

Bureaucracy & Working in Peacebuilding

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In this newsletter's interview, you will see Jonathan Cohen mention an oft-underacknowledged necessary skill for those interested in working in peacebuilding and mediation: bureaucratic know-how. Bureaucracy, a commonly dreaded word, is built into academic and non-profit work. Whether this be when engaging with funders or an organizational overseer (ex. a host university). This practitioner piece seeks to examine the relationship between bureaucratic navigation and building/supporting a Track Two process, how these skills are gained, and how one develops an efficient bureaucratic protocol and relationship with bureaucracy for their team and organization.

Key takeaways:

- ⇒ **Delegation** as a necessity in preventing bureaucratic duties from overshadowing the substantive work of mediation.
- ⇒ **Foresight** to mitigate the impact of common bureaucratic hang-ups in Track Two dialogues, for example: visa delays and/or rejections, reimbursement protocol, flight cancellations.
- ⇒ **Flexibility** as a requirement for creating accessible bureaucratic procedures and creating contingency plans.



About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world. We create forums where parties can explore difficult issues in an analytical, problem-solving way to develop new paths forward. We then work with our partners to transfer these ideas to places where they can make a difference. As a complement to its field work, Ottawa Dialogue pursues a rich research agenda focused on conflict analysis, third party dialogue-based interventions, and best practices relating to "Track Two Diplomacy".

Bureaucratic Navigation as Skill-Building

Navigating bureaucracy is often an exercise learnt “on the job,” but is an indispensable skill, nonetheless. These are things like understanding organizational hierarchies and structures (including the roles and names of those within an organization), a level of vigilance for changes within a structure or protocol, understanding the required formatting of applications and/or reports, reimbursement filings, budget requirements, foreseeing wait times and translating jargon, are all skills under the cadre of bureaucratic navigation. Building this into a professional development scheme may be useful for self-development or for supporting team training. This remains applicable to virtually all non-profit work, and the common political sensitivities that are heightened within Track Two programming can make these skills even more imperative.

Delegation & Teambuilding

Bureaucracy and an operations-heavy workload can sometimes detract from the substantive work of dialogue facilitation, though both are part of the workload. Delegation of tasks and building a team that is both willing and able to efficiently navigate the bureaucratic of this work is a key part of completing work in this field.

Burden-sharing, however, can be equally as important as delegation. While bureaucratic tasks can be dull, there is a need for attentiveness and, when necessary, involvement in the bureaucratic work being done. This is for the sake of both due diligence – i.e., remaining aware of the work and potential oversights that can be committed and therefore prevented; and building collaborative teams with well-balanced plates. Moreover, this is integral to the balancing of substantive mediation work and bureaucratic work, ensuring well-roundedness.

Benchmarks, Procedure, and Ethics

Although sometimes highly rigid and difficult to work within, a degree of bureaucracy is a common “checks and balance” exercise that does have a role to play in building a transparent practice. Bureaucratic duties, whether it be within an organization, or between an organization and an overseeing authority (ex. a university in which an organization is housed), or between an organization and a funder, is also often integral to transparency and subsequent adherence to organizational ethics. Bureaucratic competency and the patience (and willingness) to “play by the rules” commonly translates to timely and thorough reporting, diligent collection and tracking of receipts and spending, and a necessarily open communication loop between the reporting individual and the bureaucratic partner. In Track Two work, mutual trust between funder and facilitators is key to ensuring the longevity and sustainability to a dialogue, and adherence to policy is largely a requirement to maintaining this trust.

Patience and Bureaucratic Hang-ups

Bureaucracy and the common eyeroll that follows its mention is commonly associated with delays and illogical box-ticking. While frustrating and sometimes see. As many of our interviewees and colleagues have pointed out, the need for patience when working in Track Two diplomacy is often related to bureaucracy. When speaking on questions of *transfer*, turnover in funders due to tight grant cycles, gaps in an organization’s ability to hold a dialogue due to funding delays, venue selection, visa problems, and

rigid reporting requirements that may not provide a format conducive to accurately reporting the “soft” developments in dialogue process are all rooted in bureaucratic hang-ups and can contribute to an elusive understanding of the impact of a give dialogue on a conflict.

Unfortunately, the need for patience is also often put on dialogue participants, too. Delays in reimbursements and visas, the need to retain boarding passes and receipts, and the inability to provide a certain class of flights are common examples of bureaucratic hang-ups that can cause frustration on the part of participants, and, at worst, damage morale in a dialogue process. When planning a dialogue, foreseeing these concerns (and, likewise, noting them down when they occur for future reference), knowing the temperaments of your colleagues and attendees, and proactively communicating accordingly is often the best, and sometimes only, mitigation measure. Careful venue selection based on thorough visa research (even going so far as to get perspectives from hotels and tourist agents in a given destination), prompt collection of receipts and equally as prompt filings of reimbursements are additional concrete delay-prevention (or mitigation) measures.

In illiberal spaces, on-the-ground bureaucratic hang-ups are sometimes political. Particularly in Track Two processes, hotel interference, visa denials and/or delays can be related to political concerns on the part of a meeting destination. Understanding these sensitivities and the implications they may have not only on dialogue operations, but also on the morale and security of attendees, is further key to mitigating the escalation of bureaucratic difficulties. Building relationships with colleagues in a given destination can be helpful in foreseeing some of these difficulties, and a Plan B, coupled with a willingness to reroute or rethink, is often necessary.

Bureaucracy within an organization: Flexibility and Progressive Work Culture

Characterized by its rigidity, conservatism, and promotional of professional hierarchies, it is important to note that within an organization, bureaucracy can propagate system oppression(s) on which these hierarchies can sometimes be based. There is a need, therefore, to assess organizational structures and protocol on an ongoing basis, and to be willing to adjust accordingly. For example, bureaucratic limitations on work-from-home policies may not be conducive to creating an accessible (or efficient) workspace for those with young children (often women), mobility concerns, or chronic illnesses. A level of flexibility is thus required, as is open pathways for communication.

The inevitability of bureaucracy is not necessarily a barrier to operating efficiently in a field of Track Two. Developing the patience and understanding the skills necessary to navigate bureaucracies in an efficient manner is necessary for professional development and is a skill in its own right. Particularly when working in or engaging with illiberal spaces with heightened political sensitivities, as is often the case in the field of international mediation, bureaucratic navigation is indispensable from ethical and effective work.

Should you have any feedback, you may reach out to Ottawa Dialogue at OttawaDialogue@uottawa.ca.