

Staying with Conflict

*The Challenge of Engagement in
the Face of Enduring Disputes*

CADRE National Symposium

October 26, 2011

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Conflict flows from life. ... Rather than seeing conflict as a threat, we can understand it as providing opportunities to grow and to increase our understanding of ourselves, of others, of our social structures. Conflicts in relationships at all levels are the way life helps us to stop, assess, and take notice. One way to truly know our humanness is to recognize the gift of conflict in our lives.

—John Paul Lederach



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"I admire Nesby because his agendas are never hidden."

Now, just to review, at the last faculty meeting we established that Marcia hates Fred, Fred hates Carol and Marcia, Carol really can't stand Larry, Larry despises me, and I hate Larry, Marcia, Fred and Penny.



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Think About:

- A resource room teacher faces obstruction from a classroom teacher whenever children are scheduled in the resource room.
- A school board member challenges special ed funding, claiming it is a waste of taxpayer money
- Parents of an autistic child threaten to sue the school district (each year) unless their child is provided with....

Or Think About

- Dysfunctional business partners (or a faculty department)
- Alienated adult siblings and their dependent parent
- A divorced couple who have been fighting for 10 years
- Your cranky next door neighbor (if you have one)
- Global Warming
- Israel and Palestine
- The Problem of Violence Against Civilians (otherwise know as the War on Terror)
- Your Most Nagging Conflicts

Three Models Of Conflict

- Resolution
- Transformation
- Engagement

Aspects of Conflict

- Latent
- Trivial
- Transient
- Representative
- Stubborn
- Enduring

Characteristics of Enduring Conflict

- Deeply Rooted
- Identity Based
- Value Driven
- Embedded in Structure
- Systemic and Complex

Dilemmas of Enduring Conflict

From Global Warming to Warring Parents

- No Comprehensive Solution Will Solve the Problem but the problem must be addressed
- Struggle is necessary, cooperation is essential
- Decisions must be made in condition of profound uncertainty
- Need to live with ambiguity but find the energy that derives from clarity

Six Steps to Staying With Conflict

- Focus on Engagement/Confront Avoidance
- Frame for the long term
- Establish Durable Patterns of Communication
- Use Power with a Long Term Focus
- Find Agreements where Appropriate but Keep them in Perspective
- Help Sustain People Through Conflict

Changing Our Narrative

From:

- Prevention
- Management
- Resolution

To:

- Anticipation
- Support
- Engagement

Ask a Different Question

- Instead of asking:

“What can we do to resolve or de-escalate this conflict?”

- Ask

“How can we help people prepare to engage with this issue over time?”

Engaging Conflict— Confronting Avoidance

Patterns of Avoidance

- Denial—Minimization
- Misdirection
- Escalation
- Problem Solving

Framing for The Long Term

“People come to me and ask for sole custody all the time. They usually want to know how to cut the other parent out of any significant parenting role. I say them to them, ‘you gotta be kidding? Do you know what it’s like to raise children alone? Beware what you ask for, you just might get it. You are going to want all the help you can get. We just have to make sure you don’t drive yourselves or the kids crazy in the process.’”

“I have been thinking until now about how unfair this whole situation is for me, and how badly I have been treated. I am not allowed to see my girl hardly ever, and everyone treats me like I am a bad person. I have felt that I had no rights or power at all. But I realized last night that I do still have some power here. I have the power to do what is best for my baby. We need to talk about what has happened to her and what should happen to her, not what has happened to me.”

Overall Power Goal

Encouraging a

- Constructive
- Reciprocal
- Sustainable

Pattern of Power

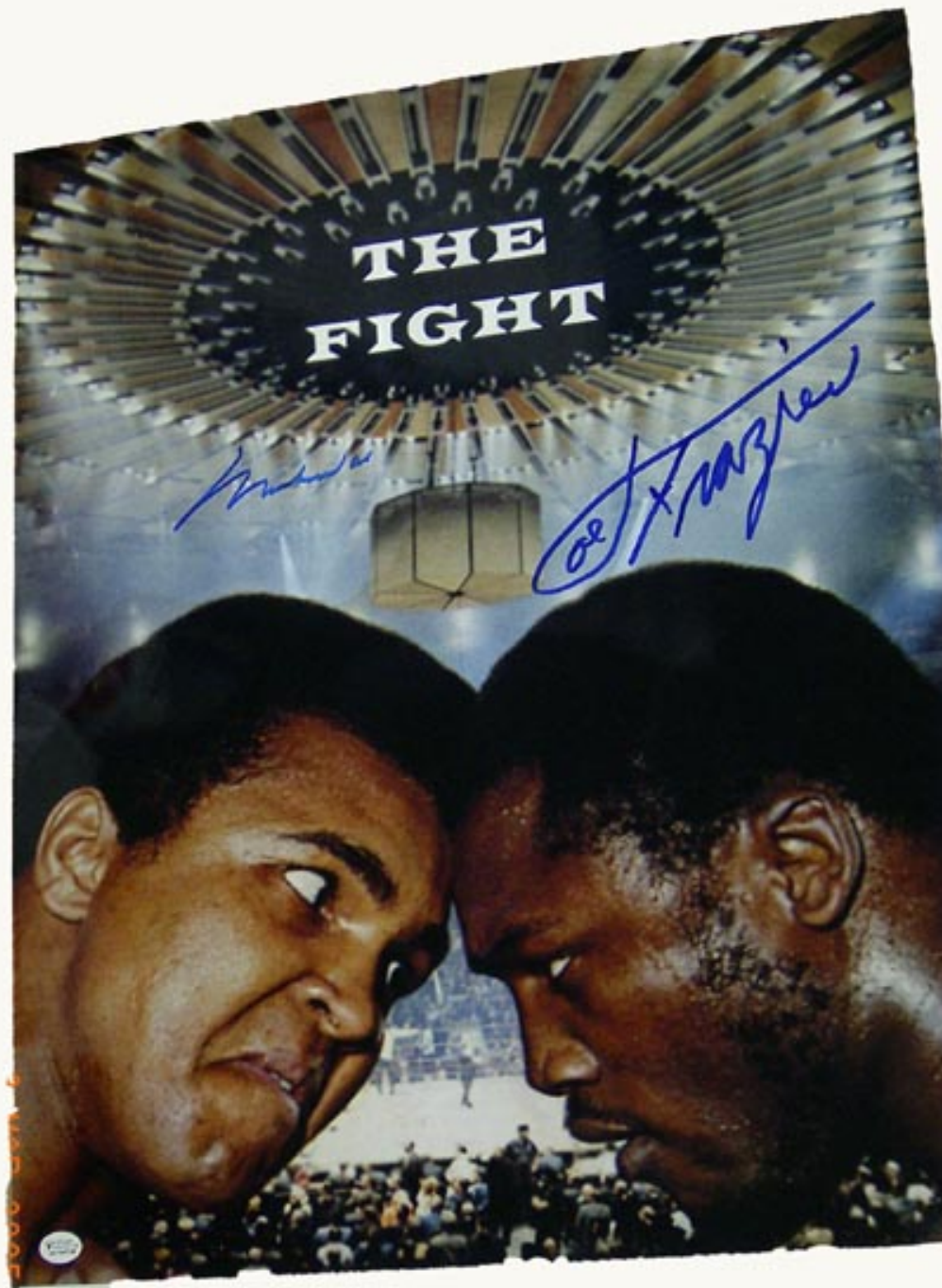
Agreements in Enduring Conflicts

- Agreements Play an Important Role—but
- Not the Final Role
- Agreements are “The Excuse to Do the Real Work
- We Use Agreements to Help People Stay With Conflict

Wise agreements solve problems, but in the case of enduring conflict, their more important function is often that they also allow conflict to proceed in as constructive a way as possible.

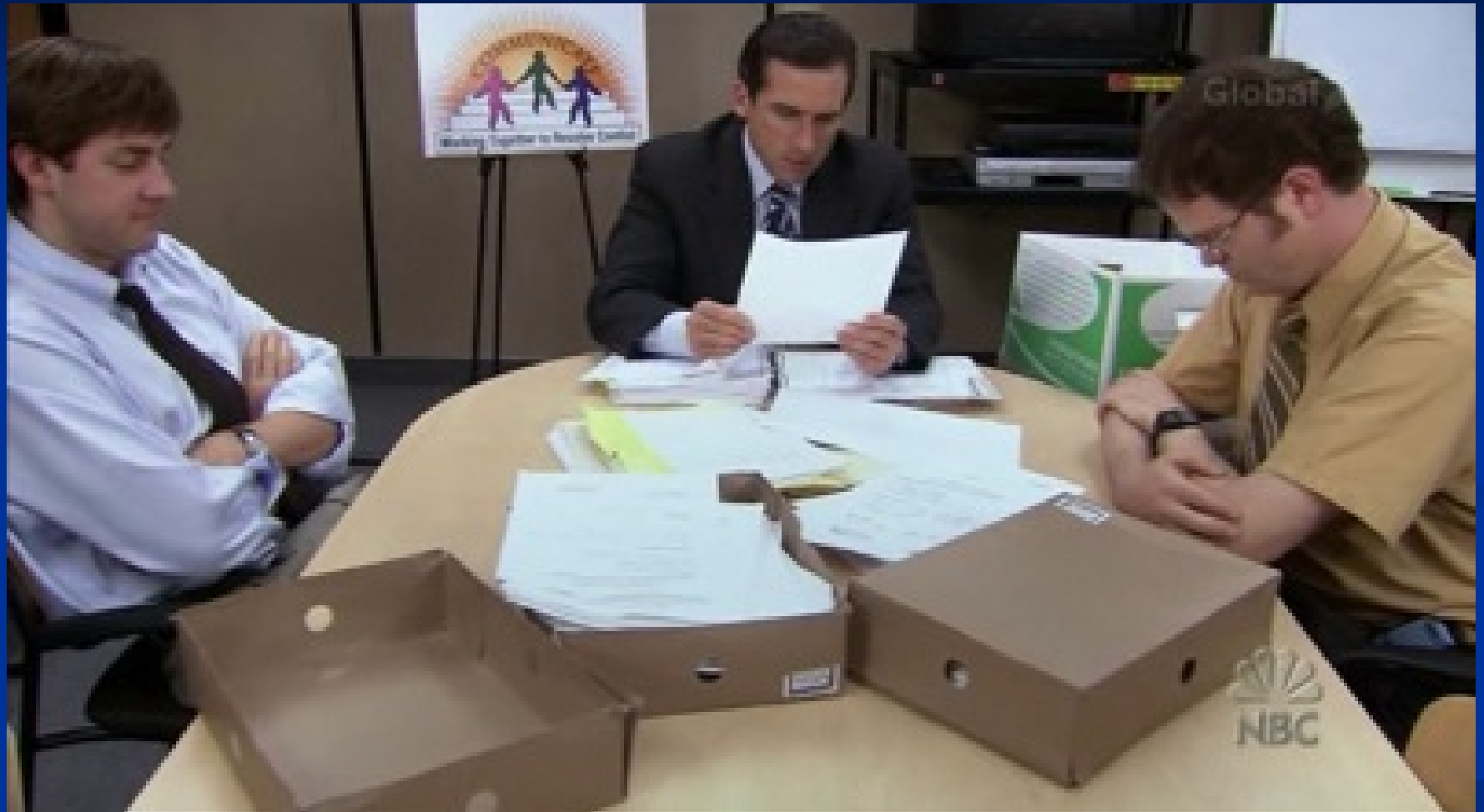
Our Defining Purpose Could Be

- Conflict Resolution
- Conflict Transformation
- Conflict Management
- Conflict Prevention
- Healing from Conflict
- Collaborative Decision Making
- Or ???





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Conflict Engagement

Relevant Books by Bernie Mayer

- Staying With Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes. Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2009
- Beyond Neutrality: Confronting the Crisis in Conflict Resolution. Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2004
- The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution, Jossey-Bass/Wiley 2000 (2nd edition will be out in 2012)