

# Can we eliminate our blind spots?

## My View



PSYCHOLOGY @ WORK  
By Dr. Chintha Dissanayake

"GLOBALLY, within the first 10 years of the end of a conflict, a third of all conflicts will have resumed." This was the opening line of a powerful address I attended a couple of weeks ago, in the heart of London, at the Royal United Services Institute.

It was most apt that this talk, on the failure of war to win enduring peace, was held in the military establishment founded in 1831 by none other than the Duke of Wellington, the Anglo-Irish general and statesman, victor of the Battle of Waterloo and twice British Prime Minister.

The question being asked, in this modern age of conflict, is why peace negotiations so often fail to achieve a just and durable peace. According to the eminent speaker, it is because "all peace negotiations contain the seeds of future conflict".

Lesley Abdela MBE, an internationally recognised post-conflict specialist, with boots-on-the-ground experience in over 40 different war-zones such as Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Aceh, Indonesia and Nepal, has worked as advisor to Governments, International Organisations and Civil Society on Democracy and Post-Conflict Reconstruction.

### Quick fixes

Abdela described how many a post-con-

flict administration, made up predominantly of the same military personnel that fought in the war, seek quick fixes to ease the immediate pains of conflict. Unfortunately, this strategy has seen repeatedly to have only a temporary effect before conflict resumes.

Lasting peace, as Abdela puts it, requires a complete new thinking, a paradigm shift, for which success is determined only by who sits at the table to set the agenda for peace.

The art of peace-building is often far more subtle than the practice of warfare, requiring almost the opposite set of characteristics: such as patience, creative dialogue, imagination, empathy, attention to critical detail, and the active avoidance of rivalries and competition.

Unfortunately, as Abdela explains, in many post-conflict situations, the people at the table setting future agendas are usually those with most access to political and economic power – such as diplomats, international organisations, senior military officers and Government Ministers – all armed with personal agendas and riding high on 'victor' or 'warrior' mentality. Sadly, under these circumstances, the chance for making a real and lasting shift in thinking, and therefore peace, is often shown to be quite remote.

How is it possible that globally, we keep making the same mistake over and over again? Since the official end of World War II, back in 1945, it is reported that the world has yet to experience a single day of peace, i.e. a day without a deadly conflict in some corner of the world.

Going back to our post-conflict situation, it has been shown that where there is disagreement (or even imagined dis-

### Blind spots

To gain a better understanding of what is really going on, we must turn to psychology, and the concept of bias, or 'blind spots,' in our own awareness. This is where our brains routinely 'fill in' for missing information, as it makes sense of events going on around us. This 'filling in' process, whilst being automatic, is however far from being 100% accurate.

Think about how we automatically assume attractive people are also smarter, sociable, modest, strong and more outgoing. Marketing gurus have long recognised our many 'blind spots' and have used them very effectively to sell us everything from drinks to cars to televisions, making us 'imagine' that if we bought their item, we would be more popular, attractive, happier, smarter, etc.

The most well-known of blind spots, however, involves our tendency to see ourselves in a positive light, even when the evidence suggests otherwise. Have you ever wondered how people who clearly lack talent or ability, often tend not to see it themselves? They also tend to see their futures as overly rosy, to see their own qualities as overly positive, take too much credit for successful outcomes and to pretty much disregard any evidence that threatens their self-esteem.

Sadly, this is true for most of us: Our own blind spots make us believe that we are in fact much better than we really are, and that our judgements and beliefs as being more objective and accurate than that of others!

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### FT Quote



In the absence of women at most peace tables, Abdela cautioned, we will continue to fail, like the Greek God Sisyphus, in all our peacemaking and peace-building attempts. This ominous warning went out to a crowded and silent room of military and civil representatives in London: that post-conflict nations, such as Sri Lanka, must include many more women at all levels of the peace-building effort, if enduring peace is to be achieved



greement), we are mentally encouraged to believe that it is our opposition that is biased, or lacking in objectivity. These beliefs, in turn, make us much more likely to take conflict-increasing actions against our old rivals. This of course leads to a mirrored response from our opponent, and before too long, the spiral of violence resumes.

But as with our rear-view and side mirrors that work together to eliminate blind spots when we drive a motor vehicle, surely, once we know where they are, can we not do something about it?

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(The writer is a chartered occupational psychologist, working in Europe and Asia, an optimising human performance at work. Daily FT readers are invited to send in work and performance related questions to address in future columns. Please write to [chintha@oxford-psychometrics.com](mailto:chintha@oxford-psychometrics.com).)

### FT Quote



Going forward, national export and growth targets can only be met through a change in the mix of local and imported goods to diversify the export base. Improving logistical performance would be an important part of meeting the competitive challenges that arise from this. Failure to raise our game on logistics will undermine the country's prospects for achieving the export targets which are crucial for meeting growth and employment objectives. Poor logistics is undermining the competitiveness of the economy



tics for the other export sectors as well.

According to the LPI, Sri Lanka's performance is particularly weak in clearance by border control agencies (particularly customs), logistical competence and ability to track and trace consignments.

There has been slow progress in implementing customs reform. Sri Lanka has made less progress than other countries in South Asia, such as Bangladesh and India. There is a strong case for attaching high priority to customs reform, including full use of the ASYCUDA system and development of a computerised system of risk management.

Lack of progress in this area place our exporters in disadvantageous position from competing in time-sensitive markets, thereby undermining the growth and employment prospects of the country.

Sri Lanka's LPI ranking also reflects logistics related problems with both road and rail infrastructure. These include congested road access to the Port of Colombo and the poor quality of trucking and rail services. Both trucking and rail costs exceed those in Bangladesh and India. The railway sector accounts for only about one per cent of freight movements and is characterised by a large cost structure.

In addition the logistics sector has been slow to provide value added services for transshipment through the Colombo Port. The Government can encourage this by providing free zones and customs procedures that will enable services to be provided efficiently. Failure to do this can make Colombo vulnerable to losing market share to Indian ports that are being upgraded, particularly as pure transshipment cargo is foot-loose.

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(This is the Tenth in the series of Economic Alerts issued by the Pathfinder Foundation. Readers' comments via email to [pm@pathfinderfoundation.org](mailto:pm@pathfinderfoundation.org) are welcome.)



## Perceptions

By Tyron Devotta  
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# PR and branding

I RECENTLY went to lunch at a restaurant in a five star hotel, and was quite surprised by the restaurant's name. It was actually called 'The Heist'. If you refer to any dictionary, it will tell you that a heist is a robbery in which there is a large haul of loot. So in other words this place could easily be called 'The Robbery'. Yes, it is a little funny, but I am merely trying to make a point.

Well, the name Heist for bars is not uncommon across the world. There is one in Melbourne and another in the UK, but now I come to the subject I really wish to write about today, which is public relations and branding.

A brand is sometimes used as a metonymy which is a figure of speech used in rhetoric i.e. where a thing or a concept is not called by its own name but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept (Wikipedia).

Wikipedia also says that a metonymy works by the contiguity (association) between two concepts, whereas a metaphor works by the similarity between them. When people use a metonymy, they do not typically wish to transfer qualities from one referent to another as they do with a metaphor: There is nothing press-like about reporters or crown-like about a monarch, but "the press" and "the crown" are both common metonymyms.

Therefore, when choosing a brand name, it is vital for the promoter of that brand to understand the need for the connection it needs to have, to the public image they want the brand to create – something that is in turn, very much connected to PR. So the name 'The Heist' may mean something, but I fail to see what!

PR is all about words whether spoken or written and to some extent images as well. These messages created by public relations companies follow a pattern – they are broken into six areas i.e. Who, What, Where, When, Why and How. And in almost every strategy, the why is the most important.

Given that, the people evolving brands for companies need to think a lot about the why or else it could well become a PR nightmare, promoting that brand in the long run. For example, why that particular image, what do these words on the logo mean, why the pay off line, how will the pay off line relate when the company expands and diversifies? These are all matters to consider when a branding exercise is embarked on and also why the PR department's involvement at this stage becomes crucial.

Companies need to know that public relations people are not insulated and have a lot of understanding of the ground realities, which will be extremely useful when going through a branding exercise.

I know that some of those developing brands love to dwell in the abstract and these arty creative guys may come up with absolutely beautiful words and visuals; but when it comes to holding the brand message or brand story through the life of a company, it may well become a distorted picture. Please don't get me wrong, I am not saying that PR companies must develop brands!

But on the other hand, as much as marketing and advertising strategies have to go hand in hand with branding, so must the PR plan. So getting one's public relations people in on the branding exercise is a priority.

This way one can avoid a mismatch in the PR messaging and what the brand actually represents. Most often it is the case here in Sri Lanka where public relations persons act in isolation from the rest of the corporate strategy. PR usually is in the rearguard of the company strategy. PR usually in Sri Lanka is for handling issues or a crisis or to supplement or compliment marketing; PR can do much more – in fact it should be the front line.

To sum this up, as a corporate strategy I believe that marketing and advertising should be linked, not marketing and PR... as a first choice it is branding that should be linked with PR.

(The writer, a PR consultant and head of Media360, was previously a mainstream journalist in print and electronic media. He also edits a new media website.)

## EXPORT GROWTH

# Challenge of poor logistics

### Background

OVER the last 50 years, the civil conflict, a dramatic decline in terms of trade, demographic pressures and misguided policies were major contributory factors to Sri Lanka's economic underperformance.

The current prospects are significantly more propitious not only because of the absence of major 'drags' on the economy but also due to favourable economic geography (previous Economic Alerts have elaborated on this).

The Government has set a growth target of 8% in the medium term. It also aims to double per capita GDP to over \$4,000 by 2016. This would require average annual real growth rates in double digits.

### Exports – Need for diversification and expansion

Given the limited size of Sri Lanka's domestic market, these targets cannot be met without a significant improvement in export performance. Both export product categories and destinations need to be diversified. A concerted effort to plug into Asian supply chains will also be particularly important.

At a time when the global economic centre of gravity is shifting from West to East, Sri Lanka needs to address a situation where 60% of its exports are directed to the sluggish markets of Europe and North America and less than 10% to the dynamic markets in China and India.

These two countries now contribute more than half to global growth. Improving the investment climate, particularly in the tradable goods sector, would be essential to achieve the desired export growth.

### Towards improvement of investment climate

The key elements of a conducive investment climate are well known. They include stable, consistent and predictable policies; macroeconomic stability, robust legal and regulatory frameworks; and an improving environment for doing business.

The Sri Lankan authorities are seeking to make progress on these fronts, as the pace of growth of investment after the end of the conflict has been discouraging so far. Concerted action is being taken to improve the country's ranking of 102 out of 181 in the World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business Index'.

The rankings are particularly low for paying taxes, dealing with permits and enforcing contracts. The Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) is taking the lead in bringing about a significant improvement of Sri Lanka's ranking on this index. The

target is to take Sri Lanka into the top 30.

### Logistics system: Where do we stand?

While considerable attention has been focused on the country's performance in the World Bank's 'Ease of Doing Business Index,' much less has been discussed or done to address a worse ranking on the World Bank's 'Logistics Performance Index' (LPI). Sri Lanka was ranked 137th out of 154 countries in 2009.

The LPI is composed of indicators relating to customs, infrastructure, logistics competence, shipments, tracking and tracing and timeliness. Within the South Asia region, Sri Lanka's ranking is even below Bangladesh, which is a 'Least Developed Country'.

However, it is noteworthy that improvements in logistics have been a major determinant of the success of the apparel sector. In fact, this is part of the explanation why orders, which have hitherto gone to Bangladesh, Vietnam and other apparel producers have now been diverted to Sri Lanka. The challenge is to move away from the current two-tier system and to improve the logis-

## The Pathfinder Foundation Economic Alert



The logistics sector has been slow to provide value added services for transshipment through the Colombo Port