



## Bonner delivers hard-hitting communications and conflict resolution advice

*The 'tough love' Allan Bonner dispenses can be boiled down to the following: First, do your research, know your facts, and be prepared to back up your statements with specifics.*

*Tough Love at the Table: Power, Culture and Diversity in Negotiations, Mediation and Conflict Resolution*, by Dr. Allan Bonner, Sextant Publishing, 220 pages.

By CHARLOTTE DAVIS

TORONTO—In the course of his 20-year practice as a communications and dispute resolution consultant, Allan Bonner has come up against his fair share of powerful and tough-talking clients.

One, a senior executive in the resource sector who was facing a threat from Greenpeace to protest his plant's emissions, issued the following order to Mr. Bonner: "I want a meeting with the minister of Economic Development, the minister of the Environment and the premier's staff, in that order. These people have campaigned on a pro-business, anti-red-tape platform, and this is a case where they can live up to their promises."

Before meeting the executive, Mr. Bonner did a little research and discovered that the executive had indeed contacted the government—by way of a strongly-worded letter to the premier's chief of staff in which he outlined what the government should do for his facility to keep their election promises and get Greenpeace off his back. To the government and political people who knew the executive, he was considered a loose cannon, or at best, highly presumptuous.

While Mr. Bonner felt confident he could arrange the requested meetings—and told the executive so—he also pointed out the need for current and precise plant emissions data as this would form the basis of the company's negotiating position as well as inform its complete communications plan—from employee and community relations through to media and government relations. It was a struggle for Mr. Bonner to extract the data from the company but when he did, he discovered that the executive was operating a clean and modern plant downwind from another city with lots of industry. What Greenpeace was targeting for public protest was a clean plant in a dirty neighbourhood. Although Mr. Bonner was eventually able to broker a deal with Green-

peace, he points out that valuable time and resources could have been saved if the plant had a standard and ongoing communications policy in place and the technical record on the plant's environmental record at hand.

This is one of many real-life case studies Mr. Bonner presents in his latest book, *Tough Love at the Table: Power, Culture and Diversity in Negotiations, Mediation and Conflict Resolution*.

Another involves a government official who suggested Mr. Bonner run an accident simulation from the official's Edmonton office rather than out in the field.

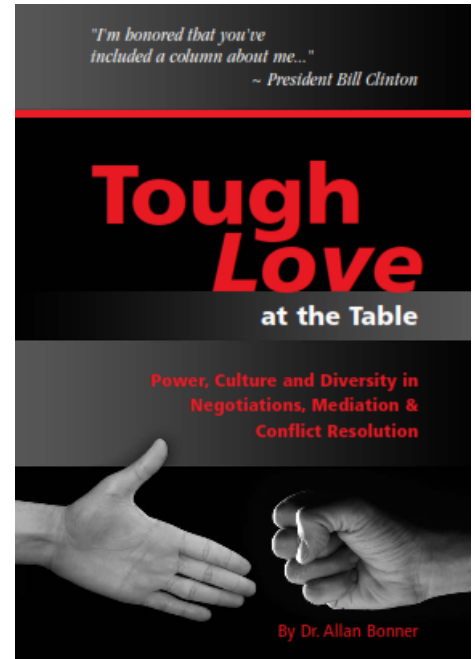
"Look," the official warned, "If you have a bunch of people out there running around interrupting and playing reporters, you're going to wreck a perfectly good simulation."

"If I don't have a crew out there interrupting and playing reporters, it won't be a simulation," Mr. Bonner countered quickly.

A host of others show how diversity—be it cultural, racial, gender or religious—can affect even the simplest of negotiations, much less complex international conflict resolutions.

What emerges from this collection of case studies are some simple, yet too-often ignored, lessons, which politicians, civil servants, and CEOs, alike, would do well to heed. The "tough love" Mr. Bonner dispenses can be boiled down to the following: first, do your research, know your facts and be prepared to back up your statements with specifics. Second, don't balk at spending the time and effort to create policies; these "just-in-case" policies can save your skin if even one incident covered by the policy occurs. Third, there is no substitute for preparation and rehearsal, and this includes simulations. Here, John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and Nicholas Burns, former spokesperson for the U.S. State Department, are offered as role models. This all sounds easy enough, but if everyone were doing it, Mr. Bonner would not continue to be as busy as he is.

*Tough Love* is structured in roughly two parts. Six short introductory chapters deal with such theoretical concepts as process design, culture, gender, race and power, and reflection. These are followed by the 60 brief case studies. Finally, Mr. Bonner includes a glossary of terms, an extensive bibliogra-



phy and a chart to assist others embarking on their own ethnographic studies of past cases and events.

While this structure may allow the reader to dip in and out as he/she pleases, I would have been preferred to see a stronger link between the theoretical concepts and the actual case studies.

This minor quibble aside, Mr. Bonner is a great teacher. With graduate degrees in political science, law, business administration and risk, crisis and disaster management, he clearly delights in learning and in sharing his vast experience with others. His writing reveals a passion for his craft, an intellectual energy and curiosity and, most importantly, the ability to evolve and adapt his thinking to changing times, situations and cultures.

Like Mr. Bonner's previous books on communications, crisis management and media relations, *Tough Love* is written in clear, clean prose. Moreover, Mr. Bonner has an ear for dialogue, which enlivens every chapter and makes the reading not only instructive but so much fun.

Anyone involved in negotiations, mediation or conflict resolution—at any level and in either the public or private sector, or not-for-private—will find *Tough Love* a useful and entertaining addition to their library.

*Charlotte Davis is a lawyer and director of business development in the Toronto office of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP.*

news@hilltimes.com  
The Hill Times