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GETTING BEYOND “GROUND ZERO” An Interview with Pascal Da Rocha

Linda Botha with Pablo Lumerman

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Pascal Da Rocha has over 18 years of experience in crisis negotiations in volatile environments. He provides political advisory and political mediation activities for organizations such as UN, NATO, and EU. His thematic expertise is in extractive industries, gender, national dialogue and reconciliation and security arrangements. Pascal also provides advisory services for Fortune 500 companies in change management strategies and intercultural communication. Pascal holds lecturing appointments at Columbia University in New York and IESEG School of Management in Paris/Lille, France. He has published on diversity management, political mediation and collective leadership in organizations.

Question: What is an important and recurring theme or issue you often experience in your work as a company-community dialogue facilitator?

Answer: Setting up dialogues that are based on the principles of fairness and equity.

Doing the groundwork to set up equitable and fair negotiation processes is the most important aspect of my work. It can take an enormous amount of time in a context where time is in short supply. It can take as much as a year and I’ve also seen it take five years! This is the result of parties waiting too long

to address lingering issues. By the time the mediator arrives on the scene, it is often like “ground zero;” you have to build a process up from the ruins.

Companies may believe that their social investment in communities, for example, building schools and hospitals, is what creates fairness. But sometimes this is done without proper consultation or assessment of what communities really need. Corporate social responsibility initiatives cause more harm than good if community voices are not heard in their design and execution. It is crucial to get community buy-in. People need to feel that their participation in a process is meaningful – that they are helping to shape their own future, not just benefiting from immediate improvements of the local infrastructure.

My role as the mediator is to engage parties as a partnership broker and to design a conflict-sensitive engagement approach. I first help stakeholders gain a deep insight into the history, the relationships, rights and roles of various actors. Once they develop an understanding of the issues, they become open to the idea of being active participants. If there is a perception that all voices are heard, then fairness comes back in to the picture.

Question: *What is an example of this challenge?*

Answer: *Brokering a partnership between a resource-extraction company and a local community.*

In areas where I work, governments give concessions to companies in the extractive industries for gas and oil exploration. Licenses are granted but communities are not informed. They wake up one day and see foreigners and government officials in their village. Sometimes they are simply told to move out. The communities feel they have no recourse; they don’t know what the company is doing or how the government is dealing with compensation for the land where wells are being drilled.

In one case involving an oil company, unresolved grievances accumulated over the years, making it very difficult for the company and communities to even begin to resolve their issues. As a facilitator, I had to start somewhere, even if it was from “ground zero”. I did a proper stakeholder analysis and found out who all the actors were that had to be involved. I invited them into a dialogue and deliberation process. The aim was not to immediately solve the problems, but first to broker a partnership where people had a mutual understanding of the issues. Very often, problems are framed from only one perspective – for example, a company might only analyze a problem from a cost-effectiveness point of view, neglecting the social, cultural and political dimensions important to the community.

Getting people to look at a problem through a similar mental frame is time-consuming. However, without this common understanding it is not possible to set realistic priorities or implement grievance mechanisms. Once the parties had a shared understanding, perceptions of equity and fairness

increased. That is conflict mediation “101”. The process also helped to bring about a cultural shift within the company as more managers got exposed to the ideas of conflict-sensitive dialogue processes.

Question: *How did this impact the parties’ ability to achieve rights-compatible, interest-based outcomes?*

Answer: *Communities became active in problem solving.*

It took a range of activities, like workshops and meetings, to get the relational groundwork in place. It was a cascading process where a variety of leaders, liaison officers, mediators, NGOs and media actors played a role to sensitize all parties to the value of collaboration and information sharing. Increasingly, I see that even powerful players perceive what the opportunity costs might be if these elements are not given enough time and attention.

What we learned was that, if people who never had a voice are given an opportunity to participate, interesting things can happen. For example, communities came up with a low-cost, low-tech solution to foster communication between themselves and company representatives. The area where they live is remote, with little communications infrastructure, such as access to mobile phones. Still, there had to be a way for the indigenous communities to send messages to the company in case there were issues of concern, such as an oil leak. They came up with the idea to use strategically placed “drop boxes” where written messages could be left. Company representatives would pick these up and would then communicate back to the community about what was being done.

An indigenous approach was taken and turned it into a formal system. It had a transformational impact on the relationship between company and community, because information sharing became a regular part of their interaction. That is where equity came into the equation. All groups felt that their voices mattered. If someone feels heard, it can do magic. It doesn’t solve all problems immediately, but it gives stakeholders the confidence to say “Yes, we can actually do this”.

Question: *The answer to what question would have helped you be able to more effectively intervene as a third party?*

Answer: *What are the mental frames behind the behavior actors?*

Part of my job as mediator is to understand the mental frames through which people view conflict, since this has a decisive impact on their responses and actions. It always comes up when a joint

understanding of a problem is sought, because divergent framings of issues is a core part of why there is conflict in the first place.

The same goes for me as a mediator. I also bring my own frame and biases to the table, priming me to respond in a certain way. Facilitators are not untouched by these things! It influences how we perceive rights and wrongs, relationships and roles. Very often our frames are determined by the academic and intellectual disciplines we are steeped in. Some of us follow a social practice approach; others prefer more transactional methods with lots of rules and regulations. There is no one single way to go about this work.

I try to be aware of my own mindset. On a daily basis, I keep a diary or a journal to keep track of what is happening, what is being said, the verbal and non-verbal exchanges, all the various responses. I also like to have debriefing sessions with other professionals, like this exercise we are engaging in right now. I constantly ask myself questions. Why am I here? Am I imposing my mindset? Am I too neutral? It takes a lot of individual effort to be in touch with your own strengths, weaknesses and behavioral patterns.