

## Re-framing our role as conflict specialists

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In reviewing Bernard Mayer's *Staying with Conflict*, Anne Sutherland-Kelly discovers the potential of accepting the enduring aspects of some conflicts.

I have had my mindset shifted and my approach to conflict enriched by Bernie Mayer's latest book, *Staying with Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes* Jossey-Bass, 2009. The breadth and depth of *Staying with Conflict* is comparable to that of Mayer's first book, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution* Jossey-Bass 2000.

*Staying with Conflict* will appeal to any mindful practitioner. It will be of most use to experienced practitioners interested in expanding their skill set and the range of their work beyond conflict resolution to conflict engagement. As in his book, *Beyond Neutrality* Jossey-Bass, 2004, Mayer calls us to define our purpose as 'conflict engagement'. The argument made in this latest book will be more compelling to a broader readership than his 2004 work.

Mayer has a talent for scouting the terrain ahead of the pack. In this work, Mayer shines a spotlight on the fact that many conflicts are, of their nature, enduring. He then forensically examines what this means for us as conflict specialists. Mayer invites us to ask a new question.

As conflict specialists, our training, and maybe our own desire for resolution and 'peace', result in a strong tendency to disregard the ongoing, unresolvable aspects of a dispute and focus on the aspects of the conflict that can be resolved. Worthwhile work can be done this way. However, when enduring conflict is a real aspect of the dispute, Mayer suggests,

*"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." (p. 3)*

As I considered the ramifications of this new question, I remembered parties who were engaged in long term conflict. One example, a divorcing couple whom I was assisting to mediate agreements regarding care of their children and division of property and a business. They had 12 years of joint decision making for their children ahead of them, in a context of bitter personal conflict. In mediation they formed some agreements that I believe are still serving them well. I'm also sure they continue to deal with ongoing conflict.

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How different may my approach have been if I had asked the new question? I suspect, the most challenging differences between them may have been addressed more openly and more realistically, and the agreements they formed may have included more robust strategies for how they were going to manage their ongoing communications.

In a similar situation today, I am still going to work hard with the parties at resolving the issues they can, and want to, resolve. However by changing my mindset to consciously accepting that some elements of this conflict are likely to be enduring, everything I do and say with those parties has a new realism.

As conflict specialists, if we bring an understanding of the enduring nature of some conflict into the room, we will be more able to help parties engage with the challenges of ongoing conflict; and, with clarity about which aspects of the dispute can be resolved and which need ongoing engagement, the agreements formed will be more robust.

How different it is to say, some aspects of the conflict 'require ongoing engagement' rather than, some aspects of the conflict are 'unresolved'! This is the difference Mayer is inviting us to make in our practice.

Mayer places his thesis in the context of the central role that conflict plays in individual lives and human development (pp 19-53; 271-2). He observes,

*"Conflict is essential to everyone's growth and survival. It is the vehicle all of us use to face our most significant challenges."* (p.19)

If we recognize conflict as, not just inevitable but, necessary for human development, it follows that all conflict does not need to be resolved. It follows that sometimes the most constructive response to conflict is, not to seek resolution but, to seek engagement. Mayer has made a classic mediator move, he has normalised an aspect of conflict with which many of us are uncomfortable — its ongoing nature.

Mayer's insight is analogous to, but different from, recognising that some aspects of a conflict are party and time specific, while other aspects are systemic. The new move that Mayer makes is to say, regardless of whether this aspect of the conflict is personal, situational or systemic, it may be here to stay, and if it is here to stay, our job becomes helping the parties stay with it.

This will be a radical shift for most mediators. I think it is a shift that enriches and deepens our practice. If mediation practice is a house of many rooms, Mayer has added a whole new wing to our home, a new space in which we can move and work.

Having invited us to step into this new space, to re-conceptualise our role as conflict specialists, Mayer does not leave us unaccompanied in unfamiliar territory but provides an abundance of practical guidance as to how to understand, and respond to, enduring conflict.

He addresses:

- dealing with conflict avoidance (Chapter 3);
- helping people construct conflict narratives that can accommodate enduring conflict (Chapter 4);
- effective communication strategies for parties in enduring conflict (Chapter 5);
- supporting the constructive use of power and escalation in conflict (Chapter 6); and,
- the use of agreements as tools for staying with conflict (Chapter 7).

Mayer names and defines the practitioner's experience with accuracy and insight. I regularly find that aspects of my work are validated and illuminated as he describes the experience and analyses its significance. He has done this again with his analysis of conflict avoidance and how we can usefully respond to it.

I always find Mayer's clear-eyed examination of power dynamics refreshing. He is not coy about the reality and importance of engaging with disputants' uses of power. Here, he has approached the subject through different categories to those in *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*. His analysis of power dynamics has developed further and he gives practical guidance on how to assist disputants to use the power available to them wisely and constructively.

Our vocabulary is expanded with his schema of "The Six Faces of Conflict" (pp.21-7) and with such terms as, "creative non-resolution" (p.52) and the "guerrilla communicator" (p.148). Mayer's illustrative examples are numerous and apt, and range from the interpersonal to the international.

In the final two chapters, Mayer concludes with questions and suggestions for our profession.

*"The central element of the challenge is one of imagination. Can those of us who work in the conflict field envision for ourselves a new role, one that incorporates the work we have always done and then expands on it? Can we change our focus in conflict from prevention, management and resolution to anticipation, support and engagement? Can we see within the many roles we play the opportunities to work with disputants on the enduring element of conflict, not just the transient or stubborn elements? Can we change how we frame our larger role so that we are more than conflict resolution practitioners and are in fact conflict engagement specialists?" (p. 267)*

As Mayer highlights for us, if we choose to accept this challenge, we not only expand the range of ways in which we can serve our clients, but we build a skill base required for the major challenges of our own lives and of our time (Chapters 2 and 9). Those personal conflicts deeply embedded in our personalities or relationships and the key challenges facing us globally, such as environmental sustainability, poverty and the needs of refugees, are all enduring conflicts.

In Mayer's new book, we now have a toolkit customised for the challenges of staying with enduring conflict.

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