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Honest appreciation can heal the nation

Written by Mike Eldon



Chief mediator and former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan (centre), Cabinet minister Martha Karua of PNU (left) and ODM's William Ruto in a discussion. "Leaders have been wondering how bad things are and to what extent, beneath those apparently almost normal surfaces, people are really suffering."

February 21, 2008: Many have seen the need for reconciliation and healing in the work place. Staff, or at least their friends and their relatives, have been through traumatic experiences; and not a few have found themselves engaging in rough exchanges. What used to be viewed as acceptable banter has now become politically incorrect, and we've tended to become very self-conscious about our behaviour.

Leaders have been wondering how bad things are and to what extent, beneath those apparently almost normal surfaces, people are really suffering. What tensions, what anger bubbles underneath? What do people really feel? Are we just going to have to live with the more difficult relations between ethnic groups? Must each carry some ongoing burden of at best self-conscious restraint, at worst an uneasy guilt over less than charitable thoughts?

Should we just ignore the problem and let sleeping dogs lie? Should we just hope things will calm down, concerned that if we try to tackle the subject head on we risk making matters worse? What can we do that can make a positive impact? All responsible leaders

are asking themselves these questions.

Many CEOs called their staff together very early in the new year, calming and encouraging them. They asked them to hold back from expressing strong political views; to keep off using vernacular languages that make others feel excluded (some have always discouraged this); and to reach out to colleagues of different ethnic origins.

Some held discussion sessions that seemed helpful at the time but found that underlying feelings almost immediately resurfaced. Others saw people congregating in separate tribal (yes, let me call a spade a spade) groupings in different corners of the staff canteen. And here and there fist-fights even erupted.

In the public sector towards the end of last year, some of those who expected their tribal political leaders to win were eyeing juicier corner offices, while those who saw negative poll expectations for their people expected their days in the sun to be numbered. Then, when things turned out as they did, the winners exalted and losers mourned.

But elsewhere life seemed to go on as normal, punctuated by the traditional good-natured teasing over the much-loved tribal stereotypes. Where organisations had invested heavily in developing a meritocratic and diverse culture they often reaped their due rewards. Yet sometimes, just as model parents are not always rewarded with model children, even such investments have not always resulted in harmonious post-election environments.

At the end of January, the Institute of Human Resource Management mounted a half-day workshop to talk about work place relations in the aftermath of the disputed elections. This was in response to their members' desire to exchange experiences and offer support. Those present were given opportunity to share experiences.

Next, life coach, Jane Karuga, explored their pain and anger with some of those present. She offered some inconvenient truths. "Whereas pain is inevitable," she confirmed, "suffering is choice," adding that life doesn't always unfold as you want it to. "Stuff happens.

But you must move on." Instead of getting used to living in a bad situation we must identify where we would rather be... and find ways of getting there. Not only that, but we must figure out how to avoid regressing to that bad place once more.

Now it was the turn of Beatrice Nzovu of PeaceNet-Trust. Beatrice divided the gathering into groups, and each was asked to identify the 'Dividers' that separate us and the 'Connectors' that bring us together.

I came in with my favourite "I'm OK, You're OK" framework. In brief this divides us humans into four categories: 'I'm not OK, You're OK'; 'I'm not OK, You're not OK'; 'I'm OK, You're not OK'; and 'I'm OK, You're OK'. The present situation has badly exacerbated the third of these types – at the expense of the fourth, and I challenged the participants to find ways of reversing the terrible trend.

It was also not lost on them that an 'I'm OK, You're not OK' mindset goes along with a win-lose expectation, one that is hardly likely to be sustainable.

Finally Joan McGregor, who came with experience of conflict resolution in South Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere, talked about the inspiration she had gained from what so many good Kenyans were doing at this difficult time.

She spoke of the need to listen openly and empathetically to one another, in a spirit of 'unconditional positive regard', to accept one another, and to build a common positive force to take us from where we are to where we want to be.

We need to put appropriate systems and structures in place, she said, both formal and informal, that will curtail dysfunctional behaviour and support constructive behaviour.

And this behaviour must be aligned with our inner feelings, our values, attitudes and beliefs, which in turn are influenced by our culture and our identities. Ultimately it boils down to a battle between 'hindering forces', that hold us back from embracing the change needed, and 'helping forces' that propel us there.

Given more time we would have helped with an understanding of how emotional intelligence enables healthy relationships; of how appreciative inquiry builds on what's good; and of how to build trust and mutual respect, and how this paves the way for reconciliation.

In the half day at our disposal participants could also see that there are people in this country who have specialised in conflict prevention and resolution, in energy alignment, in developing win-win attitudes, and that these people are only too anxious to share their expertise and their experience.

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