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For Immediate Release

Solving Tough Problems

An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities

By Adam Kahane

"This breakthrough book addresses the central challenge of our time: finding a way to work together to solve the problems we have created."

—Nelson Mandela

Tough problems usually don't get solved peacefully. They either get stuck or they get solved by force. These frustrating and frightening outcomes occur all the time. Families replay the same argument over and over, or a parent lays down the law. Organizations face the same crisis again and again, or a boss decrees a new plan. Communities divide into camps around a controversial issue, or a politician dictates a settlement. Countries negotiate to a stalemate, or they go to war. Either the people involved in a problem can't agree on what the solution is, or the people with power—authority, money, guns—impose their solution on everyone else.

In *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*, author Adam Kahane draws on his amazingly rich experience working with corporate, government and civil society leaders all over the world to explain why our ordinary way of solving problems—expert-driven, piecemeal, and best practice—cannot work for solving the complex problems we face increasingly in all our communities and organizations.

There is another way to solve tough problems. The people involved can talk with and listen to each other and thereby work through a solution peacefully. But this way is often too difficult and too slow to produce results, and so force becomes the easier, default option. Adam Kahane has written this book to help those of us who are trying to solve tough problems get better at talking and listening—so that we can do so more successfully, and choose the peaceful way more often. He wants talking and listening to become a reliable default option.

Our talking and listening often fails to solve complex problems because of the way that most of us talk and listen most of the time. Our most common way of talking is telling: asserting the truth about the way things are and must be, not allowing that there might be other truths and possibilities. And our most common way of listening is not listening: but listening only to our own talking, not to others. This way of talking and listening works just fine for solving simple problems, where an authority or expert can work through the problem piece by piece, applying solutions that have worked in the past. But a complex problem can only be solved peacefully if the people who are causing the problem work together to develop a shared understanding of their situation and to improve it. We need to learn another, less common, more open way.

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Kahane reached these conclusions after 25 years of working professionally on tough problems. He started out his career learning how to talk and listen like an authority, first at university and then by working as an expert analyst in the world of government policy and corporate strategy. Then, in 1991, he found himself plunged into another role and another world, working as a consultant on problem solving processes to a series of extraordinary teams of politicians and guerillas, activists and public servants, clergymen and businesspeople, academics and trade unionists. He helped these teams work on some of the most difficult problems in the world: in South Africa during the transition from the white rule of apartheid to the multi-racial democracy that exists today; in Colombia in the midst of the civil war; in Guatemala in the aftermath of the genocide; in Argentina when the society collapsed; in deeply divided Israel, Cyprus, Northern Ireland, and the Basque Country. And over the same period, he helped teams working on complex problems in more ordinary settings: in North America, Europe, and Japan, in companies, governments, and non-profits.

Commuting back and forth between these two worlds allowed Kahane to see how tough problems can and cannot be solved. In the harsh light of life-and-death conflicts, the dynamics of how people create new realities are sketched clearly, in bright colors. Having seen the dynamics there, he recognizes them in circumstance where they are sketched faintly, in muted colors. He has learned what kinds of talking and listening condemn us to stuckness and force, and what kinds of talking and listening enable us to solve peacefully even our most difficult problems.

ADAM KAHANE is a founding partner of Generon Consulting and of the Global Leadership Initiative. During the early 1990s, he was head of Social, Political, Economic, and Technological Scenarios for Royal Dutch/Shell in London. Previously he held strategy and research positions with Pacific Gas and Electric Company, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, the Institute for Energy Economics, and with the Universities of Toronto, British Columbia, California, and the Western Cape. He was one of the 16 outstanding individuals featured in *Fast Company*'s first annual "Who's Fast."

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By Adam Kahane

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

ISBN: 978-1-57675-464-1

Paperback

\$14.95

Number of Pages: 149

Publication Date: July 2007

Originally published in cloth:

ISBN 978-1-57675-293-7

Hardcover: \$22.95

Number of Pages: 149

An Open Way:
10 Suggestions to Talking and Listening that are Simple but Not Easy

1. *Pay attention to your state of being and to how you are talking and listening.* Notice your assumptions, reactions, contractions, anxieties, prejudices, and projections.
2. *Speak up.* Notice and say what you are thinking, feeling, and wanting.
3. *Remember that you don't know the truth about anything.* When you think you are absolutely certain about the way things are, add "in my opinion" or "from my perspective" to your sentence. Don't take yourself too seriously.
4. *Engage with and listen to others who have a stake in the system.* Seek out people who have different, even opposing, perspectives from yours. Stretch beyond your comfort zone.
5. *Reflect on your own role in the system.* Examine how what you are doing or not doing is contributing to things being the way they are.
6. *Listen with empathy.* Look at the system through the eyes of the other. Imagine yourself in the shoes of the other.
7. *Listen to what is being said not just by yourself and others but through all of you.* Listen to what is emerging in the system as a whole. Listen with your heart. Speak from your heart.
8. *Stop talking.* Camp out beside the questions and let answers come to you.
9. *Relax and be fully present.* Open up your mind and heart and will. Open yourself to being touched and transformed.
10. *Try out these suggestions and notice what happens.* Sense what shifts in your relationships with others, with yourself, and with the world. Keep on practicing.

Endorsements for Solving Tough Problems

"This breakthrough book addresses the central challenge of our time: finding a way to work together to solve the problems we have created."

—Nelson Mandela

*"**Solving Tough Problems** offers a new approach to addressing peacefully our most complex and conflictual challenges—at home, at work, and in the larger world. Kahane reflects candidly and insightfully on his rich experience working with corporations, governments, and civil society organizations around the world. A fresh and valuable contribution from a pioneering practitioner."*

—William Ury, Associate Director, Program on Negotiation, Harvard University, and co-author *Getting to Yes* and *The Third Side*

"This book is rich with insights and inspiring examples that are very relevant to the global challenges we face today. In a dynamic and complex world in which escalating violence is fueled by clashing ideologies, we would all be well advised to give up dictating and knowing and take up listening and learning."

—Debra Dunn, Senior Vice President, Hewlett-Packard Company

"This book should be read by everyone who is concerned with the quality of decision-making in our democracies."

—Elena Martinez, Assistant Secretary General, United Nations

"Adam Kahane's book makes a strong case, woven together from fascinating inside stories about the really tough problems in the world, that success or failure depends on their leaders learning or not learning to listen. The book is recommended reading for all decision takers who find themselves dealing with tough problems."

—Arie de Geus, former Group Planning Coordinator, Royal Dutch/Shell, and author of *The Living Company*

"This is a profound and important book. It is special in both the simplicity and authenticity of the writing, and the value and far reaching impact of its message. It offers a ways of thinking and acting that can heal the woundedness of our organizations and our communities. I recommend it wholeheartedly."

—Peter Block, author of *Flawless Consulting*, *Stewardship*, *The Empowered Manager*, *The Answer to How Is Yes*, and *Freedom and Accountability at Work*

"Many people have written about the healing power of dialogue. None, however, has put that power to the test under more extreme conditions with greater success than Adam Kahane. Informative, inspiring, and beautifully written. Highly recommended."

—David Korten, President of the People-Centered Development Forum and author of *When Corporations Rule the World*

More...

“Adam Kahane presents a very strong case for how authentic dialogue can change the world. His book is permeated with a fascinating mix of large ideas and practical details, winnowed from decades of experiences in many countries and institutions around the world. Here is a definitive work on an exciting social innovation that promises to transform societies in the years to come.”

—Nicanor Perlas, recipient of the Right Livelihood Award, and author of *Shaping Globalization: Civil Society, Cultural Power, and Threfolding*

“A brave and powerful book.”

—Len Lindegren, former Global Strategy Leader, PricewaterhouseCoopers

“This book is a victory for those of us who believe that even the most intractable of our societal problems can be successfully addressed through the efforts of people of good will. It inspires us with real stories of unlikely groups of people separated by gulfs of fear, history, rage and violence, sitting down and bridging chasms of mistrust through the simple human acts of speaking and listening from the heart. I recommend it highly.”

—Robert Gass, Rockwood Leadership Program; former President, ARC International

“This book includes the story of the Visión Guatemala team, in which a group of us, who in the ordinary course of events would never have met or worked together, had an unprecedented experience that opened up new horizons for us and for our country. Adam helped us cultivate our dreams and ideals, and gave us the energy and hope to act to renew our society.”

—Raquel Zelaya, former Cabinet Secretary of Peace, Guatemala

*“**Solving Tough Problems** speaks to the essence of true leadership: the capacity to sense and bring forth better futures. Kahane has a brilliant track record of helping highly diverse teams—within and across companies, governments, and civil society—lead together. In this beautiful, simple book, he reflects on his experiences and teaches us how we can, by changing how we work together and are together, change the world.”*

—Joseph Jaworski, Chairman of the Global Leadership Project and author of *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership*

“This book offers us stories of profound transformation—and with a refreshing directness teaches us ways of talking and listening that can embrace the toughest problems. The packing of so much practical wisdom into such a small space creates a jewel of inspiration.”

—Betty Sue Flowers, Director, LBJ Library

“Adam Kahane is one of those rare action-intellectuals who combines a deep theoretical understanding of social change and group process with actual experience in situations of conflict and turmoil, where people are desperate for solutions but unable to secure what they need. Adam brings the catalyst for change.”

—James Garrison, President of State of the World Forum and author of *America as Empire: Global Leader or Rogue Power?*

“This book is a gem. It explains simply and eloquently the essence of the process of non-violent, voluntary transformational change in social systems that seem stuck in hopelessness. This book is in a class of its own.”

—Arun Maira, Chairman, The Boston Consulting Group India