

THE  
**DYNAMICS**  
OF  
CONFLICT

RESOLUTION

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

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**Bernard Mayer**







# **The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution**



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# Preface

## Thinking About Conflict and Its Resolution

Understanding conflict is basic to its resolution. If we seek to end a conflict, we must start by understanding its nature. What makes a successful peacemaker or conflict resolver is not a set of processes, methodologies, or tactics; it is a way of thinking, a set of values, an array of analytical and interpersonal skills, and a clear focus.

The purpose of this book is to present a set of practical ideas to assist people to understand conflict and then to resolve it. Mediators and other conflict resolvers do not operate primarily in the world of theory but neither do they rely solely on specific procedures or intervention tools. Instead, effective conflict resolvers employ a combination of personal skills, substantive knowledge, and practical concepts. These concepts provide the link between theory and practice. It is this link that allows professions to develop out of crafts, specific experiences to inform general practice, and reflective practitioners to mature. The field of conflict resolution is at a stage of development that requires a focus on these frameworks.

In this book I focus on how conflict resolvers can productively think about conflict and resolution, rather than on what they should do. I present ideas that can assist people to be effective as negotiators, facilitators, mediators, and communicators. These concepts must be informed by our practical experiences and our values, but in turn they very much influence what we actually do when we are in conflict situations. I have drawn them from over two decades of experience as a mediator, facilitator, conflict resolution trainer, and dispute systems designer. In articulating the practical concepts I use in my work, I have found the process of self-reflection to be critical. I believe that our most creative moments as practical theorists come when we attempt to integrate

the explanations of conflict and conflict resolution to which we are attracted with observations about what we actually do in real-life situations.

The experience I have had as a conflict resolution trainer has both crystallized my focus on practical concepts and convinced me of those concepts' importance in the development of the field. I have repeatedly observed people coming to seminars wanting to learn how to "do" mediation or facilitation or negotiation. The challenge has been to refocus them on how to *think* about conflict and its resolution in creative ways and how to put these *thoughts* into practice in the many different situations they face. When my colleagues and I succeed in helping people develop deeper ways of thinking about conflict resolution, we contribute to a far more important change in the way they do things than we do when we simply teach them processes or steps for handling conflict.

In this book I attempt to present in practical terms the concepts my colleagues and I use when facing different conflict situations and to provide practical examples of the ways these concepts apply across many different settings. I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work in a great variety of settings and with many different kinds of conflict, and I have tried to use the entire range of these experiences to illustrate these concepts. This does not mean that identical approaches should be taken to different types of conflict or that profound differences in the underlying structures of these conflicts do not exist. But I believe that if one discerns a dynamic that is operative in, for example, both international conflict and family conflict, there is an important lesson to learn from the very breadth of its relevance. The examples I use have therefore been drawn from my work with interpersonal, community, organizational, labor management, environmental, public policy, and international disputes. I also discuss conflicts that have been in the news.

I have approached this book with a strong belief in the value of collaborative problem solving, and my primary (although by no means exclusive) experience has been as a third-party neutral. My belief in the power and ability of people to solve their own conflicts is reflected throughout. But this is not primarily a book about collaborative negotiation, mediation, or dispute system design. Negotiation and mediation are basic life skills in my view, and no

consideration of conflict resolution can be complete without a discussion of them. But I present them in the context of a broader consideration of conflict and resolution processes.

When I was first introduced to conflict resolution and mediation, I felt that two important strands of my life were suddenly brought together in a remarkable way. My first professional work was in child welfare and mental health. I worked as a psychotherapist and administrator in residential treatment centers for children, mental health centers, drug abuse treatment programs, and private practice. But I also came of age during the 1960s and was very active in a variety of movements for peace and social justice. The war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement in particular were major forces in my development. Work in the field of conflict resolution seemed to pull these different parts of my life together, the part that was interested in providing services to people in various stages of crisis and the part that was committed to social change.

Conflict resolution still has these twin thrusts, as a service to people who need assistance and as a force for social change, but it is easy to lose sight of them in the business of building a respected field of practice. In its earlier days it was easy to think of conflict resolution as a social movement, and to focus on demonstrating its relevance and effectiveness, creating new applications, and promoting a common set of practice principles and procedures. Now that the field is more accepted and institutionalized, it is easy to lose sight of the foundational values of our work. I believe this work continues to be about helping people keep control of their lives, even when in crisis, and about creating more powerful and democratic ways of dealing with important questions of social justice and peace. As we practitioners move from the initial excitement of creating a new field of practice to the less dramatic but equally important challenge of deepening the field's foundation and institutional structure, it is crucial that we retain a clear view of the core values of our work.

I have tried here to avoid being overly prescriptive about what conflict resolvers should *do* and instead have tried to concentrate on what the useful ways are of *thinking* about conflict and its resolution. I do not put these ideas forward as *the* right conceptual frameworks but rather as ways that I have found to be useful and

poignant as I have worked as a conflict resolver and teacher. I hope that this will stimulate readers to deepen their own thinking or to put forward their own ideas, sometimes, perhaps, by way of disagreeing with mine.

I do not believe any of us can hold all these concepts in our heads as we engage in the day-to-day, hour-to-hour work of resolving conflicts. But I hope that some of these ideas will resonate with each reader and that he or she will take these into his or her practice. Other ideas may be useful as readers reflect on their own experiences and try to learn from them. Still others may not resonate at all and may either be rejected or, more likely, forgotten.

I do not try to present a single unified theory of conflict resolution, although I believe the concepts I present to be internally consistent. In fact, I am suspicious of such global theories because I think they too easily become straightjackets or dogmas. Instead, I lay the ideas out as a series of conceptual tools that build upon each other but also stand on their own. However, the following themes do recur because they are basic to how I think.

Conflict resolution is an interactive and dynamic process. No one approach is always appropriate or effective, and no one theory has a lock on how to understand conflict. At the heart of effective resolution is a set of constructive attitudes and good communication skills. Repeatedly, I find our attitudes toward conflict and communication determine the effectiveness of what we do. The art of conflict resolution lies in discovering the level at which a conflict is really operative, and the challenge is to find a way of working at that level. We can err by going too deep or staying too shallow. Although conflict resolution is not itself a movement for social justice, the values that guide us cannot be separated from a commitment to justice and peace. Unless our ways of understanding conflict and working toward resolution are consistent with such values, we will not be very effective. I believe conflict can be a constructive force in people's lives, and I believe it is essential to get beyond blame and helplessness if we are to be effective conflict resolvers. Finally, I believe that conflict resolution works best and operates most in keeping with its values when it helps people to solve their own conflicts in a collaborative, powerful, and just way. These beliefs are reflected in every chapter of this book.

## **Audience**

I have written this book specifically for people involved in conflict resolution as a field of practice—mediators, facilitators, organizational consultants, trainers, public involvement specialists, community organizers, family therapists, and professional negotiators. But I have also tried to create a book that is accessible to others interested in conflict resolution. I do not assume a broad familiarity with conflict resolution literature or practice, and in setting the context for developing an expanded conceptual framework, I take the time to describe some fairly basic principles. I also try to focus on concepts that apply generically across different arenas of conflict and resolution. Though I have been profoundly influenced by many different thinkers over the years, this book is not a literature review. Rather, it is more about the practical concepts that have emerged from my work and that I have found to be powerful aids in my practice and teaching. Where I have specifically drawn on the ideas of others, I have of course cited their work.

## **Overview of the Contents**

This book comprises two major parts. The four chapters in the first part present concepts that are helpful in understanding the process of conflict. Chapter One describes the nature of conflict—in particular, the different dimensions along which conflict occurs, the sources of conflict, what motivates people's participation in conflict, and the interaction between conflict as a means of expression and conflict as an attempt to achieve a particular outcome. Chapter Two focuses on the ways in which people engage in or avoid conflict and on the differences in how they try to get their needs met. It also presents a set of variables that can be used to understand people's conflict behavior. Chapter Three discusses the different types of power that people bring to bear in conflict and the sources of that power, and then describes the different ways in which power is applied in conflict. A distinction is made between integrative and distributive power, and the chapter concludes with a discussion of the relationship between power issues and social

justice in conflict resolution. Chapter Four considers the important relationship between conflict and culture—in particular, the continuities and differences in how various aspects of conflict are handled by different cultures. Rather than focus simply on cultural obstacles, this chapter questions how people from different cultures transcend cultural barriers and differences when engaging in a conflict resolution process.

The chapters in Part Two discuss the resolution process. Chapter Five discusses the nature of resolution and asks what constitutes a genuine resolution of a conflict. It presents a model of the dimensions of resolution and examines the different purposes of various approaches to conflict resolution. It poses the key challenge that conflict resolvers face—how to find the right level of depth at which to pursue the resolution of conflict. Chapter Six examines the heart of conflict resolution—communication. It presents a way of understanding what constitutes effective communication, including listening, speaking with power, and framing conflicts in constructive yet poignant ways. It also considers how communication tools can be used to help people change the fundamental way in which they understand a conflict.

Chapter Seven looks at the negotiation process and examines the contradictory pulls that most negotiators face. It outlines the dimensions of negotiation and how negotiators function along these dimensions, and concludes with a detailed discussion of the different ways in which negotiators reach agreements and closure. Chapter Eight looks at the nature of impasse in conflict and presents a way of understanding impasse as a necessary and often constructive aspect of the resolution process. Chapter Nine discusses the essential contribution of mediation to the resolution process. It discusses the heart of what mediators bring to the table that helps alter the nature of a conflict interaction, and what mediators actually do to affect the course of a conflict. This chapter also discusses the contradictions between what mediators think about their role and what disputants want from a mediator.

Chapter Ten looks at the continuum of approaches to conflict resolution and at what each element on that continuum offers. In particular, it discusses prevention, procedural assistance, substantive assistance, reconciliation processes, decision-making services,



and design and linkage procedures. Chapter Eleven considers the value base of conflict resolvers. It discusses these values in terms of how conflict is handled; how conflict resolution efforts fit into more general values about peace, democracy, and social justice; and the personal impact that conflict resolution as a field has on conflict resolvers.

It has been an exciting journey for me over my years of practice to arrive at the ideas discussed in these chapters and to commit to them by articulating them in writing. But it is also clear to me that this is a snapshot of a particular time in an ongoing process of discovery that I am on and that we are all on. I hope that by my sharing this snapshot with you, your journey will be enriched. Mine certainly has been.

## **Acknowledgments**

It is a daunting task to acknowledge all the people who have helped me directly and indirectly with this book. Over the years, my ideas have of course been very much influenced by other writers and practitioners in the field and especially by my colleagues at CDR Associates of Boulder, Colorado, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary of conflict resolution practice and education just as I started this project. Through these years of a long and fulfilling professional relationship, I have felt as though I have been in an ongoing seminar with some of the most creative and able practitioners of conflict resolution anywhere. Where CDR's influence stops and my ideas begin is impossible to discern.

All my colleagues at CDR have been my teachers, my friends, and my supporters. I want to particularly thank my wonderful partners, whose dedication and capability have been a source of inspiration for twenty years: Judy Mares-Dixon, Mary Margaret Golten, Michael Hughes, Christopher Moore, Louise Smart, and Susan Wildau. In addition to allowing me to take the time to write this book, they have all reviewed parts of this manuscript and given me honest and valuable feedback. Most of my ideas have been developed in dialogue with them. Many other people have also reviewed parts of this book and provided terrific insights and suggestions: Peter Adler, Jonathan Bartsch, Daniel Bowling, Mark Gerzon,

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Boulder, Colorado  
February 2000

BERNARD MAYER

# **The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution**



*Part One*

**Conflict**



## **| The Nature of Conflict**

We all are of two minds about conflict. We say that conflict is natural, inevitable, necessary, and normal, and that the problem is not the existence of conflict but how we handle it. But we are also loath to admit that we are in the midst of conflict. Parents assure their children that the ferocious argument the parents are having is not a conflict, just a “discussion.” Organizations will hire facilitators to guide them in strategic planning, goal setting, quality circles, team building, and all manner of training, but they shy away from asking for help with internal conflicts. Somehow, to say that we are in conflict is to admit a failure and to acknowledge the existence of a situation we consider hopeless.

This ambivalence about conflict is rooted in the same primary challenge conflict resolvers face—coming to terms with the nature of conflict. As conflict resolvers, we may think of conflict on many different levels. How we view conflict will largely determine our attitude and approach to dealing with it. Conflict may be viewed as a feeling, a disagreement, a real or perceived incompatibility of interests, inconsistent worldviews, or a set of behaviors. If we are to be effective in handling conflict, we must start with an understanding of its nature. We need tools that help us separate out the many complex interactions that make up a conflict, that help us understand the roots of conflict, and that give us a reasonable handle on the forces that motivate the behavior of all participants, including ourselves.

Whether we are aware of them or not, we all enter conflict with certain assumptions about its nature. Sometimes these assumptions are very helpful to us, but at other times they are blinders that limit

our ability to understand what lies behind a conflict and what alternatives exist for dealing with it. We need frameworks that expand our thinking, that challenge our assumptions, and that are practical and readily usable. As we develop our ability to understand conflict in a deeper and more powerful way, we enhance our ability to handle it effectively and in accordance with our deepest values about building peace. However, in order to simplify the task of handling complex conflicts, we need to complicate our thinking about conflict itself. This is an ongoing challenge for everyone concerned with conflict and its resolution.

A framework for understanding conflict is an organizing lens that brings a conflict into better focus. There are many 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. Moreover, the lenses presented in this chapter are not equally applicable to all conflicts. Seldom would we apply all of them at the same time to the same situation. Nevertheless, together they provide a set of concepts that can help us understand the nature of conflict and the dynamics of how conflict unfolds.

## **What Is Conflict?**

Conflict may be viewed as occurring along cognitive (perception), emotional (feeling), and behavioral (action) dimensions. This three-dimensional perspective can help us understand the complexities of conflict and why a conflict sometimes seems to proceed in contradictory directions.

### **Conflict as Perception**

As a set of perceptions, conflict is a belief or understanding that one's own needs, interests, wants, or values are incompatible with someone else's. There are both objective and subjective elements to this cognitive dimension. If I want to develop a tract of land into a shopping center, and you want to preserve it as open space, then there is an objective incompatibility in our wants. If I believe that the way you desire to guide our son's educational development is incompatible with my philosophy of parenting, then there is at least a significant subjective component. What if only one of us



believes an incompatibility to exist, are we still in conflict? As a practical matter, I find it useful to think of conflict as existing if at least one person believes it to exist. If I believe us to have incompatible interests, and act accordingly, then I am engaging you in a conflict process whether you share this perception or not.

### Conflict as Feeling

Conflict also involves an emotional reaction to a situation or interaction that signals a disagreement of some kind. The emotions felt might be fear, sadness, bitterness, anger, or hopelessness, or some amalgam of these. If we experience these feelings in regard to another person or situation, we feel that we are in conflict—and therefore we are. As a mediator, I have sometimes seen people behave as if they were in great disagreement over profound issues, yet I have not been able to ascertain exactly what they disagreed about. Nonetheless, they were in conflict because they felt they were. And in conflicts, it does not take two to tango. Often a conflict exists because one person feels in conflict with another, even though those feelings are not reciprocated by or even known to the other person. The behavioral component may be minimal, but the conflict is still very real to the person experiencing the feelings.

### Conflict as Action

Conflict also consists of the actions that we take to express our feelings, articulate our perceptions, and get our needs met in a way that has the potential for interfering with someone else's ability to get his or her needs met. This conflict behavior may involve a direct attempt to make something happen at someone else's expense. It may be an exercise of power. It may be violent. It may be destructive. Conversely, this behavior may be conciliatory, constructive, and friendly. But, whatever its tone, the purpose of conflict behavior is either to express the conflict or to get one's needs met. Again, the question of reciprocity exists. If you write letters to the editor, sign petitions, and consult lawyers to stop my shopping center, and I do not even know you exist, are we in conflict? Can you be in conflict with me if I am not in conflict with you? Theory aside, I think the practical answer to both of these questions is yes.

Obviously, the nature of a conflict in one dimension greatly affects its nature in the other two dimensions. If I believe you are trying to hurt me in some way, I am likely to feel as though I am in conflict with you, and I am also apt to engage in conflict behaviors. Also, none of these dimensions is static. People can go rapidly in and out of conflict, and the strength or character of conflict along each dimension can change quickly and frequently. And even though each of the three dimensions affects the others, a change in the level of conflict in one dimension does not necessarily cause a similar change in the other dimensions. Sometimes an increase in one dimension is associated with a decrease in another dimension. For example, the emotional component of conflict occasionally decreases as people increase their awareness of the existence of the dispute and their understanding of its nature. This is one reason why conflict can seem so confusing and unpredictable.

What about a situation where no conflict perceptions, emotions, or behaviors are present but where a tremendous conflict potential exists? Perhaps you are unaware of my desire to build a shopping center, and I am unaware of your plans for open space. Are we in conflict? We may soon be, but until conflict exists on one of the three dimensions, I believe it is more productive to think in terms of potential conflict than actual conflict. The potential for conflict almost always exists among any individuals or institutions that interact. Unless people want to think of themselves as constantly in conflict with everyone in their lives, it is more useful to view conflict as existing only when it clearly manifests itself along one of the three dimensions.

Can social systems—organizations, countries, and communities—as well as individuals be in conflict, particularly along the emotional or cognitive dimensions? Although there are some significant dangers to attributing personal characteristics or motivational structures to systems, practically speaking I think systems in conflict often experience that conflict on all three dimensions. Although we might better use terms like culture, ethos, public opinion, or popular beliefs to signify the greater complexity and different nature of these dimensions in social systems, conflict among groups clearly has cognitive and affective dimensions as well as a behavioral dimension. Is there an emotional and a perceptual

aspect to the conflict between Iraq and the United States? Of course, and we cannot understand the nature of the conflict if we do not deal with these aspects. This does not mean that every individual member of each country shares the same feelings or perceptions or even that a majority do. Instead, it means that the conflict evokes certain reactions and attitudes from the dominant leaders and a significant number of people in each society. Similarly, when we look at conflicts between union and management, environmental groups and industry associations, Democrats and Republicans, it is important to understand the attitudes, feelings, values, and beliefs that these groups have toward each other if we are to understand what is occurring.

By considering conflict along the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, we can begin to see that it does not proceed along one simple, linear path. When individuals or groups are in conflict, they are dealing with different and sometimes contradictory dynamics in these different dimensions, and they behave and react accordingly. This accounts for much of what appears to be irrational behavior in conflict. Consider this not unusual workplace dispute.\*

Two employees are assigned to work together on a project and soon find themselves in a conflict over whether they are each pulling their weight and passing along important information to each other. They engage in a fairly public shouting match, and they each complain to their supervisor. The supervisor sits them both down, and they agree on a workload division and certain behavioral standards, to which they then seem to adhere. Has the conflict been resolved? It may have been alleviated along the behavioral dimension. But each goes away from this meeting feeling victimized by the other and unappreciated by the boss. One of the employees decides that these feelings just result from the nature of the job and believes that the immediate conflict is over, but the other continues to see the conflict being acted out every time the other person comes late for a meeting or sends a terse e-mail. Thus progress has been made in the behavioral dimension, the emotional dimension is if anything worse, and there are contradictory developments along the cognitive dimension. This kind of result is not unusual in conflict, and

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\*All the examples from my own practice are either from public, nonconfidential forums or are heavily disguised to protect confidentiality.

it drives people to behave in apparently inconsistent ways. These employees may cease their overtly conflictual behavior, but the tension between them may actually increase.

## **What Causes Conflict?**

Conflict has many roots, and there are many theories that try to explain these origins. Conflict is seen as arising from basic human instincts, from the competition for resources and power, from the structure of the societies and institutions people create, from the inevitable struggle between classes. Even though there is something to be said for most of these theories, they are not always helpful to us as we contend with conflict. What we need is a framework that helps us use some of the best insights of different conflict theories in a practical way.

If we can develop a usable framework for understanding the sources of conflict, we can create a map of conflict that can guide us through the conflict process. When we understand the different forces that motivate conflict behavior, we are better able to create a more nuanced and selective approach to handling conflict. The wheel of conflict, illustrated in Figure 1.1, is one way of understanding the forces that are at the root of most conflicts. This conceptualization of the sources of conflict has arisen out of my work and conversations with my colleagues at CDR Associates and is derivative of the circle of conflict developed by one of my partners, Christopher Moore (see Moore, 1986, 1996).

At the center of all conflicts are human needs. People engage in conflict either because they have needs that are met by the conflict process itself or because they have (or believe they have) needs that are inconsistent with those of others. I discuss the continuum of human needs later in this chapter. My major point for now is that people engage in conflict because of their needs, and conflict cannot be transformed or settled unless these needs are addressed in some way.

Needs do not exist in a vacuum, however. They are embedded in a constellation of other forces that can generate and define conflict. In order to effectively address needs, it is usually necessary to work through some of these other forces, which affect how people experience their needs and how these needs have developed.

There are five basic forces, or sources of conflict: the ways people communicate, emotions, values, the structures within which interactions take place, and history (see Figure 1.1). Let's examine each of these sources further.

## Communication

Humans are very imperfect communicators. Sometimes this imperfection generates conflict, whether or not there is a significant incompatibility of interests, and it almost always makes conflict harder to solve. Human communication has inspired a large literature and multiple fields of study, and I will discuss communication as a resolution tool later. The main thing to consider here is how hard it is for individuals to communicate about complex matters, particularly under emotionally difficult circumstances. We should keep reminding ourselves just how easy it is for communication to

**Figure 1.1. The Wheel of Conflict.**

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