A PSYCHOTHERAPIST'S VIEW of DECISION -MAKING: IMPLICATIONS for PEACEFUL NEGOTIATIONS

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"I am the decider!" President George Bush

For the last 35 years, I have been a practicing psychotherapist and researcher who helped develop evidence-based cognitive-behavioral therapy procedures. In this capacity, I have worked with a variety of clientele who experience intractable conflicts such as distressed couples and dysfunctional families; who evidence impulsive explosive disorders such as aggressive behaviors; who experienced traumatic events, but who are reluctant to seek treatment; and who experience depression and are suicidal (See Meichenbaum, 2007 and papers on the Website www.melissainstitute.org).

A major focus of these cognitive behavioral psychotherapeutic interventions is the client's cognitive and emotional processes that contribute to their distress and on ways that clients can learn to alter their mindset. A central concern are the barriers that impede behavioral change such as misperceptions, miscalculations, unrealistic expectations, perfectionistic standards, cognitive distortions, mental habits, faulty decision rules, entrenched beliefs and sacred values. Cognitive behavioral psychotherapeutic interventions have been informed by the research literature of cognitive science on how individuals make decisions under conditions of uncertainty and stress (Kahneman, 2011; Kahneman, Slovic & Tversky, 1987; Sternberg, 2002; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008).

Can any of these psychotherapeutic strategies be used to improve political decision-making and foster peace negotiations? This question has been addressed by a number of previous cognitive behaviorally oriented psychotherapists (Aquilar & Galluccio, 2008; 2011; Bandura, 2002; Beck, 1999; Ellis, 1992). In each instance, these authors have highlighted the nature of the

cognitive processes that political leaders engage in, or that they fail to engage in, that impact their decision-making process.

The need to focus on the decision-making process of political leaders and peace negotiators has been underscored by numerous historians, journalists and various Royal Commissions who conduct "*post-mortem* analyses" of political and military decisions. Irving Janis (1982, 1989) has documented a number of "historical fiascos" that have resulted from defective policy planning and faulty decision-making. Whether they are military initiatives such as the Bay of Pigs or Iraq war invasions, or the absence of actions as in the case of preventing genocide in Rwanda (Dallaire, 2003), or decisions that impact the world's climate, there is an urgent need to educate, monitor and improve political leader's decision-making skills.

The central premise of this paper is what would be the potential benefits if political leaders included in their cabinet, or in their inner decision-making circle, a "neutral observer" who is an expert in the area of decision-making and behavior change processes and knowledgeable about the types of mistakes and faulty cognitive processes that escalate violence and that undermine engaging in peace negotiations.

Put simply, why wait for misconceptions and miscalculations, or "historic fiascos", to occur and then lament their occurrence, after the fact. Imagine that a "neutral observer" could provide on-going feedback at the time when such decision-making activities were occurring. The task for this Decision-Making Consultant (DMC) would be to act like a supportive coach who provides constructive feedback. The DMC would be sworn to secrecy and would use all of the psychotherapeutic skills that go into developing, maintaining and monitoring a "therapeutic alliance" with the President, Prime Minister, Peace Negotiator and other political and military leaders. The DMC would need to establish trusting, nonjudgmental, respectful relationships and

would wait for the invitation to provide feedback on the decision-making process. The DMC would use the "art of Socratic questioning" and discovery learning to provide feedback and conduct psychoeducation for political leaders. This is not psychotherapy, but consultation in the tradition of Kelman's (2002) scholar-practitioner mode.

Imagine the following feedback session between a President and a DMC.

"Mr. President, could you walk me through the steps of how you came to the decision to do X?"

"How did you judge the credibility of the information that was provided to you?"

"What other alternative options did you consider and how did you come to choose this one?"

"What do you consider both the short-term and long-term risks and benefits of making this decision? Would it be okay if we, once again used our decisional-balance sheet in evaluating your decision to do X?" (2X2 Balance Sheet of Pros and Cons, Short-term and Long-term).

"I noticed that in your press conference you used certain historical analogies and metaphors. Could we take a moment to discuss whether these fit the current situation (similarities and differences) and how using such analogies/metaphors .. "like a" statements impact your decision to

do X?"

"Have your advisors adequately thought through the potential barriers and obstacles of taking this action and put in place back-up contingency plans?"

"Have any of your advisors 'gamed the system' by strategically bypassing or misrepresenting other advisor's positions?"

"Mr. President, I noticed and I was wondering if you noticed any possible omissions, questionable decision-making steps that need to be re-considered? I know you like to "trust your gut" in these matters, but permit me to share some of the lessons learned from the past that might apply in this case. We have discussed multiple examples of historic fiascos, as well as successful actions of your predecessors. Let's see if we can be on the lookout for these avoidable errors. For instance, has there been a poor information search, a lack of curiosity about credibility of the sources of information, selective confirmatory biases, 'cherry picking' of the data, absence of consequential thinking, inadequate contingency planning, cognitive distortions, failure to perspective take, presence of mental habits, unquestioned assumptions and the like?"

"I greatly appreciate the opportunity to share my observations about the

> ***decision-making process with you. I hope my comments will prove***
>
> ***helpful. May I ask, how do you feel about our chatting like this***
>
> ***about the decision-making process? Is there anyone else among***
>
> ***your advisors that you would like me to share these observations?"***

Note, that the DMC probes all focused on "What" and "How" questions, and not on "Why" questions. The focus of the feedback is on helping political leaders and peace negotiators become more aware and how to be more on the lookout for possible motivational and cognitive errors and limitations that can undermine the decision-making process.

Table 1 provides a Checklist of a potential "thinking errors" political leaders and peace negotiators may make (see Meichenbaum, 2011 for a more extensive description of each thinking error). The DMC could use this Checklist to provide specific constructive feedback to political leaders. In the same way that airplane pilots or doctors use Checklists (see Gawande, 2009), the DMC could ensure that political leaders could receive similar feedback.

Two examples of cognitive processes warrant special attention when it comes to conducting peace negotiations. Carol Dweck (2012) and her colleagues (Halperin, Russell, Trzesniewski, Gross & Dweck, 2011) have examined the influence of individual's and group's mindsets or implicit theories and the causal role they play in molding attitudes and behaviors. They have drawn a distinction between "fixed" mindsets or what they call "entity" theories versus "growth" mindsets or "incremental" theories. Individuals and groups who hold a fixed mindset tend to affix labels, hold stereotypes, reject information that runs counter to their stereotypes, consider problems as intractable and hold deep-seated attitudes that other groups are

"evil" or aggressive forever and not malleable. Political leaders who hold a fixed mindset are likely to support statements such as the following:

"Groups can do things differently, but the important parts of who they are can't really be changed."

"Groups that are characterized by violent tendencies will never change their ways."

"Every group or nation has basic moral values and beliefs that can't be changed significantly."

In contrast, individuals and groups who possess a "growth" mindset or "incremental" theory hold deep-seated attitudes that other groups are capable of change and they have a willingness to interact and compromise. Their attitudes are not frozen as they are more likely to seek challenges, view obstacles as learning opportunities, and evident greater resilience in the face of setbacks.

Dweck (2012) reports on examples of how an incremental mindset can be primed and nurtured in order to facilitate Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, reduce prejudice and aggression. Elsewhere, (Meichenbaum, 2012) I have described how the mindset of traumatized and victimized individuals, including returning service members, can be impacted in ways that bolster resilience. Cognitive behavioral interventions have proven effective in altering mindsets from a "fixed" entity perspective to a "growth" incremental perspective.

Another potential barrier to entering peaceful negotiations is that the respective parties involved may hold what are called "sacred values" (Atran & Akelrod, 2008; Ginges et al., 2007; 2011). Sacred values represent moral imperatives that circumscribe certain actions including terrorist acts and self-sacrifice for a cause and for one's support of group members. A central feature of sacred values is a sense of honor that cannot be violated, nor challenged. Such sacred values may be political, religious or personal and can disrupt negotiations and contribute to intransigence. A commitment by individuals and group members to such sacred values can contribute to religious martyrdom and undermine instrumental cost-benefit calculations that underlie the negotiation process. Such sacred values can be viewed as an issue of national pride, tied to historical exploitation and past affronts. Any efforts at using financial incentives as a negotiation position can lead to moral outrage and backfire, as described as "taboo tradeoffs" by Tetlock, Kristal, Elson, Green and Lerner (2000).

If the negotiation process is going to be undertaken successfully, there is a need to recognize the "sacred values" of the other groups, as well as one's own sacred values and how they impact the consideration of behavioral options. Ginges et al. (2011) highlight that in order to address such barriers there is a need to engage in symbolic acts that reflect an understanding and respect of the sacred values and honor of all negotiating parties. There is a need to carefully frame requests and offer negotiation positions so they are not viewed as challenging sacred values. As Pruitt (2011) highlights, there is a need for peace negotiators to avoid demonization of the other parties, but instead to rethink the conflict from the other's perspective, to scale down one's aspirations, to be hopeful, to engage in symbolic acts that nurture trust and to engage in back channel communication, often using third parties, in order to "test the waters" and discover common ground.

As Ginges et al (2011, p.515) observe:

> **"Although words- of an apology, recognition or respect- are not enough on their own, they are a beginning; they are the things that just might make the other side willing to listen and calm the heat in their anger. Words have the power to change emotions. They can express the abstract and the factual, but also change and inspire."**

The thrust of the present proposal is that a dialogue between experts who study and conduct negotiations (Faure, 2011; Fisher & Ury, 1991; Janis, 1982, 1989; Kelman, 2002; Kremenyuk, 2002; Pruitt, 2011; Thompson, 2006) and experts in cognitive behavioral interventions could prove quite fruitful. Cognitive behavior therapists are constantly addressing issues such as; how to

1) establish, maintain and monitor the quality of communication processes and ways to address "ruptures" in such working relationships (Galluccio, 2011);

2) foster participation using motivational interviewing procedures;

3) conduct psychoeducation by helping individuals and groups become more aware and vigilant about potential cognitive pitfalls and increasing their understanding of the connections between emotions, cognitive processes (implicit beliefs, sacred values, mindsets) and chosen actions;

4) engage in collaborative goal-setting that nurtures hope and "unfreezes" core beliefs;

5) employ social discourse, perspective taking, empathy-compassionate activities, symbolic acts and problem-solving skills;

6) anticipate and address potential barriers and obstacles in the form of relapse prevention.

Such interventions can be conducted by a DMC, not only on an ongoing consultative basis, but on a preventative basis, as well. My work on the development of Stress inoculation training (Meichenbaum, 2007) has raised the possibility that political leaders and peace negotiators can be presented with case studies of both "historic fiascos" and successful instances of negotiations (negotiations involving Northern Ireland, South Africa and the Oslo Middle East talks as described by Pruitt, 2011) and other examples. The Stress Inoculation Training has three phases: 1) a psychoeducation phase that educates individuals and groups to ways in which stress influences decision-making, especially under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure and increase awareness of the interconnectedness between core beliefs, sacred values, decision-making errors and thinking traps; 2) a skills training phase where individuals and groups have an opportunity to learn from case examples and then practice communications and negotiation skills; 3) an application phase of training using both imaginal and in vivo (real life) negotiation settings. There is a need to build into the Stress Inoculation Training regimen guidelines to increase the likelihood of generalization.

Political leaders and their advisors should be able to recount and be aware of such historical events. As the philosopher George Santayana observed: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

It is time to introduce Decision-Making Consultants (DMCs) into political circles, negotiation rooms and businesses and military boardrooms and to critically evaluate how their

presence and feedback influence the social discourse and decision-making process. It is an experiment worth trying.

TABLE 1

Checklist of Motivational and Cognitive Errors in Decision-Making

"What to Watch Out For"

1. Use of thinking shortcuts - - Mental heuristics and habits of thought

2. Use of confirmatory bias - - Seek information that is only consistent with prior views. Ask for opinions of only those who agree with you.

3. Engage in tunnel vision - - Stubbornly hold beliefs and "cherry-pick" data that one wants to hear.

4. Lack curiosity - - fail to question the credibility of the source of information.

5. Inadequate consideration of how questions are framed - - Frames always trump facts.

6. Engage in stereotypic thinking - - Demonize others, use escalating images, lack perspective taking, not rethink the conflict.

7. Use of historical analogies and metaphors - - Use "like a" statements that do not fit the current

situation.

8. Inadequate consequential thinking - - Lack of conducting a barrier analysis and accompanying

   contingency planning.

9. Think defensively - - Blame others (attribution bias effect). Denial.

10. Make snap impulsive decisions - - "Hidden agendas" influence decision-making.

11. Use group think processes - - Strive for unanimity, group cohesiveness, solidarity,

   homogeneity of decision-making.

12. "Game the system" - - Strategically bypass and misrepresent other advisor's positions.

   Presence of hubris and unquestioned self-confidence.

13. Hold a "fixed entity" mindset and embrace "sacred values" that undermine the negotiation

   process.

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