

# Solving Tough Problems

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*AN OPEN WAY OF TALKING, LISTENING,  
AND CREATING NEW REALITIES*

Adam Kahane



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## Foreword by Peter Senge



*I*NCREASINGLY WE FACE ISSUES for which hierarchical authority is inadequate. No CEO can transform a company's ability to innovate, or single-handedly create a values-based culture. No country president can resolve intractable political stalemates that stand in the way of national development. It is painfully apparent that even the most powerful political leaders and global institutions are powerless in the face of issues like climate change or the growing gap between rich and poor that, if left unaddressed, will undermine the future we leave our children and grandchildren.

Faced with this reality, we see everywhere a growing sense of powerlessness and an increasing reliance on force. The former reflects awareness that the big issues are generally getting worse, not better; the latter, a desperate response to this awareness. Few of us do not shudder at the prospect of a continuation of today's escalating reliance on force. Adam Kahane's book poses a third option: a transformation in our ability to talk, think, and act together. I am convinced this is the only reliable path forward, not only for hierarchical leaders but for all of us—as parents, citizens, and people at all levels in organizations—seeking to contribute to meaningful change.

While this third option is commonly dismissed as idealistic and unrealistic, Adam's belief in this possibility has been forged in the fire of some of the world's most complex and conflicted situations. As a young scenario planner from Shell, he found him-

self in 1991 helping formerly outlawed black political party leaders in South Africa develop strategies to guide their divided country. The problem was that they saw the world differently from one another and very differently from the white minority with whom they had to work. Remarkably, in little more than a year, this Mont Fleur scenario process resulted in a meaningful consensus on many of the country's core challenges and a way of talking and working together that united a broad cross section of the country. South Africa still faces immense challenges, but it is hard to imagine the country's transition to stable multiracial democracy without this process and others like it.

Since then, many similar experiences—some successful and some not—have illuminated a few simple principles around which Adam's story unfolds.

We are unable to talk productively about complex issues because we are unable to listen. Politics and politicians today epitomize virtually the opposite of the symbol from which their calling emerged—the Greek *polis*—where citizens came to *talk together* about the issues of their day. Things are little better in most corporate boardrooms, where the most difficult and politically threatening issues often never see the light of day. Indeed, we now have a new hero of corporate governance: the “whistle-blower” who risks it all to say what no one wants to hear.

Listening requires opening ourselves. Our typical patterns of listening in difficult situations are tactical, not relational. We listen for what we expect to hear. We sift through others' views for what we can use to make our own points. We measure success by how effective we have been in gaining advantage for our favored positions. Even when these motives are covered by a shield of politeness, it is rare for people with something at stake truly to open their minds to discover the limitations in their own ways of seeing and acting.

Opening our minds ultimately means opening our hearts. The heart has come to be associated with muddled thinking and personal weakness, hardly the attributes of effective decision makers.

But this was not always so. “Let us bring our hearts and minds together for the good of the whole” has been a common entreaty of wise leaders for millennia. Indigenous peoples around the world commence important dialogues with prayers for guidance, in order that they might suspend their prejudices and fears and act wisely in the service of their communities. The oldest Chinese symbol for “mind” is a picture of the heart.

When a true opening of the heart develops collectively, miracles are possible. This is perhaps the most difficult point of all to accept in today’s cynical world, and I will not try to argue abstractly for what Adam illustrates so poignantly. By miracles I do not mean that somehow everything turns out for the best with no effort or uncertainty. Hardly. If anything, the effort required greatly exceeds what is typical, and people learn to embrace a level of uncertainty from which most of us normally retreat. But this embrace arises from a collective strength that we have all but ceased to imagine, let alone develop: the strength of a creative human community grounded in a genuine sense of connectedness and possibility, rather than one based on fear and dogma.

It has been my privilege to work with Adam for the past decade, as part of a growing community of intrepid explorers around the world looking for alternative paths to catalyze and sustain profound, systemic change. This work is being done in corporate, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations, and in settings that involve all three sectors. It is a joy to see some of the initial articulations of its foundations now reaching publication.

Through this time I have come to appreciate Adam as a consummate craftsman, a deeply pragmatic person not given easily to hyperbole or naïve expectations. This book captures his spirit as well as his knowledge. The theory and method gradually emerging from this collective work sit quietly in the background of his story of challenges, accomplishments, failures, and discoveries.

Although what Adam and others of us are learning is undoubtedly no more than first steps, I believe the direction is becoming clear. The path forward is about becoming more human, not just

more clever. It is about transcending our fears of vulnerability, not finding new ways of protecting ourselves. It is about discovering how to act in service of the whole, not just in service of our own interests. It is about rediscovering our courage—literally, *cuer age*, the rending of the heart—to pursue what Adam calls “an open way,” because the only progress possible regarding the deep problems we face will come from opening our minds, hearts, and wills.

Peter M. Senge  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
April 2004

## Introduction: The Problem with Tough Problems



**T**OUGH PROBLEMS usually don't get solved peacefully. They either don't get solved at all—they get stuck—or they get solved by force. These frustrating and frightening outcomes occur all the time. Families replay the same argument over and over, or a parent lays down the law. Organizations keep returning to a familiar crisis, or a boss decrees a new strategy. Communities split over a controversial issue, or a politician dictates the answer. Countries negotiate to a stalemate, or they go to war. Either the people involved in a problem can't agree on what the solution is, or the people with power—authority, money, guns—impose their solution on everyone else.

There is another way to solve tough problems. The people involved can talk and listen to each other and thereby work through a solution peacefully. But this way is often too difficult and too slow to produce results, and force therefore becomes the easier, default option. I have written this book to help those of us who are trying to solve tough problems get better at talking and listening—so that we can do so more successfully, and choose the peaceful way more often. I want talking and listening to become a reliable default option.

Problems are tough because they are complex in three ways. They are dynamically complex, which means that cause and effect are far apart in space and time, and so are hard to grasp from firsthand experience. They are generatively complex, which

means that they are unfolding in unfamiliar and unpredictable ways. And they are socially complex, which means that the people involved see things very differently, and so the problems become polarized and stuck.

Our talking and listening often fails to solve complex problems because of the way that most of us talk and listen most of the time. Our most common way of talking is telling: asserting *the* truth about the way things are and must be, not allowing that there might be other truths and possibilities. And our most common way of listening is not listening: listening only to our own talking, not to others. This way of talking and listening works fine for solving simple problems, where an authority or expert can work through the problem piece by piece, applying solutions that have worked in the past. But a complex problem can only be solved peacefully if the people who are part of the problem work together creatively to understand their situation and to improve it.

Our common way of talking and listening therefore guarantees that our complex problems will either remain stuck or will get unstuck only by force. (There is no problem so complex that it does not have a simple solution . . . that is wrong.) We need to learn another, less common, more open way.

I have reached these conclusions after twenty-five years of working professionally on tough problems. I started off my career as someone who came up with solutions. First I was a university researcher in physics and economics, and then an expert analyst of government policy and corporate strategy. Then in 1991, inspired by an unexpected and extraordinary experience in South Africa, I began working as a neutral facilitator of problem-solving processes, helping other people come up with their own solutions. I have facilitated leadership teams of companies, governments, and civil society organizations in fifty countries, on every continent—from Royal Dutch/Shell, Intel, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Federal Express, to the Government of Canada and the European Commission, to the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Anglican Synod of Bishops—helping them

address their organizations' most difficult challenges. And I have also facilitated cross-organizational leadership teams—composed of businesspeople and politicians, generals and guerrillas, civil servants and trade unionists, community activists and United Nations officials, journalists and clergy, academics and artists—helping them address some of the most difficult challenges in the world: in South Africa during the struggle to replace apartheid; in Colombia in the midst of the civil war; in Guatemala in the aftermath of the genocide; in Argentina when the society collapsed; and in deeply divided Israel-Palestine, Cyprus, Paraguay, Canada-Quebec, Northern Ireland, and the Basque Country.

Commuting back and forth between these different worlds has allowed me to see how tough problems can and cannot be solved. I have been privileged to work with many extraordinary people in many extraordinary processes. From these experiences I have drawn conclusions that apply not only in extraordinary but also in ordinary settings. In the harsh light of life-and-death conflicts, the dynamics of how people create new realities are painted in bright colors. Having seen the dynamics there, I can now recognize them in circumstances where they are painted in muted colors. I have learned what kinds of talking and listening condemn us to stuckness and force, and what kinds enable us to solve peacefully even our most difficult problems.

My favorite movie about getting unstuck is the comedy *Groundhog Day*. Bill Murray plays Phil Connors, a cynical, self-centered television journalist who is filming a story about Groundhog Day, February 2, in the small town of Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania. He despises the assignment and the town. The next morning, he wakes up to discover, with horror, that it is still February 2, and that he has to live through these events again. This happens every morning: he is stuck in reliving the same day over and over. He explains this to his producer Rita, but she laughs it off. He tries everything he can in order to break this pattern—getting angry, being nice, killing himself—but nothing works. Eventually he relaxes into appreciating the present, and opens himself

up to the town and to Rita. Only then does he wake up to a new day and a better future.

Many of us are like Phil Connors. We get stuck by holding on tightly to our opinions and plans and identities and truths. But when we relax and are present and open up our minds and hearts and wills, we get unstuck and we unstick the world around us. I have learned that the more open I am—the more attentive I am to the way things are and could be, around me and inside me; the less attached I am to the way things ought to be—the more effective I am in helping to bring forth new realities. And the more I work in this way, the more present and alive I feel. As I have learned to lower my defenses and open myself up, I have become increasingly able to help better futures be born.

The way we talk and listen expresses our relationship with the world. When we fall into the trap of telling and of not listening, we close ourselves off from being changed by the world and we limit ourselves to being able to change the world only by force. But when we talk and listen with an open mind and an open heart and an open spirit, we bring forth our better selves and a better world.