

Ombuds Outlook — December 2018
Ombuds/Dispute Resolution Services for Faculty
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The Case for Staying with Conflict

In his book *Staying with Conflict*, Bernard Mayer posits that people engaged in an ongoing conflict would do well to take a constructive approach to enduring and entrenched disagreements. While challenging to do so, it is important that individuals not run away from the difficulty, resort to destructive escalation, or attempt to find a grand solution that ignores the conflict's deep roots. Mayer argues that staying with conflict is what allows us to lead life to the fullest.

He contends that staying engaged with conflict requires courage, vision, resources, skills and stamina, and that individuals involved in long-term conflict often need help and support in this effort. When we stay with conflict, we remain engaged with the core issues that we care about, we continue to work on the problems or concerns that are important to us, and we continue to relate to the people with whom we are in conflict. Crucially, we also continue to communicate about the conflict and to advocate for what is important to us.

In kind, there should also be a conscious attempt to deepen our understanding of how others think and feel about the issues. By staying engaged with conflict, Mayer claims that we develop the emotional and intellectual capacity to live with our enduring differences but also, importantly, continue to work on them even though we know that the core conflict may continue over a long period of time.

Though Mayer encourages us to stay with an enduring conflict, he recognizes that the urge to avoid conflict is always there, and in some cases, avoiding a conflict is wise and even essential. Although one message of this book is that conflict avoidance is a major obstacle to long-term healthy relationships and growth, we might ask ourselves why the urge to avoid conflict is so pervasive, even when avoidance appears to be ineffective and/or destructive.

Mayer explains that there are some powerful and valid incentives to avoid conflict. For example, individuals may avoid conflict due to: fear, feelings of uncertainty, feelings of powerlessness, inadequate skills to handle the situation, and resource depletion for possible ways to address or resolve the issues.

Individuals may also avoid conflict to conserve energy, avoid a sense of shame, and preserve any relationships that are at risk because of the conflict,

It is indeed a complex process. For Mayer, these factors of avoidance play out in many different ways, and often times, they reinforce each other as well. And, these are obstacles that many people experience. We can think of enduring conflicts as those struggles that are embedded in people's lives, relationships, and institutions because they stem from their most deeply held values. The key is learning more about those values and then how to endure conflict. Staying with conflict calls on all involved to develop their capacity to fully engage in life with all its perplexities and challenges.

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

Conflict Resolution Competencies for Leaders

Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith propose that leaders who are willing to address workplace conflicts are unique and have a specific skill set. Although not all leaders innately have these competencies, with enough patience and practice, anyone can learn. In their book, *Resolving Conflicts at Work*, Cloke and Goldsmith describe six competencies to empower leaders.

Master the Context - Conflicts go beyond the individual level and are impacted by the values and frameworks within an organization's structures, systems, and cultures and even extend to the larger context of social, economic and political issues that indirectly impact the workplace. Leaders support values that move toward resolution (without forcing values or resolve) by exploring diversity, contextual disputes, and opposing views, while simultaneously looking for links and coalescing perspectives to join the conflicting sides.

Know Yourself - Leaders need to be aware of their biases, values, and assumptions about each conflict. This includes understanding and being cognizant of their personal histories around the topic of the conflict, their interpersonal relationships, and the conflict at hand. Leaders are willing to ask for help from others to provide additional skills in mediating conflict, especially if the leader is a part of the conflict.

Create a Vision for the Future - An inspiring vision allows people to maintain perspective even when there is opposition. When leaders mediate and support resolution, they elicit input and unifying solutions from all parties and create a meaningful and creative vision for change. This vision should be focused and one that excites people to work for resolution and change.

Communicate with Meaning - Leaders are acutely aware of the need to communicate the deeper meaning of a conflict to the people experiencing the conflict. They know that insults, attacks, unsubstantiated judgments or proclamations are not helpful. In their meaningful communication, a leader will focus on eliciting feedback through the use of questions in order to understand the deeper meaning for those involved.

Maintain Trust Through Integrity - Trustworthiness is crucial for creating change and moving toward resolutions. Leaders who are working to address conflicts are focused on consistently demonstrating integrity and trustworthy behaviors as well as valuing integrity from their coworkers. An approach that prioritizes integrity and trust helps to create personal change and change to an organization's conflict culture.

Realize Intention Through Action - The final competency for leaders is to put efforts toward action steps that are observable and measurable. Action steps demonstrate a leader's intention to create a positive environment, move toward resolution and find lasting concrete results. The key for leaders is to translate their insight about the conflict into tangible decisions, actions and agreements, thus impacting change in the greater context of the organizational systems, policies, structures, and interpersonal relationships.

After reading through these competencies, you might reflect on what you are able to do to gain insight to your skills in your varied roles as a leader. Identify areas of growth, and areas of strength. How might your skills as a leader help you address conflicts in your workplace?

Cloke, K., & Goldsmith, J. (2011). Lead and Coach for Transformation. In *Resolving conflict at work: Ten strategies for everyone on the job*. (pp. 241-271). NJ: John Wiley & Sons.



These may spark your interest during the semester break.

