



Using Organizational Values and Mission to Guide Strategic Planning

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ABSTRACT

As an ISKCON Resolve is part of a global, integrated conflict management system serving congregations in a hundred countries for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. This global system began in 2002—and is the only one of its kind in a worldwide faith-based organization. ISKCON Resolve is led by two organizational ombuds, Brian Bloch and Bob Cohen. They respond to visitors; train, serve and supervise dozens of mediators; and support the Governing Body Commission of the faith. This essay describes an event at which the two ombuds were supporting their incoming CEO in strategic planning for conflict management.

KEYWORDS

organizational ombuds, values and mission statements, conflict management systems, faith-based conflict management, leadership skills

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I had heard all my life about the importance of organizations having well-understood values and using those values in day-to-day decisions and strategic planning. But it is hard to discern if or how organizations are doing this. I write today about an inspiring event in my life. I witnessed an incoming CEO, supported by his two ombuds, the leaders of ISKCON Resolve, using the organization's values and mission as scaffolding for strategic planning about conflict management.

I am a longtime ombuds and a professor of negotiation theory and conflict management (Rowe, 2021). In 2014, I had been consulting to ISKCON Resolve for a decade about conflict management system design. ISKCON Resolve is part of a global, integrated conflict management system (Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution, 2001) for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. Their far-flung, integrated conflict management system (ICMS) began in 2002. It now serves visitors, congregations, and mediators in about 100 countries and is the only one of its kind in a worldwide faith-based organization.

The event I refer to happened in 2014, when Sesa Dasa was pondering his coming role as chairman of the Governing Body Commission (GBC) of ISKCON. He had convened a small group for strategic planning many months before his accession. Sesa had called a meeting with Bob Cohen and Brian Bloch, the ombuds who are co-directors of ISKCON Resolve. The three had invited me to listen about their ICMS and provide process feedback.

I was told that Sesa was taking some months to think deeply about his coming service as CEO. He was somberly aware of the huge importance of leadership in a worldwide faith with millions of adherents in dozens of different cultures and language groups.

We met at a home in Washington, D.C., a de facto guesthouse for ISKCON-DC, with several of us sitting around a small kitchen table for a day and a half. Sesa, Brian and Bob talked for hours, very soberly and thoughtfully. Sesa and the others had prepared a short but deep agenda, thinking about the mission of the faith and their responsibilities in the face of many concerns and conflict arising within the faith and outside it. Brian took careful notes and skillfully located backup documents as the three men discussed various issues.

As a consultant on conflict management, I sat at the table, quietly listening. Gopinath Bloch, 24-year-old son of Brian Bloch, and a youth leader in ISKCON, likewise sat quietly, respectful, and attentive. I listened to the choice of questions raised by each of the older men. I was quickly engaged by the depth, scope, and integrity of Sesa's reflections during these discussions and began to take a few notes.

In negotiation theory, a famous guideline for addressing conflicts and concerns is to begin by thinking about the *principles* that should guide resolution of the issues (Fisher, Ury & Patton 2006). I was drawn in by Sesa's personal mode of addressing the challenges he would face as a CEO. He often stopped to think for a minute or two, and then spoke slowly and thoughtfully. As I saw it, he was iteratively examining facets of each issue, and then, indeed, discussing one or another principle for beginning to address each facet.

At the end of the second day, I was asked about thoughts I might have had. Picking up from my notes, I humbly offered a brief list of topics that were addressed. In accord with basic negotiation theory, I offered a brief list of what I had thought to be Sesa's principles in examining each topic. For example, he had asked, many times, from whom should he be seeking information? On what basis should decisions be made when there are millions of devotees all over the world? How could the GBC know what people of different backgrounds, at all levels, felt about certain issues?



How would he find out what devotees and leaders thought—to provide *options*, and a *choice* of options for the GBC—in the decisions that would take place the coming year?

He spoke about the importance of the principle of trying to do good, or at the least "no harm". That is, whenever a question came up when there was a decision to be made, "what was the best that could happen—at the least cost/least harm to anybody? At the least disruption to anybody's life?" He talked about leading by example, by means of what, at the moment, I had thought of as "role modeling."

I was impressed throughout with Sesa's strength and humility as a leader. It seemed clear that he was strong and capable as a leader but thought himself as a servant to the faith. He was particularly concerned with the relationships that people had with each other, throughout ISKCON and the GBC. What was most important was the caring—and respect for each other's dignity—that people have with each other.

I tried to present what I had understood to be the principles that Sesa was following, over and over, as different topics came up.

When I stopped talking there was a long moment of silence. Then, breaking the silence, Gopinath suddenly stood up behind me—he also had simply listened all day—and said, very clearly: "Those are the Gita Values!" It was an extraordinary moment for me personally. The others understood of course what Gopinath meant (ISKCON of DC, n.d.). I, however, had still much to learn.

In wanting to understand more, I asked for specifics. The group of us then turned to Skype to discuss my humble list of "negotiation principles" with a major teacher in ISKCON, Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and Hindu chaplain to Oxford University. He kindly heard the brief list of what I had heard from Sesa. He then discussed each one of the *values* from the sacred Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita* that underlay what I had taken to be principles for decision-making.

I was startled and moved by what Gopinath had said. I found his insight, and the occasion, the more extraordinary when I had the chance to listen at length to Shaunaka and the others about the values that were used to guide strategic planning. I learned about Sama-darshana, (Equal Vision) and Iccha (Choice), Bhakti (Devotional Service), Acharya (Teaching by Example), Priti, (Affection), Amanitva, (Humility) and Ahimsa (Without Harm) and the specific importance of each of these values in illuminating the details of what I had heard in the discussion.

As it turned out, my ISKCON colleagues now are using the Gita Values in many ways—in internal publications, in seminars in many parts of the world, in the official magazine of ISKCON—and in leadership meetings to help guide decision-making. I think of this day every time I hear that the mission and core values of an organization should guide an organization. It had been a rare chance—in real life—to hear values clearly and specifically informing the everyday thinking and decision-making and leadership of a CEO.



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