

Preface

Why should we commit to resolve disputes? Maybe we need to deepen them?

Environmental activist

Participants in a project I was assisting with were having doubts about advocating consensus-based solutions to environmental conflicts. As part of the Common Sense Initiative, sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in the mid-1990s, conflict specialists and a variety of others were working to produce a manual for industry, government, workers, environmentalists, and citizen groups about participation in collaborative processes, but a number of the participants were not buying the premise.

After considerable discussion, participants came up with the term *constructive engagement*, and the resultant *Constructive Engagement Resource Guide* (Mayer, Ghais, and McKay, 1999) details criteria for deciding whether a collaborative effort makes sense and how best to engage in one if it does. This was not the abstract formulation of conflict specialists, but the best take of experienced environmentalists, community activists, industry leaders, and government officials on how to characterize their aims for dealing with what they understood to be long-term conflicts.

They were onto something and my colleagues and I needed to listen.

As usual it was not the experts who broke new ground but the participants in conflict, who knew what they needed. According to their understanding, they did not necessarily need conflict specialists to help them resolve their disputes—because many of their conflicts were either not ripe for resolution or had to be understood in the context of deeper and further-reaching struggles. Instead, they wanted the conflict experts to understand the essence of what people in each conflict need and then to figure out how to meet those needs.

Given their inclination, values, and skill set, most conflict professionals are oriented to respecting client autonomy and leadership. But we also have to carve out our own identity and develop a market niche to make a living. And we are bound by the structures of our own practice. As a result we have not really embraced the concept of constructive engagement. Instead, we have gravitated toward conflict resolution as our defining goal. When resolution is the phase of conflict that parties need to address, we are in business. But this is a very limited and limiting view of what disputants want and need in the broad range of conflicts that they face in their lives. As a result our efforts have been more constricted than they need to be.

I have written previously about our need to move beyond identifying our work solely with third-party efforts to resolve conflicts (Mayer, 2004). But as I have considered the heart of what people struggle with in conflict, I have come to believe there is an additional dimension to our challenge. The most significant conflicts people face are the enduring ones—those struggles that are long lasting and for which a resolution is either irrelevant or is just one in a series of partial goals in service of a long-term endeavor.

Everyone knows that not all conflicts get resolved. Many of the conflicts that people experience today in their families, workplaces, and communities have probably been present in some form

or another for a long time and are likely to continue for many years. But we in the conflict intervention field often act as if resolution is our entire purpose and focus. What we overlook is that there is work to be done—constructive, hopeful, and valuable work—in dealing with conflicts that are ongoing and likely to be around for a long time.

As I look back at the most challenging and meaningful work that my colleagues and I have been part of, almost all of it has been about assisting in some way with enduring conflict. Our role may have been specific and time limited, but the thrust of our efforts was to help people make progress in the ways they engaged in the long, deep, and intensely meaningful conflicts they faced. This has been true no matter what the system, focus, or context of the conflict—interpersonal, group, organizational, communal, societal, or cross-cultural.

Despite the comparatively narrow focus and self-definition that we conflict specialists have generally adopted, I am convinced that we have a great deal to offer participants in enduring disputes if we can broaden that focus and definition. We need to start by revising our sense of purpose. As articulated by the participants in the Common Sense Initiative resource manual project, our overriding goal ought to be to promote a constructive approach to engagement in the significant issues that disputants face, and very often that means working on enduring conflicts.

And just what does *constructive engagement* imply? Constructive engagement requires disputants to accept the conflicts in their lives with courage, optimism, realism, and determination. It means learning to engage with both the conflict and the other disputants with respect for each person's humanity, if not his or her behavior or beliefs. It means articulating the nature of the conflict in a way that opens the door to communication and understanding rather than slamming it shut. It means developing durable avenues of communication that will survive the ups and downs of a long-term conflict. Constructive engagement requires using one's power

and responding to others' use of power wisely—upping the level of conflict when necessary but doing so in a way that promotes desired behavior rather than becoming destructive. It means negotiating and problem solving within the context of the long-term challenge, and it means developing support systems that can sustain and energize individuals throughout a conflict.

When disputants avoid important issues, polarize problems, look for quick fixes to long-term issues, cut off all intentional communication or communicate to shut others down, use power or respond to power with the intention of hurting others or beating them into submission, they are not engaging constructively. When they escalate their use of power way beyond what is necessary to encourage constructive behavior, sacrifice important concerns to avoid unpleasant or even dangerous interactions, or alternate between obsessing about a conflict and denying its existence, they are not engaging constructively.

Everyone, no matter how sophisticated he or she is about conflict dynamics and communication, struggles with maintaining a constructive approach to long-term conflicts. Everyone needs help with this critical challenge, and conflict specialists are one important resource. But to offer this help we have to recognize the nature of the challenge—which is at its core about assisting people in finding a way to stay engaged and committed to working on problems that are going to be around for the foreseeable future.

When faced with enduring conflict, we need to ask a new question. Instead of asking, “What can we do to resolve or de-escalate this conflict?” we need to ask, “How can we help people prepare to engage with this issue over time?” As we seek to answer this new question, our focus will begin to change and significant new avenues of intervention will become apparent. The basic challenge is strategic—it is the broad approach to the conflict that has to be altered. There are no simple steps or tactics that can change the whole dynamic, but the overall way in which parties approach the conflict can make a big difference in how constructive or

destructive the conflict process is for them. This means that we have to start by understanding the nature of enduring conflict, and especially what makes it enduring. Once we achieve that understanding, I believe we have six strategic challenges:

1. To confront the pervasive and destructive power of conflict avoidance
2. To work with disputants to construct conflict narratives that encourage an effective approach to long-term disputes
3. To assist in developing durable avenues of communication
4. To help disputants use power and respond to power wisely
5. To understand and recognize the proper role of agreements within the context of long-term conflict
6. To encourage the development of support systems that can sustain disputants over time

In this book, I look at the nature of each of these challenges and the strategic considerations that conflict specialists need to employ in meeting them. I examine this from the perspective of the three primary roles that conflict professionals play—as conflict allies, third parties, and system interveners. The tools that the conflict intervention field has developed over many years are a rich resource for helping with enduring conflicts. We have developed approaches for dealing with poor communication, the destructive use of power, polarizing approaches to negotiation, cultural variations in approaches to conflict, and destructive group dynamics. We have honed our skills as mediators, coaches, advocates, negotiators, dispute system designers, and conflict trainers. We have learned a great deal about the nature of conflict, communication, collaboration, and decision making. And we have certainly found ourselves in the middle of many ongoing, enduring disputes. This is a firm foundation upon which we can build effective approaches to dealing with long-term conflict.

I believe that good practice derives from a clear understanding of the nature of the challenge and the essence of the intervention that is needed. Although there are many specific intervention tools that we can use (and I will discuss a number of these), the essential challenge is to reorient our thinking and the strategic approach we take. That is the focus of this book.

HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

For many years as a conflict intervention trainer, I said that the growth of individuals, communities, organizations, and societies is dependent on two variables in the conflict equation, knowing how and when to initiate a conflict or raise it to a higher level of intensity on the one hand and knowing how to resolve conflict wisely and thoroughly on the other. I have now come to believe there is a critical third variable as well, knowing how to stay with conflict over time—steadfastly, effectively, and responsibly. The experiences I have had over the past thirty and more years as a conflict practitioner and student of conflict and conflict intervention (and also my earlier work in mental health, child welfare, and substance abuse treatment and as a social activist) have led me to this conclusion and have informed the concepts and approaches described in this book.

In the first chapter I discuss the essential challenge and opportunities that enduring conflict presents and what it will take for conflict specialists to address these. In Chapter Two I start with a discussion of how we can help disputants understand the nature of enduring conflict and what it takes to engage constructively over time. I also examine the reasons why people need enduring conflict, and I introduce the concept of creative nonresolution. In the subsequent chapters I offer specific approaches to helping people stay with conflict.

In Chapter Three I discuss what may be the biggest obstacle to constructive engagement—conflict avoidance. Specifically, I look

at why and how people avoid conflict and how we can help them deal with their avoidant tendencies. I also consider what to do when the wisest course may be to avoid a dangerous conflict. In Chapter Four I discuss how we can help disputants frame an enduring conflict constructively, which usually means altering the conflict narrative.

Chapter Five focuses on communication, with an emphasis on establishing durable approaches to communication and responding over time to dysfunctional patterns of communication. Chapter Six deals with power and escalation. Power differentials, the inappropriate and oppressive use of power, and the desire to maintain power are key factors in perpetuating conflict. Helping people learn how to develop constructive sources and applications of power and how to respond to the power of others is often the key to helping them stay with conflict. This sometimes requires that we guide people in escalating a conflict appropriately.

Chapter Seven focuses on the role of negotiation and agreements in enduring conflict. Agreements are viewed as tools for ongoing constructive conflict engagement rather than as the end point of a conflict process. Chapter Eight takes on the question of how people can sustain themselves over the long haul in an enduring conflict. I discuss how to help people develop the substantive and emotional resources necessary to stay with conflict, and then I consider how we can help disputants to encapsulate conflict so that they do not avoid it but they do not allow it to take over their lives either.

Chapter Nine looks in more detail at the different roles that conflict specialists can play in assisting disputants engaged in enduring conflict. I revisit our sense of our purpose and look specifically at the relationships among conflict resolution, transformation, and engagement. I then look at how conflict specialists can work in enduring disputes as third parties, allies, and system interveners. I also consider the challenge of marketing this approach. The Epilogue revisits the fundamental challenge of enduring

conflict, summarizes the essential approach I am advocating, and ends with a consideration of the dynamic nature and potential of enduring conflict.

Throughout I rely on examples drawn from a broad variety of conflicts from interpersonal to international. I do this in the belief that the challenge presented by enduring conflict and the skills that staying with conflict requires are not specific to one type or arena of conflict and that the lessons we learn from one area can be adapted and applied to other circumstances.

Note also that I have changed the specifics of some of these case examples considerably, and in a few instances I have combined several cases into one, both to protect confidentiality and to consolidate the presentation. Although the specific facts have been altered, the dynamics and essential stories have not. In examples drawn from events that were open to public and media participation (for example, the Alaska Wolf Summit), I have tried to present what occurred as accurately as possible.

I have tried to maintain a focus on the conflict field, the role of conflict specialists, and the goal of conflict engagement. I have avoided referring to the field of *conflict resolution* or *alternative dispute resolution*. I believe that one way to begin to change our sense of purpose is to change the way we refer to who we are and what we do. When we fall into identifying our role as agents of conflict resolution and our approach as third-party intervention, we do not adequately describe our potential and often our practice, and we limit the scope of our services. I also focus on conflicts that are *enduring*, *ongoing*, or *long term* rather than ones that are *intractable* or *irresolvable*, because I think the latter terms suggest that conflict duration is itself a problem or that progress is hopeless. I believe that enduring disputes are important and necessary expressions of individuals' struggles as social beings and that their enduring nature is not itself the problem.

I have addressed this book specifically to conflict specialists. But the ideas and approaches are relevant to anyone who is faced with an enduring conflict, which of course means everyone. The challenge of staying with conflict is a fundamental one, and I hope that discussing how we can help others with this challenge will also help us consider how we can face it for ourselves.

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Staying with Conflict

