

# Robert McKersie: Integrative Scholar

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## Abstract

This article is a tribute to Robert McKersie. It focuses on his career journey as an integrative scholar and touches on his scholarship, which among many honors included the 1995 *International Association of Conflict Management (IACM)* Lifetime Achievement Award. As the article suggests, Bob is integrative in multiple ways—as a teacher and facilitator integrating diverse concepts and interests; as a scholar lifting up Mary Parker Follet's concept of integration from the 1920s and, along with co-author Richard Walton, giving it a new life in the 1965 *Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations*; and as a friend and colleague bringing out the best in everyone he encounters.

It is rare that a book is remembered much less celebrated twenty-five and again fifty years after its publication. *The Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations* (Walton & McKersie, 1965) was not just celebrated at each of these milestones; in each case, ongoing interest, appreciation, and use of the theory generated symposia in these years and in-between to discuss its continuing impact (Kochan & Lipsky, 2003; Lewicki & Spencer, 1992; Cutcher-Gershenfeld & Kochan, 2015). Beyond a doubt, that book, along with the research and teaching it inspired, stands as landmark contribution by Robert (Bob) McKersie (and his co-author, Richard (Dick) Walton). Yet Bob's impact reaches far beyond this singular contribution—as a scholar, academic leader, mentor, activist, and friend. Our aim in this essay was to introduce Bob McKersie to those who have not had the opportunity to meet him and to share reflections in appreciation for the richly deserved *International Association of Conflict Management (IACM)* 1995 Lifetime Achievement Award (see, Figure 1).

## Scholar

At every stage in Bob McKersie's career, he has been at the center of new ideas in the field of industrial relations. When he was a graduate student at the Harvard Business School, the impact of collective bargaining on management was the core idea. The fieldwork being carried out for the classic book on this subject (Slichter, Healy, and Livernash, 1960) provided the institutional grounding and some of the case study data used in the *Behavioral Theory* book. Concurrently, both Bob and Dick (who was also a doctoral student at the Harvard Business School) took graduate courses from Benjamin Selekman, a labor arbitrator who focused on the behaviors of the parties in his teachings.

As a newly hired assistant professor at the University of Chicago, Bob joined a business school faculty that was integrating economics and management theory and he put this exposure to good use in

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We thank Michael Gross and Shirli Kopelman for inviting us to write this article in honor of Bob, focusing on him as a friend and colleague while celebrating his scholarship, and we are grateful for the constructive feedback from the anonymous reviewers.

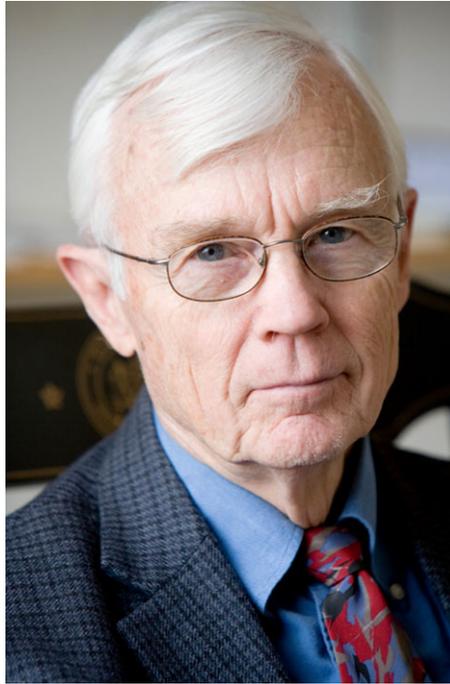


Figure 1. Robert McKersie, February 2009 at MIT, Cambridge, MA

formulating the distributive and integrative dimensions of the Behavioral Theory. Meanwhile, his co-author, Richard Walton, was deepening his knowledge of behavioral science theories on individual and group behavior during his time at Purdue and the University of Michigan. At the time, behavioral approaches to social psychology were focused on direct causal actions and reactions. Walton and McKersie saw a gap in the literature around the process of negotiations and, in addressing the gap, elevated the concept of a behavioral theory to include a complex combination of power, problem-solving, psychological attitudes, and internal structural dynamics. Specifically, the theory consists of four subprocesses: (a) distributive bargaining, (b) integrative bargaining, (c) attitudinal structuring, and (d) intraorganizational bargaining.

At a time of an increasing focus on negotiation and conflict from micro-organizational behavior lenses, a review of each of the four subprocesses and the ways they combine together will be instructive—a chance to step back and see the forest, not just the individual trees. The first subprocess, distributive bargaining, embodies the traditional zero-sum aspects of negotiations, including target and resistance points, zones of possible agreement, and the direct exercise of power. In contrast, integrative bargaining builds on underlying interests, employs brainstorming and problem-solving, and often results in the creation of options beyond what either party had considered in preparation for negotiations. These two subprocess interact with each other. If the distributive bargaining involves excessive claims, it will crowd out the integrative potential. On the other hand, if the integrative bargaining is only superficial, without hard questions being posed, it will convey a false sense of progress only to be shattered when distributed realities surface. Note the underlying mixed-motive assumption—that virtually all negotiations will feature a mix of integrative and distributive processes since virtually all parties have both common and competing interests.

Now add to the picture what Walton and McKersie termed “attitudinal structuring” and later referred to as “shaping attitudes.” This includes using various forms of influence to shape intergroup attitudes. With distributive bargaining, this can include restrained shaping such as indicating resolve and seriousness of purpose, as well as more unrestrained tactics such as elevating fear and uncertainty with threats in

intimidation. With integrative bargaining, this can include relatively superficial tactics such as kindness, as well as more robust shaping of attitudes through open sharing of information, willingness to entertain new ideas, and signaling underlying interests. Needless to say, the shaping of attitudes intensifies the integrative and distributive processes and heightens the dilemmas of managing both in the context of a given negotiation.

Initially, the theory only had the three elements—integrative, distributive, and attitudinal. In developing the theory, Walton and McKersie observed negotiations and used rare full textual transcripts from collective bargaining, including caucus sessions. There were some aspects of the data that just could not be explained by the first three elements, and ultimately, a fourth was added. Initially termed “intraorganizational bargaining” and latter referred to as “internal negotiations,” this subprocess accounted for the internal dynamics within each party (with all three elements), which impacted their ability to negotiate across the table in countless ways. Two decades later, Robert Putnam would cite Walton and McKersie as the basis for departing from the unitary actor assumption in international diplomacy and the need to see negotiations as two-level games (Putnam, 1988). Virtually, every negotiation theory developed since the *Behavioral Theory* draws on some or all of the subprocesses and it remains one of that best frameworks for making sense of the full “forest” involved in any negotiations.

As the citation data in Figure 2 illustrate, the propositions embedded in the theory have had an enduring impact in the fifty years since their initial publication.

But the scholarly impact of the Behavioral Theory is only, at best, half of the story. The distributive and integrative bargaining components of their analytical framework, and the various offshoots they inspired, continue to serve as the core concepts taught in the generic negotiations courses that are now so popular in business, law, and other university programs.

In addition to getting his research career started at Chicago, Bob’s activist tendencies led him to participate in the civil rights movement Jesse Jackson and others were leading in that city throughout the 1960s. Consistent with Bob’s penchant for understating his personal contributions, those not there at the time would have to wait five decades for him to describe his experiences in this domain (McKersie, 2013).

### Academic Leader and Mentor

Bob joined the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) at Cornell University as dean in 1971 at a time when quantitative social science research methods were advancing the frontiers of the field. While the ILR faculty was steeped in the institutional and historical aspects of labor-management relations, it had not yet embraced these newer methodological developments nor kept up with

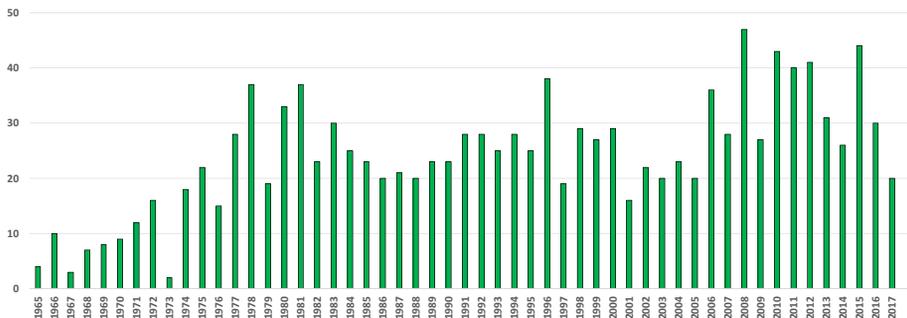


Figure 2. Citations of *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations*: 1965–2017. Sources: Google Scholar and Scopus (Initial chart developed by Mary Kathleen Kern, University of Illinois reference librarian and Ximin Mi, University of Illinois graduate student; update developed by Alex Willett, Brandeis University Academic Outreach Librarian for GIS & the Social Sciences)

many of the broader issues and developments that were reshaping the substantive agenda of the field. Over the course of his tenure as dean, Bob started the transformation of the ILR School by recruiting a large number of young faculty who would go on to build modern world-class departments of Labor Economics, Human Resource Management, and Labor Relations. At the same time, he encouraged faculty to work together across departmental boundaries to take on cutting-edge issues ranging from public sector collective bargaining, to quality of working life, to worker adjustment programs. As a result, not only did the research portfolio of the School broaden and deepen, the cross-disciplinary projects produced a new generation of PhD graduates with multidisciplinary, state of the art training.

The subject of productivity has always been at the top of his research agenda. His dissertation examined the impact of different wage payment systems on productivity, and while at Cornell, he completed a study of productivity bargaining in Great Britain with co-author Laurie Hunter of Glasgow University (McKersie & Hunter, 1972).

When Bob joined MIT's Sloan School of Management in 1980, the future of industrial relations as a field was on the table. Changes in negotiations processes, wage outcomes, work rules and work practices, and business strategies were appearing that he and his faculty colleagues could not explain using existing theories. Pattern bargaining in major industries, such as steel, autos, and telecom, was breaking down, while new nonunion firms were increasingly employing sophisticated employee engagement strategies as way of staying nonunion. Bob put his mentoring and intellectual leadership skills to work in building a faculty and student research team that would produce multiple dissertations and articles and a book (Kochan, Katz, & McKersie, 1986). The book provided a new theoretical framework capable of explaining the transformations underway in industrial relations and in doing so helped launch a new generation of scholarship focused on assessing innovations in work systems and their effects on organizational performance. He would be the first to say that he was just a member of the MIT team that produced this work. Since we were there, we would describe his role very differently: He set the norms of inclusion and openness to new ideas and debate that made MIT a true intellectual "hot spot" (Leavitt, 1996) throughout this transformative period.

The lessons emerging from the transformation research also led Bob along with Dick Walton and Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld to revisit and expand the Behavioral Theory to add strategy and structure to the process theory (Walton, Cutcher-Gershenfeld, & McKersie, 1994). Strategic developments motivating the expanded theory included a spectrum ranging from the collaborative transformation of labor-management relations to the complete destruction of the relationship. Structural developments ranged from multilateral bargaining to globalization to the increasing importance of teams and frontline relations.

When interrogation of terrorist suspects became such a high-profile subject, Bob and Dick joined a team sponsored by the Intelligence Science Board to study and recommend concepts and tools that drew on negotiation theory. Building relationships rather than inflicting pain is a more effective pathway to eliciting valuable information.

In the Boston area, Bob is a founding contributor to the Program on Negotiation (PON) at the Harvard Law School, one of the world's leading centers for research, teaching, and professional development. He has been a consistent voice within PON for the importance of pedagogy and, for fourteen years, co-led (with Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld) the PON seminar on "Negotiating Labor Agreements." Offered four times a year, the seminar reached over 1,500 practitioners and served as one of the leading benchmarks of for bringing a problem-solving approach to collective bargaining.

## Community Builder and Friend

"Say hello to Bob McKersie for me." How many times have either of us heard someone at a professional meeting ask us to say this to Bob next time we see him. It is more than a perfunctory request. Bob's warmth and friendship and his impact on those he has interacted with over the last sixty years far surpasses the surface memories people have of each other, many of which fade over time. Not with Bob.

Two examples illustrate the lasting friendships and respect he has built up over the years. In 1998, we organized a festschrift to celebrate and again discuss the impact of his work as he contemplated “retirement” from full-time teaching duties. We sent out a save the date note to the large list of friends and colleagues he helped us generate. The response was overwhelming. Not only did everyone who could make the date confirm they would be there, most wrote back saying they could not imagine not coming and the few who had other commitments wrote crestfallen notes often with a short comment about Bob’s impact on them. One in this latter category was George Shultz, Bob’s former dean at the University of Chicago who went on to his distinguished government service career (Secretary of Labor, Treasury, and State). George’s response was he would be traveling overseas on that date, hated to miss it, but then asked: What else can I do to pay tribute to my friend? He made a video that we showed at the festschrift where he made the comment “nearly everything I know about negotiations I learned from Bob’s work.” While that was perhaps a bit of an overstatement, he then gave an example of a conceptual point right out of the Behavioral Theory he used in advising President Reagan about negotiating with China!

The second example comes from the symposium we held in 2015, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Behavioral Theory. Jesse Jackson also had to send his regrets but then proceeded to produce a moving video describing how the basic concepts in that book still were relevant to advancing the cause of civil rights today. Reverend Jackson commented as follows:

Fifty years ago, when Bob McKersie and Dick Walton were developing the behavioral theory of labor negotiations, Bob was also volunteering with our community organizing efforts in Chicago. He was putting into practice the theory that he was developing at the time.

In the theory, they talk about the tension between integrative and distributive bargaining—expanding the pie and dividing the pie. We were certainly looking to expand the pie with Chicago area employers and the same time there were some tough issues in which we had to engage in hard bargaining.

The theory also talks about the importance of influence — what they called attitudinal structuring. I can tell you that most negotiations are not about raw power, but the much more challenging exercise of influence.

Finally, the theory talks about internal negotiations. As they document in the last chapter of the book, which was focused in part on civil rights, there were many internal tensions that we had to address — from people advocating more militant action and those advocating more collaborative strategies. We had to resolve our internal negotiations before we could be effective externally.

In addition to this year marking the 50th anniversary of the publication of the Behavioral Theory, I am also participating this week in 50th anniversary activities associated with the marches in Selma, Alabama. It was a sense of senseless violence fueled by racial bigotry. The gathering in Selma is not just about honoring history, however. There are deep racial, economic, and religious challenges in society today. The challenge fifty years ago and the challenge today is to make sense out of the senseless actions so that we can all contribute toward an inclusive and productive future.

In fact, as one police shooting after another surfaced with video, and society began to divide in response, Bob McKersie characteristically leaned forward to build bridges between the local police and the community in Everett and Arlington, MA, where he lives. He then began looking for ways to have such bridges be systematic in our society—work that is still ongoing.

## Conclusion

In employing the concept of “integration,” Walton and McKersie reached back to the 1920s, building on the work of Mary Parker Follet (Follett, 1927). She introduced integration as an alternative to domination and compromise and observed that it had the unique property of generating something new.

Throughout his career, Bob McKersie has been pivotal in helping to advance so many new developments in the fields of negotiation, industrial relations, and conflict management. Simply put, he embodies the very concept of integration, as is evident in this statement from the editors of the book of essays produced from papers presented at his retirement festschrift:

It is fair to say that the force of McKersie's personality has bolstered the penetration of his scholarly work into diverse arenas. In McKersie we find a unique blend of intellectual brilliance, visionary leadership, and moral authority. He has been a role model for countless colleagues, scholars and students. . .and he has had a transforming effect on every institution with which he has been affiliated. (Kochan & Lipsky, 2003: x)

In concluding this article, we turned to Bob to share a few additional thoughts as he seeks to make sense of the many challenges now facing labor-management relations and society more broadly. Here are his comments:

During the last three decades, the field of negotiations and conflict management has shown robust development. This is reflected in an explosion of courses, the creation of research and program centers, the launching of journals, and the formation of professional organizations. Can we say that the field has arrived? Not yet. There is still much more work needed to understand and to manage conflict.

Here are agenda items looking ahead:

Even though most managers know the gist of interest-based bargaining (IBB), the portion who use it effectively is not large.

The political system is polarized and is characterized by fixed-sum behavior—how can we bring more of a problem-solving approach to the political arena?

The subject of race remains deeply adversarial in society, as is illustrated by the issues around police–community relations.

Some so-called experts in interrogation still adhere to use of torture, a practice that is contrary to basic human rights.

The social media are galvanizing parties into fixed positions, impeding negotiated solutions to societal challenges.

Women find it difficult to thrive in the workplace and too often avoid negotiations that might serve their interests.

Organizations have become more complex; achieving consensus across interests and boundaries has become elusive.

The list could be expanded. The point is that society and our civil order are in desperate need of ideas. Savvy individuals are needed to help the parties find the integrative outcomes in a mixed-motive world that has become intensely distributive. The field is ripe for research to better understand the barriers and the forces that lead so many sectors to be locked in dysfunctional process and poor outcomes. We can do better as individuals, organizations, communities, and entire societies.

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