

A Conversation with Shauna Ries

The author and CEO of a company that teaches peace talks about why everyone needs conflict in their lives, the importance of going with your gut and frogs.

You'd think that with nearly 750,000 lawyers in the country, we have disputes pretty well covered. But the Institute for Advanced Dispute Resolution, the Boulder, Colo.-based company you co-founded and are CEO of, is more in-demand than ever. Why do you think people are looking beyond lawyers these days?

There are some disputes – one's in which there is no longer going to be a relationship in the future – that can go to court if need be, but if there is a future relationship – whether it is family, work, a friend – and you will be seeing the person you have the dispute with, I think there is an obligation to settle the dispute with dignity and grace. Besides, mediation and other types of alternate dispute resolution save money and time.

Wouldn't it just be easiest if we tried to eliminate conflict and the disputes that arise?

No. Conflict is good. So is anger. When my partner Genna [Murphy] and I were researching our book [*Quality of Life: How To Get It. How To Keep It.*, William Morrow & Company, 2000] we realized anger and conflict were constructive. Anger helps clarify one's thinking and can help people grow, move and develop and it is when we're in conflict, whether with ourselves, our family or our boss that we really learn about ourselves. Conflict and anger tell you your instincts are working and that you care enough to feel something about a person or situation. It's the people I love the most that I have the most conflict with.

So conflict is good, but there are varying levels of conflict. What do you do to keep conflict constructive?

Don't let it get ugly.

Easier said than done.

Not really, although it is a learned skill for most people. Take the covert and make it overt. As soon as you sense something is going on with someone or something in your life, say something, preferably to whomever or whatever is the actual source of the problem. Where people have problems is trusting their own instincts. Most people feel something but can't put their words around what it is they're feeling. Trusting your instincts seems simple, but most of us have to learn how to.

So what's the Cliff Notes version of how to trust your instincts?

Look for the emotion of relief: sit with yourself and think what would give you relief right now.

You and Genna founded the precursor to IADR, Ries/Murphy Associates, in 1994 to provide conflict resolution and stress management services. What made you decide to branch into teaching others the skills to be successful mediators?

With mediation skills come great personal power. Successful mediators navigate through, and resolve, what appear to be intractable situations. They create families, communities and nations that value and allow for diverse, yet honoring lives. For us, setting people up to do these things is incredibly rewarding as a career.

What kinds of people are enrolling in classes?

We get all sorts of people. Some are looking to make a career change into mediation while others want to advance within their profession or enhance their resume. Still others are doing it to better their personal communication skills.

With 38 states currently requiring or recommending mediation to resolve civil and/or family disputes, the Administrative Dispute Resolution Act of 1996 mandating mediators receive training on a regular basis and over 1,500 law firms and 800 companies pledging to explore mediation before litigating there's no doubt mediators are in high demand. You could have gone gangbusters with IADR but instead you chose to grow the company slowly. Why?

I wanted a business my son and my grandkids would be proud of. I wanted to build a principled company based on sound business practices. As corny as it sounds, I wanted to build a company with the intention of the world being a little bit better of a place because it is around. I didn't want to have to worry about not being able to sleep at night.

Making the world a better place – that's a pretty hefty goal for a company these days. What kinds of personal goals do you have?

Keep things clean. Trust my instincts. Be in charge of my own destiny.

And what do all those things do for you?

They contribute to my quality of life.

Quality of Life is the subject of the book you and Genna co-authored in 2000 and something in which you both counseled hundreds of clients in your psychotherapy practice. How do you define it?

Quality of life is when what you're thinking, saying, doing and feeling match.

What takes away from someone's quality of life?

Life is complicated and abstract. Usually it's not one thing, person or event that hurts someone's quality of life. There's a story about frogs that kind of explains it. If dropped into scalding water, a frog will jump out immediately. But if you put a frog in a pot of water and slowly turn up the heat one degree at a time, it will stay. Eventually, it will die. The same thing happens to people; conflicts and unhappiness come on a little at a time, building until one day they realize their water is scalding.

What is a first step for someone looking to reclaim their quality of life?

To understand the system of things. There isn't one thing – a promotion, a new car, a better job – that in and of itself is going to make everything all right. People often have an idea of a magic pill though: “If I get this one thing, then I'll be all right.” That's not reality though. It's not that concrete. Instead, look at the different pieces of your life and take those conflicts you have control over and make some changes to them. After you do that, you'll see the other pieces naturally start to change.

It sounds like the struggle for quality of life is as self-revealing as conflict can be.

Conflict and quality of life go hand-in-hand. To have a high quality of life, you need to be able to move and navigate through conflict. Every time I've been through a difficult conflict in my life it has made me clearer, stronger and, eventually, happier. Now when I hit something that's incredibly difficult I know something magical will be waiting for me at the end. Without the conflict and struggle, you cannot feel the bliss. Besides, I am not one who really wants vanilla. I am not a 9-to-5er. I enjoy controlling my own destiny, even if it's not always easy.

IADR Global recently teamed with CTU Online to offer a MBA with a concentration in Mediation and Dispute Resolution (MBA-MDR). IADR Global and CTU Online designed the new 46-credit-hour degree to teach professionals in a wide range of fields how to maximize team cohesiveness, improve organizational efficiency and efficacy, avoid conflict in the workplace and, when conflict does occur, how to manage and mitigate the consequences. Find out more at www.ctuonline.edu or www.iadrglobal.org.