



Reviewed Work: *Make an Ethical Difference: Tools for Better Action* by Mark Pastin

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ABSTRACT

Mark Pastin's book, *Make an Ethical Difference: Tools for Better Action*, offers a practical and easy-to-use two-part methodology to sharpen one's ability to find ethical solutions. The book has implications for improving practice and standardizing the ombudsman profession.

KEYWORDS

Ombudsman, dispute resolution, ethics, methodology, practice, standardization



Mark Pastin's book, *Make an Ethical Difference: Tools for Better Action*, is an easy-to-read, easy-to-use resource that gives practical guidance on how to sharpen one's ability to find ethical solutions (Pastin, 2013). Pastin shares his experience and expertise from over forty years of giving ethical advice to organizations worldwide and several branches of the United States government. The book is suitable for those interested in sharpening their ability to find ethical solutions in their daily and professional lives. As Pastin maintains, everyone has an innate ethics sense, or what he calls "the ethics eye," which can be honed towards finding ethical solutions or "what is right" (p. 3–4). Those who approach their reading with the view to learn will likely gain confidence in their conflict resolution skills in diverse situations and in their daily practice in a handful of ways. The book also holds strong implications for the ombudsman profession.

Pastin's strongest contribution to his readers is a well-defined methodology that consists of two categories. The first category introduces five tools for sharpening one's own ethics sense. Pastin identifies each tool: "read the ground rules," "reason backward to find the interests," "face the facts," "stand in the shoes," and "the global benefit approach." The second category consists of four steps for achieving with others the ethical agreement that Pastin calls "the Convergence Process." The Convergence Process uses the same five tools spread across the four steps with some tools in combination as in Step 3. These steps are: (1) "face the facts," (2) "read the ground rules," (3) "finding the interests" and using "the global benefits approach," and (4) "stand in the shoes." Both categories are interdependent with one another. Specifically, an improved ethics sense can sharpen one's ability to achieve ethical agreement with others and vice versa. Used together, both sets have significant implications for standardizing the ombudsman practice.

The practitioner will likely find Pastin's methodology easy to apply because each of the five tools he offers is straightforward and practical, and each will contribute to sharpening one's ethics sense. First, "read the ground rules" is about identifying and understanding the broad principles that parties use to determine their actions. These rules "will only be breached under extreme duress" (p. 21). Thus, Pastin reasons that by uncovering the ground rules, one can understand others' actions. Second, "reason backward to find the interests" encourages identifying possible outcomes and linking them back to find the interests they serve. As Pastin states, "hidden interests are often the key to resolving ethical issues" (p. 167). Third, "face the facts" is about solving factual disagreements. This tool requires facts to be grasped well and understood in the context of the ground rules and interests. When using this tool, Pastin especially recommends identifying and evaluating contested facts. He defines contested facts as facts that the parties disagree are fundamental to the matter (p. 44). To evaluate these facts, one decides if agreeing would change their perspective on what ethical. If the answer is 'yes,' Pastin suggests that that contested fact is important to finding a solution (p. 44). Pastin further notes that a measure of success can be found if adding more facts no longer changes one's sense of what is ethical (p. 45). Fourth, "stand in the shoes" helps to humanize opposing sides. To use this tool, Pastin encourages identifying the potentially affected parties, especially those with whom one finds the most disagreement. It is then important to reduce the distance between parties by meeting and learning about each other. Pastin reasons that doing so increases sympathy and empathy and lessens indifference on both sides (p. 59–61). Moreover, being able to record and revise the parties' ground rules and interests while verifying and rejecting each rule and interest helps sharpen understanding of the issue and the ethics eye. Fifth, "the global benefit approach" helps to raise questions that can help one find the course of action that will produce the "greatest balance of benefit over harm for all concerned" without violating important ground rules (p. 71–72). All five tools help to sharpen the ethics eye from an intrapersonal standpoint to guide oneself with confidence towards choosing the ethical course of action.

By contrast, the four-step Convergence Process focuses on developing the ethics eye from an interpersonal level because the steps help achieve ethical agreement with others. Moreover, while individuals can pursue the process on their own, Pastin notes that reaching an ethical



agreement becomes likelier when more parties in the situation participate in this process (p. 172). The steps apply the first category's tools, but Pastin adds nuances in how they are used. One nuance appears in Step 1. There, Pastin encourages parties to decide on a method for settling the facts if the parties cannot agree on what the facts are before applying the "face the facts" tool itself (p. 111). Similarly, in "read the ground rules," Pastin adds that parties should focus on where their ground rules agree before resolving those upon which they disagree (p. 112). Step 3 is the only step that combines tools. It specifically highlights how "the global benefit approach" complements "finding the interests" by ensuring coverage of interests (p. 113). In Step 4, moreover, Pastin highlights how applying "stand in the shoes," especially to those affected, makes one's focus more specific (p. 114). By following this stepwise approach, one can align with what opposing parties see as the right course of action.

For the ombudsman, the intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of Pastin's two-part methodology have the potential to serve three purposes that contribute to more standardized practice overall. First, there is pedagogical value to Pastin's methodology for training other ombudsman professionals and improving their skills. Second, his systematic approach can serve as a checklist for record keeping and consistency of practice for quality assurance purposes. Third, and perhaps, most fundamental, is that Pastin's methodology generates self-awareness and confidence in practitioners about what they do and how they do it. The tools and steps are logical. The eleven situations Pastin interweaves throughout the chapters (although somewhat distractively) to show how each tool applies helps to draw this conclusion.

Regardless of one's background, one will likely find similarities between one's own approach and Pastin's and may even gather some form of the process he offers. However, others may likely realize how much they rely on their intuition rather than on a defined and laid-out system which they can clearly articulate themselves. This is where Pastin does the legwork. He recognizes the reliance on an innate desire and ability to do what is right but addresses the need for well-defined tools that can articulate and raise awareness—and therefore, confidence to act—about how and what people do to achieve ethical solutions. He raises awareness by articulating what the tools and steps are specifically. The result is a sharpened ethics sense for the individual practitioner. If shared increasingly among practitioners, the potential is a sharpened ethics sense in the collective consciousness of the ombudsman profession that is bound by a shared knowledge of the tools and steps at the practitioner's disposal.



REFERENCES

Pastin, M. (2013). *Make an Ethical Difference: Tools for Better Action*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2013.



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