

EDITORIAL

Deepening the Definitions of Success and Failure

*Michal Alberstein & Jay Rothman**

What are success and failure? In the demanding work of conflict analysis and intervention, it happens often that we fail – over and over again. Sometimes we fail better than other times. These are what might be called “successful failures,” when we as third parties, along with the disputants, learn much from the experience and perhaps contribute to better and deeper theorizing and practice. Just as often, though, we have “failed successes,” when it seems both process and outcomes are flowing well, and then ... nothing seems to change. But in general, we rarely fully and unequivocally “succeed,” at least in the more complicated interventions. Of course, success and failure are relative terms. Indeed, that is what this issue is devoted to exploring.

The struggle with the notion of success may have its origin with the birth of our field and its foundational moments. In many ways, our field can be described as born out of the search for success – to overcome the “litigation explosion” in domestic conflicts and to try to resolve the urgent conflicts in the international arena. In both spheres, the pragmatists who founded the field many times held the flag of success while downplaying their deeper concerns with justice, harmony and social growth. The practical needs were often driving forces for the spread of conflict resolution programs, both academic and training, and institutionalizing some of the new methods. Still, the founders’ tacit goals in seeking peace and in contributing to a deep transformation in society remained strongly embedded within the development of the field. This is why our need to deny a simple notion of success is many times part of an identity quest, which goes back to the foundational tension between efficiency and peace and/or justice.

We know that success in creatively handling conflicts is our driving pragmatic force and we want to claim achievements in order to grow and prosper. On the other hand, we deeply believe that the transformations we aspire to cannot be fully measured and can be justified even without concrete consequences. Thus, we promote a paradox: we seek success while questioning and deepening its definition. This tension permeates various contributions in this issue. We owe much to Folger and Bush, among the first to boldly promote this paradox. In this issue, they explain their reconstruction and reframing of success, while trying to measure the success of this new notion. We visit and revisit this tension when trying

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to assess the success of the CR and ADR movements: On the one hand, we would like to revel in the spread of CR and ADR, but on the other, we regret that their core principles have at times been diminished in the process (Love and Stulberg). We wonder why along some parameters the field has advanced and along others it is at a standstill: is this a failure that must be remedied or a signal to reframe the aims of the field (Matz)? We claim to be anxious about the search for success and still keep this notion as a horizon (Alberstein).

On a happier note, we praise the interdisciplinary nature of the field, which seems brimming with opportunities for defining success (Polkinghorn and Mozes-Carmel). The search for success is an ever-evolving pursuit, the ultimate test of the adaptability of the field to a changing reality (Ramsbotham).

Part of this changing reality involves our own expectations. The somewhat unrealistic expectation that we will time and again “resolve” protracted conflicts has led us to feel that we continuously fail (and in such terms: we do). The still-emerging field must grapple with the “original sin” of setting “resolution” as the standard for success. Deconstructing this narrow notion of success through reflexivity – what this issue aims to do – will help uncover what is both necessary and possible for the growing of our field (Rothman). We hope it may elevate our field to a new level of maturity and complexity.

1. Overview of Contributions

In this issue, the authors have responded to a call to our Board to write reflexive, first-person pieces about their own theorizing and experiences with success and failure.

Oliver Ramsbotham views failure as a driving force in the evolution of systems, including the field of conflict resolution. He notes that any system that doesn't adapt to deal with new failures is destined to obsolescence. “It is a never-ending process, as previous success may prove counter-productive in a new environment. Then it is important to stop investing in what may have worked before and to discover what the altered circumstances demand. [...] It is by looking at the *frontiers of failure*— those locations where the system is malfunctioning – that second order social learning is best achieved.” He follows the evolution of the field as it responded to a changing reality and new frontiers of failure. Furthermore, he asks, “Have theorists and practitioners from around the world acknowledged the cases in which established conflict resolution approaches have so far failed, and adapted accordingly?” As a case study, he examines the field's response to the failure of parties to communicate due to radical disagreement. Drawing from his own experience, he asks, “Is the field taking this failure seriously, trying to understand it, and building new approaches to deal with radical disagreement?”

Joseph P. Folger and Robert A. Baruch Bush reflect on the successes, failures and challenges facing the transformative model of mediation. This model sprang from their belief that success in mediation should not be measured through observing “what works” but rather whether the practice of mediation is aligned with its underlying ideological premises. In the case of transformative mediation,

the premises are building capacity of the parties and a “relational (rather than individualistic) view of human beings, conflict and institutional structures.” This, because “people have as much need and capacity for self-determination and human connection as they do for the fulfillment of their material needs and interests.”

Reminiscent of Ramsbotham’s framing of “frontiers of failure,” transformative mediation was born from the concern that mediation was in a sense beginning to fail: “We were concerned that mediation was losing its unique and valuable potential for supporting [transformative] shifts, and becoming more and more like the forms of conflict intervention it was intended to replace.” They wanted practitioners to view mediation “beyond the toolbox.” In their article, Folger and Bush try to gauge whether their expectations have met reality.

Reflecting on her own journey in the conflict resolution field, Michal Alberstein follows the change in the definition of success from a pragmatic, concrete definition to one that is more complex and nuanced, reflecting, perhaps, the internal motivations that precipitated the development of the field. She discusses the different views of success – result-driven versus procedural, static versus dynamic – and what they meant to her as a conflict resolution professional. Alberstein comments, “The emphasis on success as related to procedural justice and as related to values of pluralism and dialogue has not become the mainstream paradigm of the field [...] but from an academic perspective and as a counter image to the pragmatic drive, it has helped to make it more plural and complex.” She envisions a definition of success that is context driven and takes into account the views of success of the stakeholders, while being explored through the various perspectives in the field.

Jay Rothman traces his own journey from universalism to an embracing of his cultural identity, in the context of America’s historical shift from the “melting pot” ideal to a celebration of its pluralism as a “nation of nations.” He reflects on his practice as a mediator and notes that it, too, began as an exercise in universal needs theory but gradually became more attuned to the needs and narratives expressed by the participants themselves. These needs did not conform to a universalist mold. Success, for Rothman, is addressing the deep needs of the sides as elicited from them in the reflexive stories they tell. These needs and narratives, along with ways to address them, are surfaced by the third party through reflexive dialogue. Reflexivity is at the core of this approach to success and, according to Rothman, might be considered a “petite theory” for the field. This approach avoids common pitfalls – such as unrealistic aspirations and imprecision – that can lead to “negative failure” in the field.

David Matz deals with the question of success and failure of our field as an educator and through the lens of its professional growth. He says of the question: How do I start a career in this field? “That I am still getting the same question makes sense; that I am still giving the same answer is depressing.” He remarks on a disparity in the field: On the one hand, conflict resolution programs are constantly developing and improving, yet on the other, the prospects for a career in the field remain bleak. He looks for reasons for the lack of a career ladder for new mediators and delineates the obstacles that they face. These obstacles reflect the

challenges of the field as a whole. He exhorts us to start thinking of the success of the field in terms of professional opportunities and offers several suggestions to prod the field in that direction. Alternatively, there may be cause to revise our view of the field's role in producing conflict resolution professionals.

Brian Polkinghorn and Abraham Mozes-Carmel see a connection between the interdisciplinary, developing nature of the field and the way it defines success. They address the criticism of the field as a motley combination of disciplines that doesn't coalesce into a whole. They suggest that "order isn't always the end state that a field of study wants to achieve." Rather, "optimal creative spaces" often thrive in an unstructured environment. "Instead of *fusion*, we should be thinking more about *fission* and the dispersing of our ideas, practices and scholarship [...]. If and when parts of the field begin to fuse, we say 'let it happen' when the time is ripe." The diversity of the field allows for a diversity of constructive ways to frame success. They explore several such framings, and propose "significance" as an alternative to "success."

Lela P. Love and Joseph B. Stulberg have contributed a dialogue between them on the successes and failures of ADR. In this dialogue, they at times agree – and respectfully disagree – on topics related to success of the field. Is litigation a "backstop process" or should it be mandatory in certain types of cases, as "sometimes [it is] the only way to promote a fair dialogue, advance basic respect and pierce power disparities"? Are we witnessing expansion of ADR – or dilution? They find that success in spreading mediation often comes at the expense of its underlying values and discuss the extent of success versus failure in some of these instances. Their discussion follows along several spheres of success and failure in ADR – on the ground, as a discipline, in public consciousness and what disturbs or delights them most in this context.

2. Around the Corner

In closing, this is the third issue of our new journal, constituted of writing only by ourselves and our board members. The next two issues will begin the next developmental stage of our journal as open calls for papers went out widely (as of this writing, we already have received some fifty initial proposals) on the theme of merging theory and practice. This will also be the theme of an international conference that the host program of this journal will be holding in January 2015. This next issue of this journal will appear prior to the conference – helping to frame it – and we expect the issue following the journal will be drawn from other papers to be delivered there (for information and opportunities to present at the conference, please see the last page of this issue).

The discussion of success and failure is deeply related to the question of the intersection between theory and practice. For each theory about what the field is, there is a formula regarding what is considered success. We hope you enjoy this issue and that it helps provide the strength and resilience needed to advance a more peaceful society.