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The dynamics of conflict resolution - a promise kept

Joanna Kolawski

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Book review

The dynamics of conflict resolution — a promise kept

Joanna Kolawski

Just when you thought the last word had been written about conflict resolution and its practice, along comes Bernard Mayer's *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution — A Practitioner's Guide* (Jossey-Bass, US, 2000).

This is the work we have been waiting for and it begins with the implicit promise to distinguish between philosophy and practice:

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.

Those are the first words of Mayer's preface and the *Guide* proceeds to keep that promise. Mayer's goal is to focus on

'how conflict resolvers can productively think about conflict resolution, rather than on what they should do'. This is at the heart of what is missing from so many other tactics-oriented guides. Next to Mayer's work many of those guides now seem little more than a list of do's and don'ts, empty of what Bush and Folger have called 'the purpose that drives practice'.

Given Mayer's many years of professional expertise, it is remarkable that he has been able to resist the temptation to preach about process. While he illustrates the points made in many chapters with case studies from his own practice, he uses them less to prescribe what ought to have been done than to elucidate the thinking that lay behind the choice of intervention.

In a chapter on 'Culture and conflict', he

describes in vivid terms a dispute between a Native American group and a large corporation, and a curious phenomenon many practitioners have experienced — that while two parties with a great deal in common are both speaking the same language 'every time they communicated the conflict seemed to escalate'. He later reveals that:

(t)he key to our getting a handle on this case was to listen to the language and terminology that each group kept using. The differences were dramatic. So after listening to both sides long enough to get a feel for the communication obstacles, we shared our observations with both groups.

Mayer then takes the reader through the process by which the mediators clarified what they were perceiving in conversation with each of the parties. This clarification resulted in a shift of focus, not only for the parties, but equally for the mediators. It is precisely with descriptions of this kind that Mayer's humility becomes such a powerful teacher. Totally absent is the presumption that he and his co-facilitator know what is happening or how best to intervene without consulting ►

Book review

► the parties. On the contrary; they immerse themselves in the complexity of both the communication and the disputing process, and reveal their observations to the parties. This then adds to the common store of understandings through which change is ultimately made possible.

No doubt some of Mayer's views will prove controversial. He feels, for example, that:

the tendency to equate mediation (and sometimes arbitration) with conflict resolution is natural, [but] it is also problematic. Mediation is a role, a skill, an approach and a practice specially ... But it does not stand well on its own as a profession. That does not mean that the practice of mediation cannot be professionalised. It can be — under the aegis of the field of conflict resolution.

He argues that:

[u]nless [mediators] are grounded in a thorough understanding of the dynamics of conflict and resolution, they will tend to view their work as a series of intervention strategies and not as an application of a rich and growing body of knowledge about the various ways individuals engage in conflict and seek resolution.

He also puts the view that it is in the limitation of what mediators can do that '[t]heir most important resource for contributing to a resolution process lies'. Mayer believes that '[m]ediators are easier to trust when they have less power over substantive outcomes'. This is because:

mediators cannot generally provide additional resources or alter the fundamental approach and behaviour of individual disputants that disputants can more readily turn to them in a confidential and forthright manner.

Throughout the *Guide*, Mayer also has plenty to say about training, much of it incidental:

Specific procedures and tactics are easier to teach and to develop than personal characteristics, but in many ways it is the more complicated or intangible personal traits that are more important.

Among those which Mayer lists are commitment, optimism, integrity, openness and clarity about the practitioner's own value base.

The challenge for educators in the conflict resolution field is plainly now to explore ways to identify and build upon such qualities in training programs of excellence. Feedback and peer review suddenly emerge as critical to ongoing development of conflict resolvers.

Not surprisingly, Mayer's last words are about neutrality and impartiality, and they are well worth repeating here. He asserts that although conflict resolution practitioners are required to act in an impartial way, the field itself is far from being value neutral:

Implicit in what we do are very strong beliefs about how to improve the world we live in and about how people ought to relate to each other. Sometimes there is a contradiction between these values and our roles as conflict resolvers. More often, however, these values are the foundation from which we derive our power and energy.

In the *Guide* Mayer lifts the reader's sights from technique to purpose and goes behind practice to philosophy. His is a substantial contribution to the field and he leaves it enriched by a timely analysis of why conflict resolution matters deeply — whether played out at the individual, corporate or societal level. ●

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The monthly newsletter on dispute resolution

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