

## Working the Conflict Narrative

Chapter 4, Mayer, B. (2009) *Staying with Conflict: A Strategic Approach to Ongoing Disputes*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Hale, K. (1998). *The Language of Cooperation: Negotiation Frames*. *Mediation Quarterly*, 16(2), 147-162.

When dealing with conflict, especially in the workplace, the way that people approach a conflict can also determine the narrative that they use to describe the individuals and interactions involved. When polarizing and rigid narratives are used, a polarizing overall interaction is also more likely to take place. In this chapter of *Staying with Conflict*, Mayer (2009) presents ways to first identify a conflict narrative and then gives suggestions for navigating that conflict narrative in a dispute with techniques that do not limit and polarize a dispute even further between the parties involved. Within a workplace dispute, the goals should be to construct narratives that do not exclude vital parts of the story, and to adjust our own stories in ways that facilitate constructive engagement (Mayer, 2009).

### What is a conflict narrative?

Telling a story is a common way to make a point or describe a situation. Mayer notes that people who are in a dispute incorporate the most difficult and enduring aspects of their conflict into the narratives (stories) that they tell. When a conflict narrative is created, we use our story as a way to organize the events and characters involved in a dispute. For example, when you go and tell a co-worker about the encounter that you recently had with your boss (explaining how unreasonable her demands and treatment of you were), you have created a conflict narrative. Mayer (2009) explains that the problematic issue with conflict narratives is that they can be very limited in scope.

1. Those who are involved in the narrative are often portrayed according to hero, victim and villain characteristics, which restricts the range of motives and actions that individuals might have.
2. The focus within the narrative is concentrated on what we can get from a person or circumstance, a view that only conceives of benefits for one side of the dispute.
3. Dramatic theory (Hale, 1998) is employed when constructing this narrative, implying that the course of the conflict is inevitable and something that the participants have no control over.

### How can we expand the scope of the conflict narrative?

1. Do not limit characterizations to the victim, villain and hero format. There is enough room for everyone to have a part of all of those associated traits.
2. Instead of focusing on what you should get from the dispute, engage a perspective that looks for mutual gains for all parties involved in the dispute.
3. Be aware of the fact that one side does not operate in a vacuum. There are external factors (social, cultural, systemic) and internal factors (individual personality, morality) that each side has to work with.

4. A hopeful perspective (as opposed to a fatalistic one) allows for more choice and agency, and allows for the potential to work towards improvement.

Mayer argues that the narrative we use to describe and engage a dispute can significantly influence the course of that dispute. When the conflict narrative is rigid, with strict roles and potential outcomes, the interaction between the disputants can be rigid and unaccommodating. Try to evolve your conflict narratives in such a way that you account for fluid roles, mutual gains, multiple influencing factors, and a hopeful perspective in order to have constructive engagement about, and during, disputes.

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