

A New Direction for the Conflict Field

Divorced parents returning yet again to court have been referred to mediation because of disputes about child rearing. They have profound differences about religious upbringing, parenting practices, and education for their children. One of the parents now wants to move to a different state, partly in the belief that this will finally resolve their conflict—but it won't.

The principal partners in an engineering firm are embroiled in conflict about how to compensate themselves. Some argue that all profits should be shared equally, others that allocation should be based on billable hours, on dollars earned, or on business generated. Some believe that special credit should be given for enhancing the firm's profile or for providing public service. This dispute has been going on in various versions for many years and has led to the departure of a number of key staff.

An electricity generating facility has a long history of labor relations problems, including highly publicized job actions, threatened facility closures, lawsuits, and multiple grievances. Union leadership and management have an antagonistic relationship, and the membership has just issued a vote of no confidence in the management over a plan to outsource certain plant maintenance functions.

Traffic in an attractive and prosperous midsized city has grown tremendously over the past ten years, and downtown parking has become especially challenging. Every time there is a proposal to increase parking capacity or engage in major transportation infrastructure development, conflict erupts between those who feel that automobile traffic should be limited and discouraged and those who feel that unless more parking is made available the local economy will suffer.

Most of us who have worked in the conflict field have faced situations such as these throughout our careers. They are emblematic of the most challenging disputes we face, as both individuals and practitioners—the ones that won't go away. These conflicts are unlikely to be resolved, and they therefore call for long-term engagement strategies. This presents a terrific opportunity for conflict professionals, but one that we have largely neglected.

We can make progress in the management of these conflicts. We can help the parties to arrive at interim or partial agreements, we can guide them in escalating or de-escalating them, but we typically can't help them to end these conflicts because the disputes are rooted in the structure of the situation (for example, limited resources or conflicting organizational roles), core values (for example, the kind of community people want to live in or the life they want to lead), personality traits (for example, being quick to anger or conflict averse), or people's sense of who they are (for example, committed social activists or realistic business people).

As conflict professionals we exhibit a strong tendency to ignore the *ongoing* (or *enduring*, *long-term*, or *endemic*) aspect of these conflicts and to focus only on those aspects that can be resolved. In doing this we fail to address people's most important conflicts and miss out on a major opportunity to increase the role and relevance of the work that we do. In each of the previous examples, if we limit our focus to the immediate conflict, we may provide some value but we overlook the underlying challenge that confronts the individuals, organizations, and communities involved. For example, if the only assistance we offer to the struggling parents relates to the proposed move, we leave them adrift with the ongoing conflict they are likely to experience for the duration of their coparenting years, if not longer. And although it is no doubt worthwhile to mediate an immediate solution to the outsourcing issue, if we cannot help the union and the management to develop a more productive framework for confronting their

ongoing conflicts, we have failed to address the most important challenge facing the electricity generating facility.

In each of these conflicts, whatever the terms of our involvement, our outlook will expand dramatically if instead of asking our customary question, What can we do to resolve or de-escalate this conflict? we ask, How can we help people prepare to engage with this issue over time? As our outlook grows, significant new avenues of intervention become apparent, and our potential to help parties with their core struggles will grow as well.

Our challenge as conflict specialists is to meet people and conflicts as they are genuinely experienced and to help disputants deal with each other and their conflicts realistically and constructively. When we focus only on those elements that are resolvable, we are neither meeting people where they truly are nor offering them a realistic scenario for dealing with the most serious issues they face. Instead, we marginalize our role, limit the reach of our work, and fail to realize the full potential we have to help disputants. In the process, we also constrain the growth of our field and our economic viability as conflict professionals. We have the tools, the experience, and the capacity to do better than this, but too often we don't have the vision.

Intuitively, we know that important conflicts don't readily end. Each of us can think of a conflict that was present in an organization, community, or personal relationship when we entered it and will likely be there, in some fashion, when we leave. This is not necessarily a sign of organizational or personal pathology—it is rather a reflection of the human condition. That does not mean, however, that there is nothing to be done about these long-term conflicts. People can deal with these conflicts constructively or destructively. They can face conflicts or avoid them. They can escalate or de-escalate. They can let conflicts destroy important relationships or see them as the context for deepening these connections.

There is of course a role for mediating agreements or finding ways to de-escalate dangerous or destructive interchanges, and

there are times when our focus must be on the immediate and the short term. But we ought always to do this with a full appreciation for the enduring nature of most significant conflicts and with a clear view of how what we do in the immediate circumstances needs to be informed by the long-term struggle that disputants face.

CHALLENGING OUR CONFLICT NARRATIVE

Perhaps the hardest challenge enduring conflicts present to conflict professionals is that they ask us to alter the assumptions we have about conflict and the narratives we construct to explain our approach. The story we often tell is that conflict is a problem in human interactions that might be inevitable but can usually be fixed. Conflict can be fixed by *prevention*, *analysis*, and *intervention*. We say that we can anticipate and prevent conflict by effective communication and decision-making processes. We can understand conflict by analyzing the interests, needs, values, and choices of all the players. We can intervene in conflict by bringing the right people together to engage in a collaborative problem-solving process. Most important, by doing this, we can end a conflict. We can address the key interests of the people involved and thereby solve the problems that led to the dispute.

This is a heartening story. It offers a simple and optimistic approach and suggests a clear and appealing role for conflict professionals. And sometimes an intervention works in just this way, producing constructive results that are welcomed by parties who had thought their conflict was unsolvable. But where profound conflict is concerned this story is incomplete and unrealistic, and people know it. The real course of the most significant conflicts people face is muddier, less predictable, and more impervious to intentional change.

Conflict professionals can anticipate conflict up to a point, but the more significant the conflict—the deeper its roots and the

further reaching its impact—the more likely it is that we will not be able to prevent it, only prepare for it. Conflicts involve chaotic and ever changing systems. The idea that we can find the key to solving a conflict by deploying ever more systematic tools of analysis is misleading. Understanding the nature of a conflict is an ongoing challenge, and our best hope is to gain enough insight to help us make good choices at a given time.

Rarely will analysis itself reveal a magic key that will transform the nature of a deep or complex conflict. We can contribute to a better understanding, but seldom can we offer the blinding insight that will alter the course of a conflict. And whether we are talking about the long-term struggle between divorced parents, warring business partners, ethnic or racial groups in a community, workers and managers in a troubled organization, environmentalists and energy producers, or religious and secular worldviews, such core conflicts do not get resolved cleanly, completely, or quickly—if at all.

The basic choice that each of the four situations described at the beginning of the chapter and countless others like them present to us is one of purpose. Should our intention be to identify those elements of conflict that are resolvable and focus on these or to devise ways to assist people to *stay with conflict* in a powerful, constructive, and effective way?

THE CHALLENGE FOR THE CONFLICT FIELD

As conflict professionals we gain something and lose something by limiting our range of services to the resolution process. When we make resolution our focus, we are better able to explain our purpose and role definition, presenting them clearly to the public (and to ourselves). At the same time, we lose a great deal of relevance and opportunities for intervention, because disputants come to view our services as relevant for only a narrow range of conflicts. And this is why we are sometimes viewed with a

certain amount of mistrust, why people often feel that conflict specialists—mediators, facilitators, conflict coaches, and collaborative practitioners—are offering a formula that is too easy, too clear cut, and just plain naïve. We often feel that way ourselves.

People want help with conflict, but they also want realism. When we offer to help them prevent, resolve, or in some way fix conflicts that they are experiencing as inevitable, intractable, or deeply rooted, we are not seen as credible. This is not to say that the worst aspects of long-term conflict cannot be ameliorated, that complex and destructive interactions cannot be made more constructive, or that progress toward a more positive approach is impossible. But when we focus on preventing or settling conflicts that are not likely to be resolved, we lose credibility and forego the opportunity to help people in realistic and meaningful ways.

I am not suggesting that conflict professionals have created this problem out of either naïveté or hubris. We have responded to a clear need as we have seen it, and we are often asked to take on impractical goals—to resolve a long-term, deeply rooted conflict or fix a complex and entrenched problem. But if we buy into such unrealistic hopes or expectations, we are in the long run likely to disappoint our clients, and perhaps ourselves. Taking a request for assistance that may be unrealistic and negotiating appropriate and realistic terms for our work is often our first big challenge. In doing so, we need to maintain a clear view of the dispute and the possibility that it is an enduring conflict.

Sometimes the challenge of helping people face long-term conflict is obvious, either because the dispute cannot be mediated or because the disputants are clearly entrenched in their positions. Efforts to mediate disputes about abortion provide an interesting example of this. The fundamental conflict between the “pro-choice” and “pro-life” camps about abortion rights is clearly irresolvable—but that does not mean the conflict cannot be engaged with in a more constructive way. Ancillary issues (such as ground rules about picketing outside abortion clinics or

information that should be provided to teenagers about contraception, abstinence, and pregnancy termination) have also proved to be enduring because they cannot be disconnected from the core values and identity issues involved in the abortion issue itself.

Sometimes we have the choice of whether to look at the enduring aspects of a conflict or to focus just on the immediate and the resolvable features. For example, when mediating a high-conflict divorce we are occasionally presented with seemingly short-term disputes that are manifestations of intractable conflicts. A hiring conflict among business partners may seem like a short-term conflict, and we may choose to treat it as such, but it may also be a manifestation of a long-term struggle about organizational mission or direction, fair hiring practices, or power over decision making.

Sometimes our role in enduring conflict is short term, if for example we have been called in to mediate a conflict about a proposal to build a new parking facility rather than to address overall concerns about traffic and development. At other times we may find ourselves having a role to play over time, as when we are asked to work with organizations over a period of years or to set up and participate in ongoing systems for dealing with ethnic violence. But regardless of the specific circumstances of our involvement, the challenge is the same. Can we help people deal constructively with long-term, enduring conflict, and what tools can we bring to this task?

We have reached a stage in the development of the conflict intervention field where we are comfortable and often adept at working as third parties in time-limited, resolution-focused approaches. But if our field is to realize its full potential to assist with the key challenges conflict presents, we need to move beyond this zone of comfort, beyond this fairly circumscribed and limited role we have generally defined for ourselves.

We are therefore at a crossroads in the work we do as conflict professionals. We can take on the important challenge and

opportunity that enduring conflict presents, or we can continue to see ourselves primarily as agents of resolution. If we take on the challenge, we can increase our relevance and reach; if we do not, we will continue to limit ourselves to working at the margin of the most serious conflicts that people face.

NEW ROLES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROFESSIONALS

In *Beyond Neutrality: Confronting the Crisis in Conflict Resolution* (2004), I suggested that conflict professionals move beyond an exclusive focus on conflict resolution and look at how we can help disputants throughout the entire life cycle of a conflict—prevention, anticipation, management, escalation, de-escalation, resolution, and healing. I also called for an expansion in how we think about the roles we play in conflict, beyond our traditional focus on third parties. I identified three types of roles for us to consider fulfilling—*third-party roles*, *ally roles*, and *system roles*. In order to encourage this expanded view, I proposed that we think of ourselves as conflict specialists or conflict engagement professionals. Whatever specific names we use for identifying what we do, our basic challenge is to think more broadly about our purpose and our function.

I am now suggesting a further expansion of our roles in order to encompass the important work necessary to help people take a constructive approach to enduring and entrenched conflict. In this book I look at the specific skills and approaches that conflict professionals can bring to this challenge. I do this in the belief that we are well situated to take on this task. We have much of the necessary experience and many of the required skills and values, but we have to learn how to direct these qualities to the particular challenges that enduring conflict presents. In this book I discuss how we can understand these challenges, hone our skills, and refine our approach in order to address enduring conflict.

We have to start this process by taking on a new mission—we have to embrace the challenge of helping people *stay with conflict*.

STAYING WITH CONFLICT

When people stay with conflict, they engage in the ongoing struggles of their lives directly, clearly, respectfully, without avoidance, and with a full realization that these are issues that will be with them over time. They do not run away from conflict, resort to destructive escalation, or attempt to find a grand resolution for a conflict that is by its nature ongoing and deeply rooted. When business partners are willing to engage over time with their most divisive issues without vilifying one another or resorting to superficial remedies, they are staying with conflict. When a divorced couple confront each other about their different views on child rearing, advocate for their points of view, arrive at whatever intermediate agreements are possible, and do all this without attacking the integrity or personality of the other, they are staying with a conflict. When community activists address local government officials directly, repeatedly, and powerfully, but without denigrating the competence or commitment of those officials and with an awareness that their concerns are unlikely to be completely addressed soon, and maybe not ever, they are staying with conflict.

The need to stay with the most enduring and emblematic conflicts is more than simply an inevitable and unfortunate reality in people's lives. Staying with conflict is what allows all of us to lead life to the fullest. By staying engaged with the enduring conflicts in our lives we involve ourselves in core questions of identity, meaning, values, and personal and systems change. Staying with conflict requires courage, vision, resources, skills, and stamina, and all of us need help and support in this effort. Our satisfaction with our lives may be more determined by our ability to stay and evolve with enduring conflicts than by the success we have in resolving those conflicts.

We can see this on the many different levels at which enduring conflict is experienced. For example, the success of an intimate relationship is determined less by the parties' resolving conflicts than by their productively and continuously engaging with conflicts—be they about child-rearing practices, communication styles, time together and apart, or power in decision making. At work, the more people avoid potentially conflictual issues of responsibility, direction, decision making, and strategy, the more they disengage and alienate themselves from an important part of their experience. For this reason the union activist is generally much more engaged in his or her working life than is the cooperative but passive worker. On a larger stage, those who embrace the challenge of struggling for a better world—whether they see this in terms of social justice, environmental sustainability, economic strength, or family integrity—are likely to lead full and rich (if not always easy) lives.

Enduring Conflict

To face the challenge of staying with conflict, conflict professionals have to start by understanding and accepting the role of ongoing conflicts in people's lives. Whether we refer to these conflicts as ongoing, intractable, entrenched, long term, or enduring, we are basically talking about struggles that do not go away. They stay with people over time. If they die down in one form, they reappear in another. Disputants may resolve particular issues, but the essential conflict does not get resolved, it endures.

When I first moved to Boulder, Colorado, in 1972, the city was struggling with a variety of views on how to deal with traffic, transportation, open space, and affordable housing. Today, more than thirty-five years later, the community is still struggling with those same issues, and they continue to generate conflict. There have been all sorts of master plans, citizen task forces, public dialogues, and specific agreements over the years. I have facilitated several such efforts myself, and they have seemed to be

worthwhile endeavors. But the fundamental conflicts have not, likely cannot, and probably should not be completely resolved because they reflect the necessary and often healthy competition of a variety of values and the reality of limited resources.

Are all such conflicts irresolvable? Not necessarily. Some long-term, deeply entrenched conflicts do get resolved for all practical purposes (perhaps that is what is happening now in Northern Ireland) or they transform into virtually unrelated conflicts (an adolescent's power struggle with his parents may eventually transform itself into struggles with other authority figures, for example). But these conflicts are fully resolved only after their structural underpinnings undergo fundamental change, and this does not often happen through direct resolution efforts.

We can think of enduring conflicts as those struggles that are embedded in people's lives, relationships, and institutions because they stem from their most deeply held values, their sense of who they are, and the structure of the organizations and communities that they are part of. The circumstances that give rise to these conflicts might change, and personal development might eventually move a person to a place where an enduring conflict is less toxic or relevant to her experience. But enduring conflict normally stays with people over the long haul, and so the challenge is to learn how to stay with it.

What Staying with Conflict Looks Like

All of us face the challenge of dealing with ongoing conflict in our lives. At our best we handle enduring conflict effectively—that is, we learn to stay with it. But what does it look like when we stay with conflict in a constructive and effective way?

When we stay with conflict, we remain engaged with the core issues that we care about, we continue to work on the problems or concerns that are important to us, and we continue to relate to the people with whom we are in conflict. We also continue to communicate about the conflict and to advocate for what is

important to us, and we always try to deepen our understanding of how others think and feel about the issue. We develop the emotional and intellectual capacity to live with our enduring differences but also to continue to work on them, even though we know that the core conflict will likely continue for a long time. We look for areas where general progress can be made, but we do so with the full knowledge that progress does not mean final resolution.

For example, consider this conflict, one that is typical of many situations faced by teachers and parents working with special needs children:

John is an eleven-year-old with severe learning disabilities and behavioral problems. He has been diagnosed at various times with attention deficit disorder, Asperger's syndrome, and various developmental disabilities. John has been tested repeatedly, seen many specialists, and been provided with individual assistance from teacher's aides and a special education teacher. But despite these efforts, he is reading at barely second-grade level, has very poor social relations, and often seems extremely anxious or unhappy in the classroom.

His teachers and the school principal are recommending that John be referred to a different school, one with classes especially designed for children who cannot function in regular classroom settings. John's parents, Frank and Dorothy, want John to remain in the neighborhood school and in his regular classroom and have asked that a specially trained teacher work with him individually for half of each day and that a teacher's aide be assigned to him the rest of the time.

This is the latest manifestation of a conflict that has been going on for several years about the resources the school should commit to John's education, the appropriate educational setting for John, and whether John should be in a regular school at all. At times the relationship between the parents and school personnel has been

testy, volatile, and litigious. But at other times the parents and school staff have been able to talk about the concerns they share about John's falling further behind and becoming increasingly stigmatized and isolated.

Can Frank and Dorothy continue to negotiate with school personnel when they believe their child's needs have not been properly addressed? Can the school staff continue to remain flexible and open-minded about what to do for John, even while believing that no matter what the school offers it won't be enough? Can everyone remain optimistic about the possibility of making progress and the potential for working together when the conflict history does not support this? Can everyone approach each new negotiation in a constructive spirit, knowing that in one form or another, negotiation will have to occur repeatedly over the years, as John's needs change and innovations in treatment and special education programming are made? It is people's response to these kinds of challenges that determines whether a long-term conflict process can be productive or whether it will degenerate into pointless and harmful confrontation or, perhaps even worse, a pattern of avoiding the most significant issues that need to be addressed.

At some point taking legal action to argue for more resources for John might be helpful, but no matter the outcome of litigation, the essential conflict is likely to continue in some form. No single remedy will solve the problems faced by John and his parents or by the school as it struggles with resource allocation decisions. Instead, the parties will need to reengage frequently to set, review, and revise baseline standards and expectations and to modify their approach as John develops and as new information and ideas emerge. They will need to work together but also to struggle with each other as they learn to function with the stress and doubts characteristic of this situation of enduring conflict.

The critical point about this level of engagement with enduring conflict, whatever the context, is that the most important

result of disputants' best efforts is constructive interaction with incremental progress, rather than final resolution.

Challenges for Staying with Conflict

Staying with conflict requires us all, whether disputants or interveners, to communicate even when we believe communication will not produce solutions and even when little trust exists to facilitate communication; to be prepared to negotiate, even on issues we consider nonnegotiable; and to remain flexible about the ways we are willing to approach a conflict even as we remain true to our core values. It is especially challenging for disputants to do this when negotiating or communicating feels not only difficult but pointless because no end to the conflict is in sight.

We need to stay with conflict and meet these challenges on issues that range from those that can appear to be trivial (how we divide up housework) to fundamental societal issues (global warming, racism) and on any issue that represents something important about who we are or how we want to be in the world. We must try to do this with both optimism (believing that we can make progress on even the most serious conflict and the most painful personal differences) and realism (understanding that we can't find easy solutions to basic problems and that enduring conflicts do in fact endure).

Staying with conflict also requires that we gather and use power wisely and constructively. Many enduring conflicts play out against a background of serious power differentials and the misuse of power. The challenge is to respond to others' power and to use (and increase) our own without allowing a situation to devolve into a destructive exchange and without violating our values about human relations. This challenge is seen every time one party to a conflict ups the ante by threatening to use a particularly destructive alternative, whether it be legal action, a strike, public exposure, dissolving a business partnership, pulling out of a negotiation, or military force.

In order to advocate effectively for our interests, we sometimes have to be prepared to be less cooperative or collegial than we usually are, and we sometimes have to escalate a conflict in order to move toward a more constructive engagement. At most times, however, these tactics do more to sour the atmosphere and impede communication than they do to leverage others to behave differently. For example, in the special education situation discussed earlier, Frank and Dorothy likely have legal alternatives they could pursue, and school staff are certain to be aware of these. But repeatedly threatening to resort to those alternatives will not create the long-term leverage that will help Frank, Dorothy, and the school staff stay with this conflict effectively. In enduring and protracted conflicts, making threats to up the ante may feel like a necessary exercise of power, but it often fails to produce a powerful and constructive step forward—because the parties have to be able to continue to engage with one another in order to make any progress at all.

In essence, staying with conflict means engaging with the issues most important to who we are, what we value, whom we care about, and how we understand ourselves—and doing so without seeking quick fixes to serious problems or final resolutions to entrenched problems and without throwing our hands up and walking away or burying our heads in the sand. Staying with conflict calls on all involved to develop their capacity to fully engage in life, with all its perplexities and challenges.

THE ROLE OF THE CONFLICT SPECIALIST

We who have chosen the role of conflict specialist are not the only professionals with an important role to play in helping people stay with conflict—in their own ways, therapists, lawyers, police officers, community organizers, diplomats, organizational development specialists, and others face the same challenge. However, we may be especially well situated by experience and

skills to assist people involved in long-term conflict to develop the capacity and outlook that can sustain them and guide them in a more constructive direction. Indeed, staying with conflict builds on many of the same skills and tools that we use in a resolution model and involves challenges we have already faced. For example:

- When we encourage government officials to open up a public hearing to genuine dialogue and disputation, rather than sticking to a pro forma input process, we are working to help them face the reality of a conflict and consider the consequences of avoidance, and we are encouraging a genuine effort to bring different voices to the discussion and to frame a conflict more authentically.
- When we work with divorcing parents with profoundly different beliefs about religion, discipline, and education in order to help them maintain a clear sense of their own values but also be open to a variety of ways of honoring those values and when we help them to find an authentic voice, and to reexamine their approach and beliefs, our goal is to help them stay with conflict.
- When we work with highly conflicted workplaces where there is a history of mistrust between management and workers, we often find it essential to assist in the development of effective channels of communication, coach individuals to use their power effectively and wisely, work on agreements when appropriate, and find appropriate arenas for interaction.
- When we work with child protection disputes, with ethnic conflicts, or in restorative justice programs, we not only assist in developing an immediate or short-term solution but we also ask people to consider how to

develop the resources and approaches that will sustain them over time, often paying special attention to safety considerations.

These are interventions that we may apply to any conflict, but they are especially valuable in relationship to ongoing and enduring conflicts. When we mediate a plan that guides disputants in communicating around the inevitability of future conflict and when we facilitate dialogues between opposing sides in a long-term conflict, part of what we are doing is helping people stay with conflict. However, this kind of help is usually a tacit or unrecognized purpose. We don't explicitly recognize, embrace, and articulate this element of our efforts as part of our core purpose. Nor do we develop the specific strategies and approaches that would enable us to more knowingly and effectively pursue this goal.

This means that the challenge of helping people to stay with conflict requires us to take on a significantly new role. Before we can apply our skills and experience to this difficult challenge, we need to break through the limits we place on ourselves with our current assumptions about our role and with the conflict narrative we promote. We have to develop a new frame of reference for our goals in conflict and for the ways we can achieve those goals. We also need to develop and hone tools specifically oriented to helping people deal with enduring conflict.

From both a personal and a business perspective it may sometimes appear far more attractive and indeed far simpler to emphasize our role in the prevention or resolution of conflict rather than our role in creating productive engagement in conflict. But if we are committed to addressing the most important challenges that conflicts present and if we want to open up significant avenues for our work, then we will have to take on the most difficult and daunting elements of conflict, not just those that are most rapidly and easily addressed and encapsulated. This requires us to develop

additional skills and tools and further avenues of service. How we can do this is the subject of this book.

The first requirement of any effective—and durable—approach to conflict is clarity about purpose, goal, and role. I am proposing that conflict specialists adopt a new overall goal: assisting disputants to develop a constructive approach to engaging in enduring conflict. In the next chapter I look at what this new goal means and its implications for the way conflict specialists approach their work.