

Preface

In 2009, the United Nations expanded its services in managing workplace conflict by creating an expanded and geographically dispersed Office of Ombudsman and Mediation Services (UNOMS). Early on, at an occasion where the newly appointed regional ombudsmen were gathered, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon told us that “just as the United Nations addresses conflicts around the world, so must we also pay close attention to resolving and managing conflicts within the Organization.” Shortly after, I arrived in Nairobi as part of the first cohort of regional ombudsmen embedded in seven different UN duty stations around the world.¹ The regional ombudsman role was designed to bring informal conflict resolution closer to UN operations outside of headquarters in New York. Since then, the role has evolved to not only provide direct conflict resolution services to staff but also to help build the competence of staff members to productively manage conflict.

Initially, the primary focus of the expanded UNOMS office was to offer mediation as a complement to the formal system of justice within the UN. From the beginning of my tenure in Nairobi, promoting mediation as a viable alternative to the formal challenge of administrative decisions by staff members has been an important part of my practice. Efforts to introduce mediation into the UN culture of dispute resolution, however, gained ground slowly.

With the direction of UNOMS leadership in New York, I, and the other UNOMS staff, began to explore new ways of promoting mediation by expanding along a fuller spectrum of informal conflict resolution services. Eventually, we added a focus on training designed not only to help participants develop the skills necessary to productively manage conflict but also to provide a nonthreatening forum for them to assess the degree of comfort they felt with us as conflict resolution professionals. As a result, I developed a training component to my practice designed to proactively help staff improve working relationships. Through this process, I discovered that the common denominator of aspects of my practice involves either acting as a bridge

¹In addition to the UNOMS office in New York where the UN ombudsman is based, the seven United Nations duty stations that have a regional ombudsman are Santiago, Geneva, Vienna, Goma, Entebbe, Nairobi, and Bangkok.

between disparate perspectives or helping staff construct their own bridges between disparate perspectives. This bridge building not only resolves workplace conflicts and improves working relationships, but it also has begun to illustrate the connections that the secretary-general had referred to: the link between the UN's mandate and the way that we engage internally with one another as UN staff members.

My practice in this context provides an ever-constant reminder of the challenges that all human beings face in managing conflict in a positive and productive way. Being part of a peacemaking and peace-building institution does not immunize one to the corrosive effects of poorly managed conflict. The narrowing of perspectives during conflict, the activation of neural networks driven by fear and anger, and the sense of vulnerability invoked by uncertainty all exist within the UN workplace as well. In fact, the diversity of viewpoints, cultures, and backgrounds may also serve to amplify the misunderstandings often caused by these other factors. The process of making the implicit explicit, the shifting of frames, and the deepening of one's understanding of another's interests and narratives serve both micro- and macro-endeavors. It helps us engage more productively with the colleague down the hall or to help address global challenges.

The creation of the seven UNOMS regional offices and the establishment of a mediation division within UNOMS brought together a cadre of dispute resolution professionals that helped catalyze this insight. The rich interactive dynamics that result from such a critical mass of talent has sparked the group's learning, professional development, and innovation as part of the UN's efforts at workplace conflict resolution and beyond. These insights from our practice and interaction have led me to the following conclusion: as institutions and the relationships contained within them grow more complex, the systems designed to productively manage conflict must keep pace. The application of the knowledge gleaned from the scholarship and research involving workplace conflict, such as the ones presented in this book, becomes critical to keeping abreast with the rapid changes and ever-growing complexity of workplace relationships. We must increase the efficacy of workplace mediation by furthering new and more effective methods to leverage the tension inherent in productive conflict; to make the places where we work more innovative and collaborative through better dialogue; to deepen our understanding of the narratives, needs, and interests of our colleagues; to foster environments more robust in their collective decision-making; and to create a workplace that is not only more humane but, ultimately, more productive. When building bridges over increasingly wider differences, new bridge-building techniques become invaluable.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-42841-3>

Advancing Workplace Mediation Through Integration of
Theory and Practice

Bollen, K.; Euwema, M.C.; Munduate, L. (Eds.)

2016, VIII, 263 p. 12 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-42841-3