Good relations
What is necessary for good relations between people, within organizations and between nations? People want to be accepted for what they are. Just think of culture, background, gender, skin color and character. Appreciation of these aspects by others plays a crucial role for good relations between individuals. This appreciation consists in listening and questioning and giving the other party space. Holding particular points of view stand in the way of a generous appreciation of others and therefore good relations.

This principle of appreciation is central to mediation. Often this technique is used in a (threatening) conflict situation where individuals are involved. Take for instance a relationship in trouble between employer and employee. Is it possible that this principle could be useful in improving or repairing good relations between nations or organizations? We try to answer this question by illustrating two concrete situations.

International economic aid provision
In his book “Globalization and its discontents,” Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel prize winner for Economy 2001, gives a critique on the way the International Monetary Fund approached her “clients,” Ethiopia for instance. The financial aid provided by the IMF was accompanied by the imposition of certain reforms, based on free-market philosophy rather than on the situation of the nation asking for assistance. Stiglitz characterizes the IMF’s approach as a standardized formula of “one size fits all.” The standard approach took precedence over detailed knowledge of the particular circumstances of the nation concerned. Overlooking the specific situation of the nation concerned is not conducive to an atmosphere of trust where both the party asking for help and the one providing the assistance can work together constructively so that the economic situation improves. Mutual acceptance and appreciation in particular can act as fertile soil for a healthy economic policy. This advocates the application of specific mediation insights in situations where nation states interact with international organizations, such as the IMF, but also for instance the United Nations.

Managerial mediation
Parties in a (threatening) conflict situation represent certain interests. Thus a mediator must always be aware of the
complex terrain where the opposing parties meet. The mediation principle of appreciation in this context means that all interests and hence all interested parties meet on a level playing field. This runs parallel with the body of thought of Corporate Social Responsibility. According to this way of thinking organizations – especially enterprises but also government departments and non-profit organizations – are entities dealing with numerous interested parties, known as stakeholders. The stakeholders have a particular interest in the smooth running of the organization concerned. Employers, shareholders, clients, banks, environmental bodies, neighbors and the authorities can all be stakeholders in a commercial enterprise. The employee’s interest in the enterprise is continuity (no loss of employment), an acceptable wage and a good working environment. The specific interest of shareholders is a good return on their investment. Neighbors want measures in place to guard against pollution of the environment and the authorities want the enterprise to fulfill all the relevant legal requirements. Business managers are confronted with a wide range of interests. They have the responsibility to protect all these interests in such a way that all stakeholders feel appreciated. In short, the manager acts as mediator.

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The mediator focuses on maintaining or restoring good relations between individual people. Mutual appreciation of characteristics and interests of the parties is at its centre. The two concrete situations outlined above show that the mediation technique could be applied in a broader sense. Mediation can promote harmony and stability on different levels: with individual people as well as with nations and organizations. This presents opportunities for mediation as a generally applicable technique for prevention and ending of conflict. Mediators could in this way present themselves as independent experts, in situations of (threatening) conflict within and between nation states. The particular expertise of mediators, based on the principle of interest appreciation, enables them to make an important contribution to good relations and in this way to world peace.

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Translation from the Dutch by Aleida Hawkins – Wassenaar

[1] Matthew Ch. 5 v 9a (the root of the Hebrew word shalom infers wellbeing as in good relations).