

Escaping the Avoidance Trap

Mayer, B. (2009). Escaping the Avoidance Trap, in Staying With Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Dealing with conflict is not comfortable or easy and people would often rather avoid than face conflict directly. In the third chapter of his book Staying With Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes, Bernard Mayer addresses techniques that are used to avoid conflict and gives some suggestions to mediators to keep them from perpetuating the “avoidance trap.” This summary highlights some of Mayer’s general depictions of conflict avoidance techniques and also describes specific responses to avoidant behavior that help people to stay present and engaged during situations of enduring conflict.

Conflict avoidant behavior can take a variety of forms. Many avoidant approaches look like taking on a conflict while they are actually mechanisms that shut down engagement efforts (pg. 61). While there are many different manifestations of conflict avoidance, Mayer explains four distinct behaviors of entrenched avoidance patterns that mediators should be aware of.

- **Minimization** – The most common technique of avoidance which is to deny or minimize the seriousness of a conflict. When a serious dispute happens minimizing can be destructive and shortsighted (pg. 62).
- **Misdirection** – To shift the focus or definition of the real problem to another topic, or construct a narrative that eliminates personal responsibility is to evoke avoidance by misdirection. Once the cause of conflict is redirected then no further effort is given to understand the root causes.
- **Escalation** – Upping the level of conflict to limit or end communication about an issue (pg. 63). Examples of which can be threatening words, demanding demeanor, getting loud, or becoming physically imposing. Because these behaviors look like jumping into conflict, it is easy to overlook that it is actually avoidant (pg. 64).
- **Premature Problem Solving** – Rushing to solutions out of a desire to run away from the conflict. This type can sometimes be seen especially in organizations where rules and interventions function more as bureaucratic responses than fully addressing the essential problem (pg. 65).

How then does the mediator address these common manifestations of avoidance? Mayer reminds mediators that they must challenge disputants’ avoidance while still respecting their choices. Usually those in the dispute are aware that conflict exists and their inclination to avoid it. The mediator must help make people aware of the choice that they are making to avoid conflict and help them to consider moving from avoidance to engagement. The mediator has to first identify the type of avoidance that people are using and then enact the corresponding engagement technique.

- **Minimization** – A mediator can choose to either align with or challenge. To align would be to work within the denial framework to strategize about keeping the conflict

contained, and remain alert for signs of the deeper issues. To confront would be to assert that there is a significant amount of conflict taking place, which doesn't mean denial will disappear but often gives permission for expanded discussion (pg. 70).

- **Misdirection** – Ask disputants to consider interface issues, those of relationships, communication and trust, not just an individual or structural element, as a way to draw attention to core issues. Mediators can also ask clients to consider the attributions that they are making about others as a way to engage additional possibilities and perspectives (pg. 74).
- **Escalation** – The most important question to ask in a situation of escalation is what kind of interaction they would like to be having with others. This focuses the attention on the intent of the escalation instead of the behavior itself (pg. 76).
- **Premature Problem Solving** – Mediators should first be aware of their own tendencies in this area and focus on the nature of conflict not just resolving it. The mediator needs to slow people's urge to find a solution and refocus on addressing what is really going on by asking how a solution fits the problem, its significance, and implementation. Often the best advice is just to slow down (pg. 78).

These approaches give some general guidelines for addressing conflict avoidance. Mayer closes the chapter by stating that “Everyone uses avoidance to deal with stress and difficulties in life, but an excessive reliance on avoidance gets in the way of dealing with enduring conflict. As people learn to stay with conflict, they become better at facing what they have been avoiding, understanding it, and naming it” (pg. 86)

Summary prepared by Erin Watley, Graduate Assistant, Ombuds/Dispute Resolution Services for Faculty