

— CHAPTER ONE —

INTRODUCTION

Imagine for a moment that you are faced with a conflict. Imagine, for example, that your new neighbour loves to have guests over many nights of the week until the early hours of the morning, keeping you up with the noise. When you talk to your neighbour, he laughs and tells you, “Loosen up, have some fun. Come and join us if you want! You need to enjoy life more!” You go home after the conversation and get increasingly angry. You think about how insensitive he is, how little he cares for other people. You begin to think that he may actually be retaliating for the fact that your dog barks every now and then, which he complained about once. Given how you see the problem, you vow to call the police the next time he has a party during the week. This conflict is headed for a significant escalation.

We are all faced with conflict situations in many aspects of our lives, whether in our personal life, in the workplace, or with just about anyone we meet. Given how common conflict situations are and how frequently we deal with conflict, you would think that we'd all be pretty good at handling conflict.

The reality is a bit different, in that most people report little confidence in addressing or handling conflict. Why?

Managing conflict effectively is a simple two-step process that starts with:

1. how we assess the conflict we're facing, followed by
2. what action (or inaction) we decide to take to address it.

Whenever we are faced with a dispute, the first thing we do is try to make sense of it—try to determine what the conflict is about. In other words, Step One is trying to diagnose the conflict. Once we've decided on (or guessed at) the cause, Step Two is taking some type of action based directly on what we think has caused it.

In the example above, the homeowner has assessed the conflict in Step One as being caused by the neighbour's being insensitive, uncaring, maybe even vengeful. Based on this diagnosis, in Step Two the homeowner decides the reasonable and appropriate way to address this conflict is by calling the police to curtail the neighbour's uncaring, insensitive and vengeful behaviour. The conflict was assessed, and an action that seems to make sense is taken based on that assessment. But how accurate was this assessment?

In every conflict, we employ these two steps, either consciously or unconsciously. In fact, how good we are at managing conflict will be based, fundamentally, on how skilled we are at these two steps:

1. creatively and insightfully diagnosing what is causing a conflict, and
2. effectively and skillfully taking action to resolve the conflict.

In many cases, the barrier to effectively managing a conflict is that we diagnose the conflict unconsciously, react emotionally,

make choices and apply tools based on a poor diagnosis, and end up escalating the situation.

WE ALL “PRACTICE” CONFLICT RESOLUTION DAILY

This is a handbook for conflict resolution practitioners aimed at helping them understand and analyze conflict more effectively in their work. Practitioners, typically, are people who regularly manage conflict as part of their work or their life. The list of practitioners, therefore, is long and includes roles such as mediators, negotiators, lawyers, managers and supervisors, social workers, human resource and labour relations specialists, insurance adjusters, and many more. For these people, this handbook introduces a number of conflict analysis models that are useful and applicable to the two steps above: diagnosing conflict, and offering direction and ideas on resolving that specific conflict.

If this book is useful to conflict resolution practitioners for the simple reason that they regularly manage conflict, what about the rest of us? In other words, who else manages conflict regularly and might benefit from using and applying some of these models? Conflict is a universal human experience, something that every single one of us works with and addresses in our lives far beyond the workplace. In that sense, we are all “practitioners” when it comes to working with conflict effectively, and the tools and models in this book will apply to everyone who wishes to improve his or her ability to manage conflict effectively. For the sake of simplicity, then, this handbook will use “mediators” and “practitioners” interchangeably to mean “people who deal with and manage conflict.”

This book is focused on models and tools that help with the two key steps in managing and responding to conflict:

Step One: Effectively diagnosing a conflict, and

Step Two: Taking action to manage the conflict based on the diagnosis.

I use the term “models” frequently. This is not a call to introduce more theory or more academic understanding into the conflict resolution process. While theory and academic knowledge are excellent, they are often of little help in a given situation. If theoretical knowledge serves as the general foundation for the field, then “models” are the specific tools or heuristics that guide the application of that theoretical knowledge in practice. This handbook is not focused toward more theory, but rather on tools that can be applied directly to the practice of managing each and every conflict.

To understand this relationship between theory and practice, it will be helpful to understand the nature and characteristics of what can be called “practice professions.”

DIAGNOSIS: FINDING THE ROOT CAUSES OF CONFLICT

A practice profession, quite simply, is a profession aimed at helping individual people solve specific functional problems. It is distinguished here from professions that focus more generally on research and the discovery of theoretical knowledge. There are numerous professions that have a significant practice component to them, professions as diverse as medicine and law, as well as technical professions such as civil engineering and auto repair. And the nature of every practice profession is that the first critical skill the practice professional must have is the ability to diagnose, to determine the root cause of a specific problem.

For example, when a patient sees a doctor, the first thing that the doctor must arrive at is a diagnosis of the problem; indeed, everything flows from the diagnosis, and little is done until a diagnosis is reached. During the diagnostic process, if

there is any doubt about either the diagnosis or the recommended course of action (i.e., treatment) that flows from the diagnosis, a “second opinion” is often sought before any treatment is considered. Similarly in law or engineering, or even car repair, little action can be taken until the professional understands (or believes she understands) what the problem is, and based on that recommends or conducts an intervention. Few of us would accept a dentist saying, “Well, I’m not sure which tooth is hurting, so I’m going to try pulling a few of them out to see if it helps.” Few of us would return to an auto repair shop that randomly replaced part after part hoping that this would eventually solve the problem.

If diagnosis is the first key ability for a practice professional, it’s important to understand how the diagnostic process works and where it fits for the practitioner. In general, most diagnosis has its roots in the theoretical background knowledge of the field. For example, once a mechanic understands from automotive theory that the transmission of a car is responsible for sending power to the wheels, if a car won’t move while the engine is running the mechanic starts looking at the transmission as the source of the problem. Once a doctor understands the digestive tract and what functions it performs, when a patient presents with abdominal pain immediately after eating the doctor will start investigating the digestive system first. Some theoretical knowledge is therefore necessary for good diagnostic skills.

In more complex fields, however, theory alone is inadequate for good diagnosis. In addition to a grounding in general theory, practitioners need effective models and tools to achieve an accurate and useful diagnosis. For example, heart disease is one of the most common diseases in the world. There is extensive “deep” theory and knowledge about how high levels of certain kinds of cholesterol contribute to heart disease, including complex mechanisms for how cholesterol in the

blood contributes to fat slowly building up on the arterial walls, narrowing them and making the heart work too hard, eventually leading to heart attack. The theories about these mechanisms, however, are not overly helpful in diagnosing any given individual patient. To diagnose effectively, doctors have devised tests that measure cholesterol levels in the patient along with a simple model that states if cholesterol is over a certain limit, specific actions and steps are put in place to help correct the problem. The doctor, using a simple tool (a blood test) follows a specific model for diagnosing and intervening (if the cholesterol level is above a certain limit, diet changes and cholesterol medicines are prescribed) that requires very little of the deep “theory” behind the model for the practitioner to be effective in helping the patient.¹

In general, then, theoretical knowledge is required as a foundation, but in order to apply that knowledge effectively for each individual client or situation, specific practice models and tools are required to assist the professional. These models help the practitioner apply the two key steps mentioned before:

Step One: Effectively diagnosing a conflict, and

Step Two: Taking action to manage the conflict based on the diagnosis.

Without the ability to apply appropriate models and tools effectively, there is little chance the practitioner will help the client.

THEORIES VS. MODELS IN A PRACTICE PROFESSION

We have been using the terms “theory” and “model” in specific and different ways so far, and this leads us to a key question: What is the difference between a “theory” and a “model”?

Typically, the terms “theory” and “model” are used almost interchangeably, and indeed there is overlap in their meaning.

1. Indeed, in many professions such as medicine and law, simpler problems that can be diagnosed with effective models and that lead to straightforward interventions are being devolved to professionals with far less theoretical knowledge, such as nurse practitioners and paralegals.

There are also some key differences, especially in the context of a practice profession.

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary the definition of “theory” includes:

- “abstract thought,” and
- “a general principle or body of principles offered to explain a phenomenon,” and
- “an unproved assumption.”

These definitions indicate that theories are broad principles that are often related to abstract thought of a high order. Theories are strongly related to research, to the testing of hypotheses or principles to see if they are true. In the scientific method, if a theory is not verified or cannot be proven true, it is discarded as false or unusable.

This scientific approach is found in many professions (including the social sciences and conflict resolution), and is typically labeled the “research” side of the field. In the sciences, “pure,” or “theoretical,” or “deep” are terms used for research that initially gives little or no thought to practical uses or applications, focusing instead on uncovering foundational principles with little regard for whether they are “practical.” There is a great deal of money spent and many people engaged in this type of research in many fields, including the field of conflict resolution.

Separate from the research component of most fields, there is also a “practice” or applied branch of the field centred around “practitioners,” who take the existing knowledge of the field and determine how to directly apply that information to help individual patients or clients.

The term “theory,” therefore, seems to point us in the direction of abstract investigation with less, or little, applicability to the practitioner. The practitioner, on the other hand, is focused

on learning the clinical skills and tools that help in applying their knowledge and information directly with specific clients. For practitioners, very little “deep” theory is directly useful and applicable in a clinical setting other than in the most general way, unless the theory and knowledge has been translated into a useful functioning model.

This is precisely why many professions describe a significant split in their fields between research and practice, between theoretical work and the clinical application of that knowledge in the field. As in many fields, this significant gap between theory and practice exists because practitioners rarely see how the majority of research conducted helps them as practitioners. In many cases (though certainly not all) research is either too general or too esoteric to be easily understood, let alone directly applicable in the field. For this reason, a great deal of important information rarely (or only very slowly) makes its way to the practitioners in the field.

Models, however, can be something quite different from theory. In Merriam-Webster “model” is defined in some of the following ways:

- “a description or analogy used to help visualize something that cannot be directly observed,” and
- “to produce a representation of.”

Models, then, as we are using the term, have a few unique characteristics. Good models are structures or representations that approximate reality, but in a simpler and clearer way. Maps, for example, are an excellent form of model, in that they represent reality (i.e., the streets of a city), but in a smaller and simpler way (the map fits in our pocket, where the city streets themselves clearly do not), so they can help guide us to where we want to go. In the same way, conflict analysis models are “maps” of complex conflict theory or processes that are

simplified and focused to help us understand the cause of the conflict in specific situations, along with the actions we might take that will help us reach a resolution.

Christopher Moore reinforces this idea that practitioners need models, or “conflict maps”:

To work effectively on conflicts, the intervener needs a conceptual road map or “conflict map” that details why a conflict is occurring, identifies barriers to settlement, and indicates procedures to manage or resolve the dispute.²

So how is a “model” different from a “theory”?

First, a model (unlike a theory) is not burdened with whether it is “true,” but rather is burdened by the more functional test of whether it is helpful and useful in simplifying what it represents. It doesn’t matter whether a model is “true” or “right” in general, it matters whether a particular model is helpful with a specific problem; if it is, we use it, and if it isn’t, we don’t discard it forever as “false,” we simply don’t use it in this situation. For example, if I am in Toronto and all I have is a map of New York, the map isn’t deemed false and thrown away. It is simply not useful to me in Toronto, and I put it away until I’m back in New York, where it will once again be useful. For this reason, the experienced practitioner, like the experienced traveler, carries numerous maps that may be needed on the trip.

Second, a model helps us sift through a great deal of complex information by narrowing the focus to what will actually help us. Models, in this sense, help us take detailed theoretical knowledge and simplify it to something we can make sense of more quickly. As described by Robert and Dorothy Bolton,

An elegant model is a useful simplification of reality. It enables you to ignore a mass of irrelevant or less relevant details so you can focus on what is most important. A model shows

2. Christopher Moore, *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 58.

what to look for, helps identify meaningful patterns, and aids in interpreting what you see. In other words, a model helps cut through the distracting aspects of a situation so you can better grasp the essence of what you want to understand.³ [emphasis in original]

Models, in this sense, are tools for helping us get to the core or the root cause of the problem effectively.

Finally, models help practitioners accomplish practical goals. For example, when going to visit a friend in an unfamiliar city, we often rely on a hand-written map that our friend gives us to find her house. These maps are often poorly drawn and delete vast amounts of information about the city, concentrating only on key landmarks and streets that are directly on the way to the house. These maps are rarely to scale, and would be useless in finding anything but the friend's house. And yet, this map is a first-rate and effective model at getting us to that one location. Regardless of all its shortcomings, it is extremely practical for the specific task at hand. It is the simplest and most practical way to accomplish the goal.

Conflict analysis models, if they are effective at simplifying complex interactions as well as giving us useful guidance, should be routinely applied by practitioners in the field, and should be a core part of any practitioner's training. So how much training in this type of diagnostic model, in frameworks for analyzing and understanding the root causes of conflict, is included in most conflict resolution or mediation courses? Virtually none.

A brief look at the training outlines for a number of 40-hour mediation workshops reveals that the class time is spent in three primary areas: first, some general steps (usually four to six) on how to conduct a mediation; second, on a laundry list of conflict resolution and communication skills that are practiced individually in the workshop; and finally, role-play situations where the general mediation steps and the commu-

3. Robert Bolton, Dorothy Grover Bolton, *People Styles at Work* (New York: Amacom, 1996), 9.

nication skills are given a try. Few of these courses teach or spend time on anything resembling conflict analysis models, or even, for that matter, on the most general conflict resolution theory. Mediation training seems to be focused solely on face-to-face skills and simple steps for conducting the mediation itself,⁴ and does little to teach the participants about diagnosing the root cause of the conflict being mediated.

Without the ability to translate conflict theory into models and tools that help diagnose the specific conflict at hand, and without the ability to choose actions and interventions effective for that particular conflict, practitioners will simply not be good at resolving conflict.

A WIDE RANGE OF CONFLICT ANALYSIS MODELS

There is no magic formula that resolves all disputes. Because conflict situations can be so diverse, and because models are not exclusive representations of “truth,” we are not looking for a single model that will make sense of every conflict in the world. Rather, we need to be comfortable with a wide range of models that will help us in diagnosing different problems, in vastly different circumstances, with different people. This handbook contains eight different models that approach conflict situations from different points of view. All eight approaches can be useful for diagnosing and intervening in a wide range of situations.

Diagnosis is about framing the conflict in a way that has coherence and makes sense. The effective practitioner needs a wide range of diagnostic models and frameworks that help organize and make sense of a wide range of situations.

As described by Bernard Mayer, these models are essential for the practitioner:

A framework for understanding conflict is an organizing lens that brings a conflict into better focus. There are many

4. Some workshops, notably workshops taught out of the continuing education department of various universities, do teach some theory from the field, to their credit. Often, however, this is “theory” as defined above, and students have a hard time understanding how to apply this information in practice. Few workshops, including the university courses, teach practice-focused models of conflict analysis.

different lenses we can use to look at conflict, and each of us will find some more amenable to our own way of thinking than others.... We need frameworks that expand our thinking, that challenge our assumptions, and that are practical and readily usable.⁵

Mayer's "lens" analogy is useful. For example, conflict can be viewed through a communications lens, a type of conflict lens, an "interests" lens, a personality lens, a structural lens, a cultural lens, a dynamics of conflict lens, and more. This means that an effective practitioner should have a constellation of diagnostic models to help frame and understand different situations; as experience grows, the practitioner will become more skilled at choosing the one(s) that will help create effective interventions.

Regardless of the type of model or map, good models do have some characteristics in common. When focusing on effective conflict analysis models, this book will present models that are simple and useful. Each model needs to meet the practitioner's test: "Does applying this model help me diagnose the problem as well as help me choose what I do next, in real time as I work with the conflict?"

The two requirements for an effective and useful conflict analysis model can be described this way:

1. **Diagnosis: Simplicity vs. Complexity**—Effective diagnostic models and tools attempt to strike a fine balance between simplicity and complexity; a model that is overly complex will be too difficult to put into practice, and a model that is shallow or obvious is a waste of time. The complexity of the diagnosis can be extreme, such as Rummel's unified theory of conflict in his book, *The Conflict Helix*,⁶ which proposes a single, detailed model for understanding all conflict, all the way from the interpersonal to the geopolitical. While it may

5. Bernard Mayer, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 4.

6. R. J. Rummel, *The Conflict Helix: Principles and Practices of Interpersonal, Social and International Conflict and Cooperation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991).

sound interesting to have a model that attempts to explain all conflict in the world, bear in mind that this model takes a full-length book to even explain, let alone to apply. Good models are able to address complexity, but simplify them enough to be useful.

2. **Strategic Guidance**—Effective models are clear and focused in giving strategic direction to the practitioner. The clearer the strategic direction the model gives, the more practical and applicable it becomes (and the more likely it will actually be used in conflict situations).

As you work through these eight models, keep in mind these two dimensions by asking yourself:

1. “Does it help me diagnose the conflict simply and effectively?”
2. “Does it give me direction and ideas on how to resolve it?”

BECOMING A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Another goal of the models in this book is to assist the practitioner in growing and developing, in becoming a “reflective practitioner.” Reflective practice is a term that has been used by a variety of writers looking into the very nature of effective professional practice. Michael Lang and Alison Taylor’s recent book is devoted to understanding the development of the mediator from novice to artist, and describes reflective practice in this way:

Reflection is the process by which professionals think about the experiences, events and situations of practice and then attempt to make sense of them in light of the professionals’ understanding of relevant theory. . . . Reflection occurs both during the performance of professional practice (reflection in action) and after the experience (reflection on action). It

nurtures exploration and discoveries that lead to an increased repertoire of skills, it enhances the person's ability to modify forms of intervention, and it may alter his way of thinking about the problems presented.⁷

Reflection, clearly, is at the very heart of the process of learning and developing, essentially the process of "learning how to learn." This process of "learning how to learn" was identified by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon as crucial to the growth of skill and ability:

The foundation for future professional competence seems to be the capacity to learn how to learn (Schein, 1972). This requires developing one's own continuing theory of practice under real-time conditions. It means that the professional must learn to develop "microtheories" of action that, when organized into a pattern, represent an effective theory of practice.⁸

If "learning how to learn" is the path to growth, then the essential element of this growth is the ability to reflect on what is successful, what is working and what is not. And key to this would be having a framework, an ongoing set of structures or models on which to reflect and on which to base any changes or adaptations for enhanced performance. In short, practitioners need models and tools of analysis in order to become reflective practitioners.

It is important to note again that there is no single diagnostic model that is "right" or "correct" or even "true." As Folger, Poole and Stutman state,⁹ theories from the practitioner's point of view (i.e., diagnostic models) are best judged by their utility, not whether they are right or wrong. They are meant to be useful, to "explain relationships so that we might

7. Michael Lang and Alison Taylor, *The Making of a Mediator*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 19.

8. Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974), 157.

9. Many previous writers use the term "theory" in the same way we have defined the term "model," in that it refers not to deep sociological theory but rather practical frameworks that help the practitioner make sense of, or diagnose, a conflict.

describe them more fully, predict their recurring features, and control their dependant outcomes.”¹⁰

Since they are tools and structures to help us make sense of the infinitely complex situations of conflict, the more diagnostic models and tools a mediator has the more likely he or she will understand any given conflict and intervene effectively.

Theories should be evaluated on the basis of utility...certain concepts and theories will speak to you and others will not. . . . The real test, however, is for practitioners to employ these ideas in the marketplace of everyday life. The best theories and concepts are the ones that allow you to understand and manage conflict in your relationships, in your family, in your organization, in your life. No other measure of a theory can compete with that crucial test.¹¹

It is through this process of testing, trying and getting feedback on the success and value of our diagnostic models and tools that reflective practice is achieved.

Finally, this process of reflection is also a two-way street, in that by learning and applying a model for diagnosing a situation of conflict, and by using this model to reflect on the effectiveness of the actions taken to address the conflict, the learning generated will no doubt change and improve the quality, focus and depth of the diagnostic model. It will lead, as Argyris and Schon just said, to “developing one’s own continuing theory of practice,” one’s own models. This creates an endless process of growth, learning, and improvement in the field, practitioner by practitioner. This is the hallmark of truly effective practice.

SUMMARY

In summary, then, this book is focused on a specific type of conflict analysis model that practitioners can use to both diag-

10. Joseph Folger, Marshall Poole, and Randall Stutman, *Working Through Conflict*, (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1993), 44.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

nose a conflict situation, as well as gain some guidance about what interventions might help and why. The key points to remember when working with these models are:

- Each model is intended to be a simple, useful map or framework to help the practitioner work with conflict situations encountered in practice.
- The range of conflict situations is virtually infinite, and one model will simply not be helpful in all situations. The practitioner should have a number of models to help with different situations.
- Conflict can be seen and addressed from a variety of viewpoints, such as communications conflict, structural conflict, personality, and many more. For this reason, too, the practitioner should have a variety of models to work with.
- Models are not looked at as “true” or “false”; they are only useful or not in a specific situation. Models that are helpful should be used. Models that are not should be put away until a situation arises where they are useful.
- Models need to meet the practitioner’s test: “Does applying this model help me diagnose the problem, as well as help me choose what I do next?” Models need to be complex enough to bring value, and simple enough to be easily applied and used.
- Effective use of these models is the beginning of reflective practice, the path to continual improvement in managing and resolving conflict.

One of the most frequent comments heard from experienced practitioners exposed to these models is that they intuitively understand a number of these models, but had taken years to develop this intuition by trial and error. An important goal of learning and working with these models is to consciously speed up the practitioner’s learning curve by helping everyone

become a reflective practitioner. These models offer a jump-start in learning and growing as a conflict resolution practitioner.

The strategies and applications of the models described here are simply a start, a beginning, a scratching at the surface of the many ways practitioners can put these models to use. As practitioners work frequently with any of these (or other) models, they will find different ways to apply the models to their advantage; indeed, they may even adapt or modify the model to make it more useful and effective. This is only to be encouraged. This handbook is intended to introduce a basic set of models and touch on the main strategies for applying them, providing the practitioner with a useful reference manual for the ongoing use of these tools.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is not intended to be read as a novel, from start to finish in that order. Each of the eight chapters present a specific model that is self-contained, offering a clear understanding of the model's focus, what kind of situations it can be useful in, and what interventions are likely to help. Each chapter can be read independently and stands on its own. That said, it can also be very helpful to see how the various models relate to each other, and frequent footnotes will point from one model to another where useful.

Additionally, to help the reader get a clear sense of how the different models relate to each other, there is a single case study of a complex conflict situation that all eight models are applied to. Chapter 2 starts off with this detailed case study, followed by a brief summary of all eight models. Each model will then be presented in detail in its own chapter. Within each chapter, each model is applied to the same case study, so the reader can gain an appreciation of how the model is used, and how different models will give the practitioner different viewpoints,

different diagnoses, and different options for intervention. Remember that there is more than one way of assessing and intervening in a given conflict, and indeed that is one of the strengths of using different models or maps.

Each model is then followed by an additional case study unique to that chapter, to give the reader a further chance to see each model in action. Where applicable, worksheets or other helpful guides are included to round out each model.

We are all lifelong students of conflict resolution (like it or not), and hopefully one or a number of these models will become invaluable in your practice and life.