

Introduction

“Every conflict begins with thoughts of fear, animosity and aggression which pass through some people’s minds and spread like wildfire. The only antidote to these aberrations is to take on fully the suffering of others.”

—Matthieu Ricard

When’s the last time you had a client you couldn’t wait to get rid of? Or muttered to yourself the equivalent of, “A pox on both their houses!” as the case in front of you spiraled into name-calling and bullying? Or felt the rightness of someone’s position so powerfully you struggled to hear the other side?

Powerful emotional currents flow through us as professionals who work with conflict. We size up our clients and carry judgments, frustrations, and gut feelings about them in our bodies. Often, we do our best to use the tools of intellect and our desire to appear impartial to push aside these reactions, because we believe that anything else will prevent us from reaching a fair outcome.

Many of us have been trained to steer clear of anything but logic. Yet, powerfully transformative shifts are possible when we connect to our clients and ourselves with more than our rational minds.

In my years as a mediator, it has come as an extraordinary revelation to discover that understanding our personal reactions to people we are trying to help is indispensable to doing this work effectively. The frustration, exasperation, anger, and other difficult emotions that are part of daily life in this field hold the key to a deeper connection with the parties who come to us. And with connection comes new, more satisfying possibilities for resolving their conflicts. More than

any other technique or skill that I have learned as a mediator, investigating my inner self has proven to be the essential way to help others solve their problems.

This book describes the program I have developed with my colleagues Jack Himmelstein, a law professor and lawyer, and Norman Fischer, a Buddhist monk, for helping people who work with parties in conflict use their inner experiences for the benefit of their clients. It challenges many of the conventions conflict professionals bring to this field, replacing them with a full and deep commitment to bringing all of ourselves to serving those who need us. We think of this program, rooted in self-awareness, as working from the inside out.

This highly personal work draws on tools such as meditation, deep listening, and self-awareness, and it builds on the conflict-resolution model Jack Himmelstein and I have refined over four decades, a model that can best be summed up in the notion that the surest route to a resolution that satisfies all the parties is one that looks beneath the surface to address the fundamental—and often unexpressed—feelings and concerns.

Drawing heavily from my own cases, teaching scenarios, and the experiences of the conflict professionals we've known from our training programs who've worked to master this approach, the pages that follow will both show and explain our systematic, "inside-out" method for bringing our own and our clients' long-avoided emotional reactions into the conflict-resolution process.

A case study: Whose side are you on?

Because this work is more experiential than intellectual, I'd like to give you a first taste as it unfolded in a recent training session. As you'll see, the shifts that unfold from acknowledging, rather than suppressing, emotional reactions to clients and situations can be dramatic.

We were at a critical point in a mediation-training program in Germany when I sensed we'd hit a block. The 24 participants had just finished role-playing in small groups, and I asked if anyone would be willing to come into the middle of the room to work with problems they had experienced in the exercise. There was a good-humored silence, but no volunteers.

So I said, "I'm looking for trouble. Did anyone have any trouble?" Finally, a well-seasoned woman, a mediator and lawyer who had spent 25 years as a judge, raised her hand and started to explain her difficulty. Although she was speaking in German, which I could only understand with the help of the translator, I could feel her reluctance.

"Helena, why don't you and your group come show us the problem?" I suggested.

They all took seats in the center of the circle, with Helena playing the mediator, in a chair between people playing the parts of an employer and a fired employee. Each party was flanked by someone playing a lawyer.

"Start wherever you experienced the problem," I said.

As Helena addressed the employer, she seemed comfortable understanding his view. But when she engaged the employee, her body started to tense, betraying more than a hint of irritability if not skepticism about the woman's story, even though she appeared to be making an effort to understand it.

I stopped her to ask how she was feeling toward the employee.

"I think I understand her well," Helena responded.

"Is it possible that you feel somewhat irritated with her?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," Helena said. "Her position is quite irrational."

I asked her to move her chair from its central spot and sit next to the employer and his lawyer.

"I think this is where you really are now. You have decided that the employee is wrong, and now the employer has two lawyers, you being one of them. Does that seem true?"

"Yes. The employee has no realistic understanding of the situation, and is actually bordering on being incoherent."

"So we've moved your chair to the employer's side, where it seems to reflect your attitude more accurately. Does that seem true?"

"Yes."

"Is this where you want to be?" I asked.

She looked a little startled and then replied, "No. I want to get back to the middle."

"There's only one way to the middle," I said. "I want you to move into the chair where the employee is sitting and feel what it's like to be in her shoes."

Helena and the employee switched seats.

“What is this like?” I asked.

“She doesn’t even see that the employer was trying to work with her to help her,” Helena said in a disapproving tone, scrunching her face.

“So you’re still in the chair that you were sitting in before with the employer. Let yourself feel what it’s like to be in the employee’s position. Could you imagine being her and what it might be like to be fired from your job when you were doing everything you could to try to make it work?”

“Of course. She doesn’t like what’s happened to her. No one would.”

“Good,” I said. “So let yourself feel what that might be like if you were in that situation.”

“Well, I would never let myself be in that situation.”

“I know. But imagine you were. Just let yourself feel her predicament.”

Helena’s body seemed to sink a bit, and then almost imperceptibly, her eyes began to glisten behind her very thick glasses.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “You seemed to be touched by something.”

She took off her glasses and put her head in her hands. “This is very hard,” she told me.

“What is hard?”

Helena paused and started breathing heavily, working hard to bring air into her lungs. “I feel so sad for her, but I don’t know what to do with this.”

“Right. That is exactly the point. You are now not a judge. You have let yourself be in her shoes. Now you’ve earned the right to move back into the mediator’s chair. So switch seats with her again, but make sure you let yourself continue to feel what that was like.”

I moved the mediator’s chair back into its original spot, and Helena got up to sit there.

“Now that you’re here, what is this like?”

“Now, I don’t know who’s right.”

“And what is that like?”

“It’s very strange. You have no idea what my life has been like. For 25-five years, all I did was make decisions about other people’s lives. I know how to make rational decisions. That is the world that I have lived in. That is how I think. I feel like I need to relearn how to think. I have so many regrets.”

“And right now, what is it like to be here in this other way, not knowing who’s right?”

“It feels right, because I know that this is how I want to be in relation to these two people, not to be deciding, but to help both of them.”

“Why?”

“Because I really do believe that I can be more helpful to them if I can help *them* make the decision.”

“So, from this position, what do you want to say to the employee?”

She faced the employee and said, “I get it. I want to be able to help you, and I know that you did not feel that you were well treated, that you were doing the best you could, and found it frustrating not to be able to communicate to your boss in a way that he could be responsive to.”

“Great. Now turn to the employer and tell him what you understand about being in his position.”

“You felt you had no choice but to do what you did to protect the company.”

“And can you feel what it was like for him to be in that position?”

“Yes,” Helena said. “He was afraid too. But now I don’t know what the solution is anymore.”

“So now, you are in the mediator’s shoes,” I told her. “You’ve connected to both people, and you don’t know what the answer is. That’s your job.”

She looked at me, fighting to hold back tears. “Now I am so embarrassed.”

“Are you willing to hear what this has been like for all of the people who have been watching?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess so.”

The whole room burst into applause.

Will the work Helena does as a mediator for her clients be different now, as she approaches it from this new place; the one that begins with, “I don’t know what the solution is anymore?” Yes. Yes, it will.

Why reach into the internal world in conflict resolution? Because the solutions are there

For almost 40 years I have been mediating and teaching others to mediate. Much of what people want to learn is focused on techniques: What intervention should I make here? How do I deal with people who fight with

each other, interrupt each other? How can I help people understand each other when they don't want to?

And then there are all the situational problems: How do you deal with scarce resources? How about when people are stuck and there seems to be no good solution? How do you get people to an agreement when they disagree so strongly? These are the sorts of questions that typically drive people to want mediation training, and all of them focus primarily on the external reality of a situation, as if that is the only thing that matters. This is even more true for people who come to mediation as parties than for people who come to training programs. We assume that because the problems surrounding the conflict developed in the external world, their solutions will naturally come from there. Bringing in the internal world—with all its fears, animosities, judgments, difficult histories, and confusion—can seem counterproductive, a needless distraction from the real work at hand.

So we keep our focus on what's happening outside. In the often contentious and difficult process of negotiating spousal support, for example, both mediator and the parties might confine themselves to the facts of budgets, employment and other income, child care and use of assets, each person applying what pressure he or she can to shape and speed the outcome.

Most people find conflict unpleasant at best—they want it to be over. They typically hope that they can persuade the other person to agree with them, and fueled by the belief that they are right and the other is wrong, they turn to coercion—blame, accusations, and threats—to get their way. This is often counterproductive if both parties operate out of the same mindset, leading, at best, to a standoff.

Conflict professionals may apply another sort of pressure to get the parties to agree, including appealing to their fear of what will happen to them if they don't move off their polarized positions to reach some kind of resolution.

This often seems central to getting the job done. We want to be compassionate, but also expedient, not getting distracted or bogged down in the parties' intense emotions or our own. Yet pressuring others to change their position often triggers backlash, even if it seems to get results in the short run. As we see so often in everyday life and in global politics, the cost of coercion can be high. It may “move things forward,” but it's likely to satisfy

no one. Many lawyers are fond of saying that the test of a fair agreement is that both parties feel equally dissatisfied.

Even as we're consumed by the extraordinary pull and power of the external world, however, we realize that there is more to the conflict—and its solution—than what appears on the surface.

This knowledge usually remains implicit because external concerns demand our full attention. Yet we often sense that understanding the subjective dimension of our clients' problems suggests the solution they need. These elements color both the style and the substance of a conflict. For instance, the parties may communicate with each other in a way that fuels their conflict, one mocking or attacking and the other taking a defensive tone. Once we unearth and understand this dynamic, it is possible for the parties to change it and have a more constructive conversation that will allow them to be better able to agree.

By paying attention to emotional clues, we can also unearth unacknowledged feelings, concerns, and priorities that can be central to resolving the conflict if we understand and communicate them. Underneath the content of the external problem, there are almost always deeper layers of emotional context. A couple's battle over the particulars of spousal support can't help but be shaped by their feelings about giving financial support and being financially supported, as well as old hopes and resentments and their feelings about their divorce.

If we can understand the internal world of the parties—their attitudes about the problem, their relationship with each other, the places where they connect and disconnect emotionally—we can use that wealth of information to unlock stable solutions for them. Limiting the conversation to the external dimensions of the problem severely limits the possibilities for solving it.

Perhaps harder to see is that our inner realities as conflict professionals are a catalyst for the mediation process, and a force that can't help but shape it. If we can bring our understanding of the depth of ourselves to bear on the problem—if we can be honest and human as we work with our clients, not shying away from our reactions, and even our fears—we can support our clients to do the same for themselves, and thus find their way to their best outcome.

This is much easier to say than to do.

Helping clients resolve conflicts from the inside out

Moving easily between inner and outer realities isn't natural for many of the people we're trying to help. Some have great access to their internal worlds but are ineffective in dealing with external realities. Others are tilted in the other direction, unaware of what is happening inside but extremely facile in dealing with the outside. Our challenge as professionals is to help them do both: understand the emotional and practical dimensions of the situation and see the relationship between the two. When the internal and external worlds line up, we can find a way of working together that leads to a solution grounded in what is most important to people—and that also reflects results that will be practicable and workable.

The conflict professionals we meet in our workshops often tell us that they feel ill equipped to guide parties through such a process. They feel the same natural pull toward either the inner or outer world that everyone does. Many are lawyers or financial professionals who have a thorough training in the externals with little or no attention paid to their own internal processes. We also see people from the psychological professions who have been steeped in understanding the internal dimensions of the people they are used to helping, but have little background in creating external solutions. It's common for those who come to our programs to have a sense that their professional training to date lacks some essential element that would help them thrive as mediators or conflict professionals.

The missing piece, we have realized, involves learning to see what is happening inside ourselves as we work with people in conflict, and using that self-awareness to connect with and help them.

The journey toward the center

This understanding about the importance of inner work evolved over many years of experimentation and observation, much of it rooted in my own dissatisfactions, curiosities, and discoveries. The methods we've developed for doing conflict work from the inside out came slowly, each component

shaped by experiments, experience, and collaboration, and eventually incorporated into the program we teach today.

Perhaps the best introduction I can give you to the elements of this work is my own story, in which you'll see our techniques and understandings emerge and take shape. With that context in place, we'll then step into the body of the book, which details the approach my colleagues and I teach for bringing self-awareness into the daily life and work of conflict professionals.