

Reorienting to Difference

Mother was an excellent flower arranger. She would spend hours gathering flowers from the backyard, where a colorful garden spanned the entire property. Flower arranging is quite an art. What a pleasure it was to watch her make one beautiful arrangement in the vase and then to see her rearrange the colors and stems to construct another stunning display. Yes, there was a final display that she entered in the county fair, but that was just a moment where she chose one arrangement as the best at that time for the purposes at hand.

We have often commented that people who manage difference can be seen as *artisans*. They create and arrange materials for a practical purpose, to address a need. Artisans use a variety of media; they employ their creative *artistic* talents to develop a brick fence, a solar-powered house, a city utility system, or a pewter bowl. Where an artist can rearrange to their heart's content, an artisan drives toward choosing a final design, process, or scheme. In the field of conflict management, we have often heard that conflict practitioners are artists, those who are able by virtue of imagination and talent or skill to create works of aesthetic value, but we are inclined to think of conflict managers as artisans. The majority of the time they are craftspersons, and there is a pressing reason for their efforts: a family in distress, a workplace that is not functioning fully, a future that needs to be created, two countries that cannot decide on border policy, or two people who need a channel for clear communication. They use their skills, methods, and theory to craft a useful process that has the best possibility of generating positive change . . . though they probably will never win a blue ribbon at the county fair for flower arranging.

The previous chapter discussed how to transcend and transition seemingly intractable conflicts. In this chapter, we will discuss five orientations to challenge current thinking, stretch attitudes, and enable movement toward the sphere of value as we manage our differences through communication.

FROM STATIC CULTURE TO CULTURE-AS-PROCESS

We have had numerous requests from clients or students that ask: “How can I communicate with Native Americans?” “What are the most important principles for negotiating with white, male, CEOs?” “How can I talk to scientists?” It would be very useful if we could codify culture into a neat checklist, so people could communicate appropriately and respectfully in any given situation, but we cannot produce that checklist. In chapter 4, we discussed cultural differences as a significant consideration when addressing conflict. We concluded that by focusing on the cultural dimensions, we open our eyes to a variety of possibilities for both framing the conflict and for creative approaches to moving forward. We also concluded that a hazard of a cultural focus might be that we make assumptions too quickly about how people from other cultures think and act.

Culture and Complexity

The link between culture and conflict resolution has been explored extensively in the last decade. Kevin Avruch offers an interesting conception of culture that enables us to address cultural conflict. He begins by describing the following *inadequate* assumptions about culture.¹

1. *Culture is homogenous.* We cannot presume that culture is free of internal paradoxes and contradictions. It is hazardous to characterize a culture in a straightforward way. (“New Mexicans love spicy food.”)
2. *Culture is a thing.* Can we see individual agency in a static conception of culture? The reification of culture makes us see culture as an “it” with material or concrete existence. (“Don’t invite him to join our club; his culture won’t permit it.”)
3. *Culture is uniformly distributed among members of a group.* Avruch offers a strong statement on this topic, noting that intracultural variation is often ignored or dismissed as “deviance.” (Although she is a member of our group, she still won’t play the game. She’s weird.”)
4. *An individual possesses but a single culture.* To the contrary, individuals possess and control several cultures. We would rarely have only one group identity. (“I grew up Hispanic so I must remain a Catholic.”)
5. *Culture is custom.* Is a community’s culture synonymous with its traditions or customary ways of behaving? If so, we need to ask

again where the individual agency is. (“I grew up Scandinavian, so I must eat a lot of pickled fish.”) If everyone in the community is abiding by tradition or custom, what about the differences that arise? We try to imagine that people in a community compose an array of deep and wide, shallow and brief customs and traditions that evolve and change.

6. *Culture is timeless.* Culture does change throughout time. We cannot speak of the “East Coast Work Ethic” as an unchanging characteristic of the people.

Box 11.1

Think about yourself, where you come from, your family traditions and culture. Summarize these items so that someone could use the summary as they get to know you. Compare this list to the inadequate assumptions about culture.

Culture is not static, timeless, or changeless. Avruch sees it as situational, flexible, and responsive to the exigencies of the worlds that individuals confront.² With his view that “individuals reflect or embody multiple cultures,” we are invited to look less at the pattern of culture and more at the process.³ We can see culture-as-process as the continual process of reinvention or revalidation of who we are, how we behave, and what we value. A person’s culture is responsive to situational and environmental change.

Moving Forward

One way to envision this conception of culture is to think in terms of fuzzy logic, which deals with uncertainties and with propositions that are *more or less* true or false. Avruch wants to “complexify” culture by offering that there is not a real true or false.⁴ We do not need linear sets of rules for behaving when confronted with cultural differences; instead we should look at a network of possibilities or a system of cultural characteristics. With the array of options in place, we can take a *first cut* or form a *proposition* about how to move forward.

We have done some consulting in a scientific laboratory, where we were asked to assess their culture and help change it to a more business-like enterprise. This organization has a reputation for being a very efficient and productive organization. They finish their projects in a high-quality manner, meeting the deadlines and finishing under budget. In our interviews, we asked, “What is it about your organiza-

tion that makes you so efficient?" Many of them answered, "We are a culture of heroes. We all rally at the last minute and perform with great courage and strength." They also told us that they had no procedures or processes in place to guide their efforts. They just "do what they have to do to get the job done, and do it right."

We were asked to help change the hero culture to a more business-oriented structure. Our first steps were to facilitate some large and small meetings to gauge the group's anticipation of change and begin to set an agenda for collaborating on the development of business processes. Some of the group asked us, "Can you help us change our 'hero culture' to a more structured system with established procedures on which we can rely? (Can you change us?)" Since our practice consists of "facilitating change" rather than "making change happen," we had to answer in the negative. We were able to help "complexify" their culture, helping them to see all the aspects of their organization that comprise their culture. They began to see that they were much more than a culture of heroes. They had other social, national, ethnic, personal, and relational groupings with which they identified, both as individuals and as a group. The following is a sample of the questions that guided them to realize their rich culture. We captured the responses on a wall chart and clustered them.

1. Tell us about your work. What is a typical day like?
2. How are you able to perform your tasks as you do?
3. What is it about yourself that leads you to work as you do?
4. What is it about the organization as a whole that leads you to work as you do?
5. What do you value most about your organization?
6. When those values are in place, what is happening in your workplace?
7. Tell us about yourself. What is your title at work? What experiences and background do you bring to this position?
8. When are you motivated to give your best effort?
9. What is your favorite part of working here?
10. If you were to tell someone (outside the organization) what you do here, what would you say?

The resulting clusters showed that this group holds a variety of different values and orientations. There were many ways to complete projects, many different things they valued, and various behaviors and personalities that did not connect to ethnic or regional stereotypes. After this realization, we were able to move forward, acknowledging the complex and changing culture as a resource for change.

Box 11.2

Look at the summary about yourself that you created earlier. Ask the following questions to complexify it. For each of the items, ask:

1. Has there been a time when this cultural component was not evident?
2. What was happening in your life to create this difference?
3. When you look at this part of your culture, what concerns do you have?
4. Which of these parts of your culture are changing?
5. Which parts of your culture do you want to change?
6. What items on this summary will be the same a year from now? Five years? Fifteen years?

Moving toward Value

Culture does not lend itself to checklists. A listing of nationalities does not give us a concrete idea of the culture of a group. Cultures are subject to change. If we want to value the differences inherent in the ever-changing cultures we offer, we should see culture as socially inherited. Yes, there is an aspect of tradition to how we behave, but we are also responsive to situational change and reinvent our culture often.

FROM RESOLUTION TO ENGAGEMENT

We recently met with an organization that was paralyzed because of their differences. Residing in the sphere of harm, they experienced backbiting and gossip, low productivity, palpable dissatisfaction with the workplace, and resulting physical and emotional problems. They were able to meet for eight hours to try to address the “conflict” with all twenty staff members eagerly in attendance. They were desperate for a change in the situation. “Can you fix it?” “Can you fix *us*?” Early conversation at the meeting centered on stories about how one person needed to become more trustworthy and another person needed to become less dominating. The solution for them seemed to be that the bad guys needed to change so the good guys could get their work done. They were embroiled in conflict and needed help. They wanted a *resolution*. What do people really need when they are in stuck places like this? The following six needs are present when people are paralyzed by their differences.⁵

1. *Voice*. People want to be heard. They want to be heard by the people that count. In some cases, the people that count may be in the room, but in other cases, they may be those higher on the decision-making ladder. People want others to understand who they are, what they value, and what they want.
2. *Procedural justice*. People want to be given the same opportunity to manage their differences that everyone else is given. Procedures that are fair and just need to be available and consistent. If the management is given a day to retreat and work on their challenges, the entire staff would also like to be given adequate time to do the same. If some neighbors can get a hearing in court, other neighbors want similar opportunities.
3. *Vindication*. People want an outcome that shows that they are right and that their cause is just. At least they want to begin with the hope that they will prevail. We have often talked about the fantasy of “victory” in conflict management. If we can be satisfied with options that meet our interests, rather than spectacular solutions, we open a broader opportunity for forward movement past stuck places.
4. *Validation*. When experiencing conflict, feelings of hurt, anger, frustration, and victimization arise. People want these feelings to be acknowledged and validated. A teakettle metaphor may work here. Only when the water has boiled and the kettle lets off steam is it ready to make tea. People are reluctant to give up their anger, seeing it as righteous anger.
5. *Impact*. There are two levels of impact desired by those in conflict. First, they want their own personal world to get better. Second, they want a broader impact, needing connection and meaning in relation to larger issues or struggles. Sometimes these two occur hand in hand. A worker complains to the boss about unequal treatment. This worker wants to get the same benefits as others in the same job and also wants the company to improve its human resources practices to be more consistent and fair for everyone.
6. *Safety*. Conflict is a risky and scary experience. People want a safe environment to address their issues without fear of retaliation or attack.

When we find ourselves confronted by differences that are harmful, we are juggling the need for resolution (*fix us!*) along with the six items listed above. We are called to develop creative and diverse ways to address these situations.

Let's look again at a definition of conflict. Bernie Mayer defines conflict as a system rather than a thing (*that nasty old conflict keeps plaguing us*), "Conflict is a system of interaction that can involve multiple processes, the flow of energy, many different agents, different forms of communication, and many key events that can lead to a reorganization of the system."⁶ With this complex definition of conflict, we can offer ways to address it that can meet the six needs above. We can use a multiplicity of interventions or processes. Mayer tells us that working within conflict requires a complicated interaction of substantive, procedural, psychological, cultural, historical, and cognitive factors. How can we organize all of those factors, and then use them when human differences block our way? We can meet the challenge by reorienting our perspective from a *resolution* focus to an *engagement* focus.

Conflict Engagement

In this new orientation, we propose to work on a variety of levels. As the needs above reveal, participants want a variety of things, which necessitates a variety of scopes. Engaging in a conflict means

accepting the challenges of a conflict, whatever its type or stage of development may be, with courage and wisdom and without automatically assuming that resolution is an appropriate goal. Effective engagement requires finding the right level of depth at which to engage. It also means being fully aware of the many different ways we could choose to avoid conflict, including trying to resolve it prematurely.⁷

Let's work for a while with Mayer's premise of conflict engagement. In his definition, we can pull out two areas of awareness: choosing the level of depth (the conflict stage at which to engage) and knowing how to change conflict avoidance into engagement.

Conflict Stages

If we are to engage in conflict, it is important to know which particular challenge we are experiencing at a given time. If we can understand where we are most in need of assistance, we can focus there for the moment, or for the entire process. One way to describe the current conflict is to look through the lenses of developmental processes. Each of the following processes poses a challenge and a place to begin engagement.⁸ We will compare each stage to the conflict at the paralyzed organization described earlier.

1. *Awareness*. Do we know we are in a conflict? Do we see that human differences have made a hurdle for us? To become aware that we are in conflict is a necessary step and sometimes

takes engagement at the awareness level. The organization in crisis became aware of their conflict when it was very late. Their differences had become harmful, and their conflict affected almost every part of the organization.

2. *Articulation.* Can we explain our conflict to someone? If we can give voice to the conflict by directly or indirectly defining and characterizing the conflict, we are aware it exists. The workplace that is able to say “fix us!” knows that something is wrong. They also could tell us the stories about “that person who lies” and “our boss who is unreliable” and “that person who never turns off the coffee pot.” They did have the stories to explain the conflict to themselves or others.
3. *Mobilization.* Have we pooled our resources to bring the conflict to a level of activity where improvement or action could occur? This organization did a fine job of mobilizing. They waited too long, but they did the miraculous job of arranging a full day off for all twenty staff members to be able to attend an office mediation session. They put aside money for facilitators and meals. They made sure that all members of the administration attended, and no one was allowed to leave early or to take phone calls.
4. *Activation.* Once the parties in conflict and necessary resources have been mobilized, it is time to begin action, hoping to accomplish the goals. Unfortunately in this case, no action had occurred and no goal setting had been accomplished. They arrived at the retreat waiting to be “fixed.” To make progress, we commonly utilize a variety of processes to create an environment suitable for action. We address process, safety, face needs, empowerment, and collaboration (see chapters 5 and 8).
5. *Connection.* How are we going to interact? If we are to communicate and negotiate through our differences, we should have mechanisms to connect to each other. The first method of connection at the one-day retreat was to seat 4–6 people at round tables and to invite the small group to communicate with one another. Next we asked all participants to sit at a table with others with whom they do not usually interact. Throughout the day, the group had conversation focuses and interaction tasks that enabled them to connect.
6. *Need satisfaction.* Here is where the complexity in conflict begins. The six needs discussed above (voice, justice, vindication, validation, impact, and safety) change and vacillate over the course of a conflict. A common way to discover which of the needs are at play is to ask a question such as, “For this inter-

action (session, retreat, relationship) to meet your needs, what would have to happen?"

7. *Release.* At various points in the conflict, we free up some of the pent-up energy. We may give up part of the conflict, resolve some of it, or change our stance about it. At the retreat above, we took periodic breaks, with instructions to go outside and breathe in the fresh air. We had a point in the agenda where each person was asked to do some private writing about "the most challenging thing about working for this organization." At another time, we had each person turn to the person next to him or her and discuss "something they are willing to give up in order to get the thing they desire most out of this session."
8. *Process selection.* Parties in conflict can be engaged in creating the process to address their conflict. We have stated often that "people support what they create." When people are involved in the development of the way they will move forward, more commitment and ownership can occur. In the case of the retreat, we began the day with a thorough review of the agenda. We not only walked through each step of the day but also previewed what people would be expected to do at each agenda point. We followed the agenda review with a conversation about the day, refining the agenda according to the group's comfort level. We did remove a whole segment of the agenda (visioning) as the group said they thought their organization had a pretty coherent vision already. They just needed to get past the differences that divided them so they could move forward in pursuit of the vision.

If we steer clear of the stages above, either by ignoring them, or by letting our differences obscure our vision of them, we are avoiding the conflict. If we choose to engage the conflict, we can connect at any of the above levels. Just as the stages above are not linear or concrete, engagement steps enter the system at a variety of points and can spiral or loop back and forth as the system shifts to the engagement activities. The following activities help move toward engagement.⁹

- *We can name the conflict.* Related to both awareness and articulation, people engage the conflict by naming it and identifying its nature in some way. The way the conflict is named indicates where to engage. Note the difference between, "I am frustrated by the way you continuously shirk your duties, like turning off the coffee" and "Our organization needs to pay more attention to housekeeping duties, like coffee making, bathroom cleaning, and emptying the trash." You can construct a framing that will engage participants

constructively by paying careful attention to how the differences are phrased and described.

- *We can consider the costs and benefits of engagement and avoidance.* We can think through the implications of avoiding the conflict or engaging it in some way. We can also help others think in this way by asking questions like, “If you continue to communicate by e-mail and memo, and avoid face-to-face contact, what will be the result?” or “If you were to take a full day off of work and address your struggles with interpersonal relations in the workplace, what could happen? What costs and benefits would you assume?”
- *We can discuss various approaches to engagement.* We live in a time where we have access to a multitude of processes to address conflict. A few decades ago, workplace conflicts usually went like this: complain to the boss, look for the guilty party, find evidence to punish or not, and give some kind of penalty or discipline. Now we have mediation, negotiation, dialogue processes, retreats, trainings, grievance panels, and informal problem-solving processes.
- *We can rehearse engagement.* Talk through the interaction. Practice the upcoming interaction with a friend or with a professional. When we went to the organization in crisis, we gave them some pre-retreat questions to think about, so they could prepare their interaction and not be surprised.
- *We can find an appropriate forum or agent for raising issues.* It usually helps to have a clear identification of the conflict and its nature first, before choosing the most appropriate forum. When we were contacted to work with the organization, we discussed with them their needs and wondered if they could use a mediator, trainer, an organizational development expert, or a process facilitator. Even though many in the organization labeled the issue as a conflict to be resolved, the management asked us for a person to guide or facilitate the communication as the group planned for the creation of a healthy working environment.
- *We can raise the conflict directly.* Bring it up immediately, assert that there is a difference of opinion, and give attention where needed.
- *We can discuss issues of timing.* Decide when to engage in which aspect of the issue at hand. A careful sequence can help address the varied needs and complex stages of the conflict.
- *We can bring the conflicting parties together.* Whether we are the “conveners” or the “process designers” or are the parties embroiled in the conflict, we can engage the conflict by bringing the parties together to talk. Bringing people together, especially in the midst of difference, is often one of the most difficult parts

of engaging. Just finding the time in our busy schedules is often the first roadblock.

- *We can provide safeguards for engagement.* We can arrange ground rules, communication guidelines, technology for distance communication, agreements for handling disruptions and unexpected problems, and conflict management tools.

The outcomes for the paralyzed organization were hopeful and creative. Plans were made for improved workplace communication. Commitments were made to develop a new attitude toward each other and to be open to new understandings of each other's perspectives. Processes and procedures were analyzed and adjusted. Lessons were learned from stories that clarified, evolved, and changed.

Moving toward Value

Differences plague us, and we know that we have a variety of options. We do not have to avoid the resulting conflict and continue to reside in the sphere of harm. We do not have to jump into a quest for resolution (one form of avoidance). We can engage the conflict, acknowledging its complexity and variability. We can engage at any number of vantage points and challenge ourselves and others to grasp better choices with more optimism. The dynamics of human difference are a ripe foundation for productive change and healthier relationships.

FROM RESOLUTION TO TRANSFORMATION

There are not many instances in life as painful and heart wrenching as a divorce in the family. Whether it is the broken heart of the person who does not want to split up the family, or the agony of knowing that the breakup is the right thing to do in the long run, the pain is hard to bear. In divorce cases, the couple longs for the "resolution" to be final, so they can get on with life. As many of us know, even after the resolution is final, the pain still lingers, and the relationship rarely ends. The relationship usually changes into something else.

As the parties struggle to figure out how to divide stuff up, and to decide on conditions for the future, there are certain cases where the pain of divorce eases a bit. We have seen this in divorce mediation where the couple genuinely commits to focus on the children's best interests as they make decisions. The relationship has then been transformed from one of "you versus me" to "us doing what's right for the

kids.” When something is transformed, its nature or form changes or is altered, usually for the better. To transform situations where differences have become harmful into something better takes more than a miracle. It takes energy, diligence, and a commitment to seeing differences as the opportunity to transform.

Over the past four decades we have observed the evolution of the field of conflict management and the portrayal of mediation in several different ways. These approaches can be offered as “four stories”—four ways of understanding mediation.¹⁰

The Satisfaction Story: Mediation is a conflict management process that is flexible, informal, and can help parties see their conflict as a mutual problem. The highlight of this story is that adversarial, win-lose negotiation can become collaborative, win-win problem solving. The aim is to achieve mutually satisfactory agreement. This type of process has been seen most consistently for years.

The Social Justice Story: Mediation can support community development by constructing a larger context around the differences in groups and relationships. Those who are perceived as having less power can gain strength by participating in civic life, pursuing common interests, and ensuring greater social justice. Neighborhood mediation and environmental mediation have strengthened communities of interest in a variety of ways. Grassroots community organizers are most interested in this story, though it is not as prevalent in our society as the satisfaction story.

The Transformation Story: Robert Baruch Bush and Joseph Folger have illuminated this story in the past decade, with the first edition of *The Promise of Mediation*. They reoriented the mediation community by illuminating the hope that comes from conflict transformation. In the transformation story, “The unique promise of mediation lies in its capacity to transform the quality of conflict interaction itself, so that conflicts can actually strengthen both of the parties themselves and the society they are part of.”¹¹ This potential of mediation is available for all types of disputes, even divorce. The transformation story contends that the character of male-female interaction can be changed generally; specifically, it contends that the parties can be empowered to say and hear what needs to be said and heard. Ultimately, the quality of social institutions can be transformed in a positive way.

The Oppression Story: We include this story last, as it is a different kind of story and gives us a warning. The warning is that mediation can be used to consolidate the power of the strong and to increase the oppression of the weak. Because of its informality and

consensuality, mediation can be an easy way to bypass the legal process and to magnify power imbalances. Also, because of its confidentiality, mediation gives mediators broad strategic power, allowing potential biases free reign.

By looking at these four stories, we acknowledge the diversity in the field of mediation and conflict management. Many mediators say they utilize bits and pieces of each of the four stories in their practice. In this chapter, we hope to offer another orientation, a new arrangement for managing difference that brings us away from harm and closer to value. The transformative story has that potential. The main premise of transformation, according to Bush and Folger, is that the most important benefit is the transformation of the quality of the interaction from destructive to constructive.¹² This change in the interaction is not outcome related; it is process related—a shift from resolution to transformation. To achieve a satisfying outcome (resolution) is undoubtedly important to the parties, but this benefit rests on the assumption that individual needs can be met without changing the quality of the interaction itself. People will continue to be distressed by negative interaction, even if their separate needs are satisfied.

Transformation and the Management of Difference

Let's shift for a moment from mediation back to the management of difference. We use this focus as an invitation for continual diligence in communication, especially where human differences occur. If we are determined to manage difference constructively, we can look at conflict transformation for ideas about communication focuses. We will spotlight two dynamic processes or goals for our communication: *empowerment* and *recognition*, as defined by Bush and Folger.¹³

Empowerment is a restoration to individuals of a sense of their value and strength and their own capacity to make decisions and handle life's problems.

Recognition means the evocation in individuals of acknowledgement, understanding, or empathy for the situation and the views of the other.

For Bush and Folger, empowerment is the focus on *self* and recognition is the focus on *other*. (Note that our use of empowerment throughout the text envelops both empowerment and recognition as they are defined here.) We find out what is important to ourselves through our interaction with others. We also find out what others value.

Walking the tightrope of empowerment and recognition can transform our interaction in conflict situations from despair and adversarialness to hope and possibilities. Consider the following statements:

1. *Gee, as we have been talking, I have noticed how strongly I feel about loud parties. I've always known that I like to get a good night's sleep, but I am surprised at how angry I am at being kept awake.* (empowerment)
2. *It sounds like you have a need for safety and security around your home and feel that a dog gives you exactly what you need since you are out of town so often.* (recognition)
3. *I know now that I can face the teacher and request a review of my grades. After this talk, I see how little I know about the grading procedures.* (empowerment)
4. *This situation is quite stressful for both of us. I can see that you are just as uncomfortable as I am.* (recognition)

Creating Sacred Space

As we explore the potential of transforming the conflict interaction, we are addressing more than the issue itself and more than the parties themselves. The metaphor of the umbrella may work here. An umbrella is used for a variety of purposes. When it is up, we are shaded from the sun and the rain. We can shade others if we invite them under the umbrella. In fact, the act of inviting someone under our umbrella symbolizes a move toward sharing protection, security, and safety. If we have more than three or four people who need to be shaded, we get a larger umbrella; if numbers are very large, we will need a tent big enough to shade a multitude of people. Depending on the conditions, we have an umbrella handy and can carry it with us in the closed position, or even leave it at home if we think we will not need it. In any case, we use an umbrella to create a space for shelter from the elements.

The umbrella metaphor is useful when we are confronted with a challenging communication interaction. Do we need an umbrella? How large should it be? When should we put it up? Who should be under it? Who should hold the umbrella while it is in use? Instead of putting up the umbrella, should we move to a location where the elements don't threaten us? In chapter 8 we talk about "process management" as the *how* of our communication interactions. Attending to process considerations is one part of creating the space in which to communicate.

Creating this space for our interactions is an act and an attitude. We have to own an umbrella, and we need to have the intention to use it. When we possess the ability to act and believe that we can create a secure and safe place to interact, we open up the possibility to witness the moral stories of individuals and communities. Sara Cobb sees that communication in conflict situations can illuminate *moral discussions*. Moral discussion is the reiteration of stories, elaborate plotlines, val-

ues, or character roles that reconfirm and anchor the moral of the story.¹⁴ If these stories shift, and the moral of the story evolves, a new moral frame has developed. Cobb relates this moral framework to conflict situations,

Parties in conflict are captured by the stories they tell about a problem, its antecedent, and the roles they played, and there is always a moral to their story, a theme that usually reconfirms, as do all other parts of the story, their description of the problem. Inevitably, the moral of the story is that the other has to change in some way, as well as offer restitution.¹⁵

Transformation occurs within this *sacred space*, this place under the umbrella, where we are secure enough to allow our stories and pre-conceived endings to change and evolve. We can allow interaction patterns to shift and stories to change, providing sacred spaces for transformation of relationships and communities. How do we allow stories to shift?

Owning an Umbrella. We need to own the skills and attitude that allow evolution of perspectives, understandings, and convictions. Trainings and workshops that feature constructive communication practice and facilitative conflict management are a good place to start. University courses in listening, mediation, interpersonal communication, and community building also can equip us with healthy skill sets.

Using the Umbrella. Be confident enough to put up the umbrella and to share it. Inviting others into a secure space can be comforting but it can also be scary, as you now have new responsibility and duty to interact and negotiate the space. The following statements offer some ways to practice creating the sacred space under the umbrella.

- *It seems we are about to undertake a sensitive subject. Please feel free to talk about your perspective for a while.*
- *I know that positions often change in the course of conversation, so let's not hold ourselves to any commitments until we both agree that we are finished sharing.*
- *Hey, I have an idea: let's both talk about our views on this difficult decision for ten minutes and then begin brainstorming possible solutions.*
- *It sounds like you clearly know what you would like to happen in this situation. I hope we can hold off on deciding until we discuss this a bit more, and maybe even get some other perspectives before narrowing in on the right way to go.*

Closing Down the Umbrella. Two people might use a sacred space for discussion for a finite time, even a brief time. Imagine that

you want to decide where to go for spring break. You can set up a time, place, and some guiding principles. (*Let's both share some stories about the places we have ALWAYS wanted to go, and then talk a bit about other options. Let's try to decide before bed tonight.*) In other cases, you may need a sacred space that lasts for years. (*We need to build a strong foundation for our community relations. Let's create a way of communicating at these neighborhood meetings that allows us to grow and change and evolve into the strong healthy community we envision.*)

Moving toward Value

When differences present a challenging communication situation, we have the opportunity to transform the conversation from one that is positional and dogmatic (*This is what I believe and you need to accept it, as I will not change*) to one that is emergent and flexible (*For now, I have a strong opinion, and it is through our communication that I can strengthen that perspective or change it into the appropriate version*). Bush and Folger's empowerment and recognition that may occur within the interaction of the participants or the act of creating a sacred space for the interaction both invite transformation.

FROM CYNICISM TO CIVILITY

Youth sports in the United States have gotten competitive, ugly, and deadly. Parents engage personal coaches for children as young as preschool age, resulting in amazing skill levels and intense competition to get on a team. As the competition intensifies, the behavior of parents and coaches is sometimes ratcheted to a fever pitch. Fierce verbal attacks and even physical fights occur at the games. Consider the following examples.¹⁶

1. *A parent body-slammed a high school referee after he ordered the man's wife out of the gym for allegedly yelling obscenities during a basketball game.*
2. *A father of a T-ball player was briefly jailed after an outburst against an umpire during a game involving 5- and 6-year-olds. The accused threatened to beat the umpire moments before walking onto the field and starting a fight. A girl who was playing in the game suffered a minor injury when she was struck in the face during the scuffle.*
3. *A youth league baseball coach was barred indefinitely from coaching his Little League teams and was criminally charged for pushing, shoo-*

ing, and punching an umpire in the Little League. The umpire had disqualified two aluminum bats prior to the start of a 9- and 10-year-olds' game based on a safety rule.

This alarming trend coincides with the growing prevalence of disrespectful and cynical verbal and interpersonal communication. A London columnist sees that “cynicism is a new and dangerous ‘ism.’”¹⁷ Cynical views proclaim, *Don't get involved; nothing is going to change anyway*. People will leave a meeting and say, *Big deal, we spent four hours making plans, but I know none of them will happen. Why are we wasting our time?* The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes a cynic as a person “disposed to rail or find fault; one who shows a disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives or actions, and is wont to express this by sneers and sarcasm.”¹⁸ Our colleagues Ron Arnett and Pat Arneson have taken a close look at cynicism in their book, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age*. They recount cynical communication in television, at lunch conversations, in churches, and construction firms. Here is an example of cynicism in television.

A brief glance at television offerings reveals sitcoms that contain characters who are rude and insensitive to family and others, inviting an unthinking cynical response to important interpersonal relationships. Popular talk show formats quickly and openly discuss issues that require private deliberation inviting the audience to become communication voyeurs of an individual's personal trauma—again inviting a cynical response to another's problems. Essentially, we must ask who gets a stranger look—a person offering a cynical response to an action or idea, or a person interpreting an action or idea within a positive context?¹⁹

If this type of cynicism becomes routine, there may be disastrous long-term effects for society and culture.

What are the characteristics of this cynicism, other than being a negative attitude? Routine cynicism is unreflective; responses are automatic (given before one studies a situation), rejecting, disdainful, and/or not distinguishing the important from the trivial. Here are a few examples and their contexts: attending a wedding and remarking to the person next to you, “This marriage will never last”; discussing the upcoming elections, “I will not vote. Our votes don't mean anything anyway”; student at the first day of class, “No one gets an ‘A’ from this teacher, especially if you are a woman.” These examples show that cynicism is more than an attitude. This type of language does not help us live the harsh realities of our time. We acknowledge that there is cause for frustration and confusion as we attempt to make a better world and stronger relationships. It is a long, slow process in

many cases. How do we reconcile the hopelessness of the moment with a realistic and enduring sense of hope?

Cynicism and Hope

When we work to establish enduring communication that is constructive and a foundation for productive change, we cannot view cynicism and hope as the only two choices.²⁰ The opposite extremes can be self-correcting. We need to learn the appropriate place for cynicism, while relying on the strength of communication to open the door to hope. Being overly optimistic (marriage is forever; democracy always works; anyone can get an “A” in class) has downsides as do routinely negative reactions and comments. Communication can provide the means for finding balance between cynicism and hope. People experiencing differences can cocreate a story of respect and caring in uncertain times.

The building block for basic respect in this self-correcting communication is dialogic civility. We can keep our conversation going while we support our differences with “dialogue that embraces patience, persistence, and public discourse rooted in respect for the other.”²¹ Relational responsibility cannot be assumed; it is the result of hard work in forming healthy relationships at all levels. We have summarized some steps that constitute the move into civil communication, which also frames our vision of a respectful society.²²

- Privilege *listening*. Civility is exhibited by attending to the communication of the other, especially in situations where differences are difficult.
- Privilege *additive change*. The type of change that is enduring and satisfying takes multiple steps in multiple directions. Try not to look for spectacular change.
- Privilege the *between* of relationships. Whereas cynicism is about “me,” civility is about what is between “us.”
- Privilege *voice and inclusion*. We must be present and attentive to our voice and the voices of others. More than listening, we must be conscientious about each moment of each interaction.
- Privilege *face saving*. If we can preserve the public image that others want or need, we can carry on our conversations with respect and dignity.
- Privilege *finding meaning in times of change*. When our lives are disrupted by views different than ours, or by life challenges that seem overwhelming, we can still find meaning in the moment. Look for it.

- Privilege *an ethic of care*. We have relational responsibilities and can carry them out by letting go of the self-focus that accompanies cynical communication.
- Privilege *a community of memory*. We participate with ideas, people, and institutions. Keeping those ties alive and functioning is enabled by communication characterized by civility.
- Privilege *a willingness to meet broken covenants*. We will let others down, and others will disappoint us. These instances can be repaired and altered. Limitations are not showstoppers; they are only temporary roadblocks.

The process of establishing a foundation of civility can become a value system that shapes our interaction with others.

Moving toward Value

When we see our differences as an opportunity to value our interactions and our actions, we can move past the harm that comes from privileging conflict and cynicism. Dialogic civility is an invitation to move in a direction where respectful communication keeps the conversation going in the midst of diversity.

FROM SOLUTIONS TO PLATFORMS

Transcending Violence: Four Capacities

Those who follow peacemaking in all its dimensions and pursue processes and skills to assist in the path to managing conflict appreciate the decades of contributions and experiences of John Paul Lederach.²³ With extensive experience as a peacebuilding practitioner, trainer, and consultant throughout Latin America, Africa, and the United States, Lederach pioneered the development of elicitive methods of conflict resolution. The key to his work is found in his definition of “elicitive.” The point is to help people expand their customary ways of thinking about problems and solutions. Lederach has distilled his twenty-five years of experience to one question that must be answered if we are to redefine human affairs so we can construct positive social change. *How do we transcend the cycles of violence that bewitch our human communities while still living in them?* To answer that question, Lederach offers us a refreshing concept: *moral imagination*.

Imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in a pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.²⁴

These necessary and vital capacities are in reach.

Carrie Billy is the associate director for the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC). This organization is the voice of the 36 tribal colleges and universities (TCU) in the United States. The TCUs mostly exist on Indian land, and provide hope for the Indian communities in a variety of ways. Higher education offers the tribal people a chance to learn and retain their culture, traditions, and language while building economic development and community development. As in any group, differences abound within the AIHEC; differences in education (*How many PhDs do you have on the reservation?*); differences in culture (*The customary way to make wild rice is this way*); historical differences (*The Crow and Sioux are traditional enemies*); geographical differences (*Woodlands Indians understand trees, Plains Indians know buffalo*); and even personal differences arise (*Why would we want to hire a white person to become the CEO of our casino?*). Carrie Billy and AIHEC demonstrate moral imagination in their decisions and their work.

1. *Imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies.*
In the Indian world, the centrality of relationships is crucial. When differences exist, it is important to imagine the web as something larger and more encompassing. When questions about federal funding changes looked like it would further polarize competing tribes, AIHEC convened a meeting of presidents of the TCUs and leaders of various federal agencies to *create together* some paths forward.
2. *Sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity.* Ask questions that move past an either-or mentality to a variety of options you would genuinely like to know more about.

I have been wondering about your strong stance against bringing wireless technology to your reservation. What is it about this service that makes you so hesitant?

I heard you mention your hope that your tribal college could offer a masters degree program someday. I am really curious about that hope. If it did come to pass, what would the costs and benefits be? Tell me more about your work with these other colleagues. How were you able to create this initiative with the Woodlands tribe over such a long distance?

3. *Believe in the pursuit of the creative act.* People are often willing to take the time to use various mediums and environments to help them make plans and decisions. AIHEC has invited time for outdoor hikes and contemplative walks while mulling over decisions. They have offered colorful storyboarding on walls while participants are engaged in planning. One large event with TCUs had a native man situated right in the center of the room, drawing scenes from various stages of the meeting. Almost every meeting, no matter what configuration of native or nonnative people are in attendance, begins with the burning of tobacco and a prayer, centering people on the task at hand. Songs and storytelling at breaks and meals bring creative energy to a group deliberating a tough issue.
4. *Accept the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.* It is a risk to communicate respectfully with those with whom you disagree. Indian reservations have notoriously high rates of unemployment. As two competing groups discuss a finite government grant to assist with job creation, it is difficult to share hopes, plans, and resources. At one planning session where the 36 TCUs were contemplating collaboration on nationwide tribal technology infrastructure, attendees were given questions to contemplate before they returned the next day.

Think of a technology success you have accomplished in the last two years. Describe it, and list the resources (time, money, people, equipment, etc.) that were in place to enable your success. Where else in your college or community could you use these resources to improve life for your people?

The results of this discussion were then shifted from a local focus to national, asking how local resources could be used to create improvement for Indians throughout the United States. Participants accented the potential risk of sharing resources.

These capacities show us that moving past our differences requires more than just the quest for a “solution.” In fact, solutions that end a conflict are hard to find. As we have explored in the previous reorientations, we are looking to change the expression of conflict and provide avenues for redefining human relationships and affairs. Lederach invites us to move away from a linear path that takes us to an agreement as a product. The conflict can be placed in a new context, a social and political space seen as an ongoing platform. The metaphor of a platform helps us envision essential building blocks for sustainable and constructive social change through the management of difference:



This strategy is not driven by the concern of how to end the immediate and most pressing symptoms of conflict, but rather focuses on how to create and sustain a platform capable of generating adaptive change processes that address both the episodic expression of conflict and the epicenter of the conflictive relational context.²⁵

Lederach also uses the metaphors of an antacid and an immune system. We have an upset stomach, even a lifetime of heartburn. We can buy acid-reducing pills to take every day. We can create temporary solutions to the stuff that bothers us. Building a dynamic platform for change creates an immune system. We help our body be prepared to fight off invaders and retain strength. Residents of Indian country find themselves experiencing devastating social problems, high unemployment, low high school graduation rates, and ongoing difficult decisions about assimilation with society. An antacid solution would be to entice a major corporation into the community to provide jobs. Take another antacid by dumping a bunch of money into a nicer gymnasium at the high school to entice students to stick it out in high school. Take one more antacid and strengthen the local police force to be tougher on drug use. Those are all admirable solutions, but if we want to meet the challenge of genuine change, we produce a platform that resides deeper in the web of relationships. The creation of colleges and universities on campus provide more of an immune system.

There are multiple processes encompassed in one support structure. The colleges work closely with high school and elementary schools to build motivation and expectation about education. The colleges offer opportunities for entrepreneurship and teach students about economic development to foster creative ideas for community vitality. The colleges also offer education on social issues that explore the most relevant and successful ways to address diabetes, addictions, violence, and depression. And as a significant piece of the immune system, the colleges provide jobs for the community.

Moving toward Value

What is required to build a platform for change in the midst of our differences? First, we must recognize that any solutions or agreements we are working on are systematically connected to a broader process of change embedded within the web of relationships. Second, we must recognize agreements and solutions for the temporary antacids that they are. If we are developing a solution that does not endure and provide long-term health, we may need to look deeper into the web of relationships.

Look at the newspaper and find a challenging situation where human differences cause deep conflict. In the related story, what solutions are proposed? Is there any talk of creation of a platform for enduring change? Scan the whole newspaper. Do you see more examples of solutions (antacid) or platforms (immune systems)?

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS CHAPTER

Differences are what make us human; they can coexist; they can purposefully work and live together as relevant voices and choices. When the differences become problematic, conflict ensues. The worst conflict occurs when difference becomes harmful. This chapter has explored new orientations that may require individual, group, organizational, or system movement.

1. From static culture to culture-as-process

Culture is not a checklist. Culture gives us a way to talk about the relationships of individuals to social groups and institutions. We can learn about the basic schemas, models, and assumptions inherent in those relationships and identify moments when they are in play and need to be attended to. Culture is a process that gives us more insights into complexity so we can hold up human differences as a valuable resource. Complexify!

2. From resolution to engagement
It is not necessary to resolve all conflicts. Once we grasp that freeing attitude, we can move forward and engage conflict and change the way we conduct ourselves within it. Resolution will happen in many cases, but it will happen within a complex system of needs, processes, actions, pauses, timetables, rehearsals, disappointments, and hopes. Engage!
3. From resolution to transformation
We can create sacred spaces where we transform preconceived morals that are unchanging and positional to moral frames where people can change their stories, feel empowered to know what and why they believe as they do, and recognize others for their contributions and evolving perspectives. Transform!
4. From cynicism to civility
Interpersonal communication gives us a chance to construct a value system of civility. Based on respect for the other, we invite dialogue among persons of difference. Civility!
5. From solutions to platforms
Conflict does not go away easily. Our differences will continue to challenge us and require us to move past quick solutions. We can create platforms of durable change by harnessing multiple responsive processes of change that are rooted in a relational context. Platforms!

Table 11.1 Moving toward Value

	Sphere of Harm	Sphere of Challenge	Sphere of Value
From static culture to culture-as-process	Republicans are so egocentric when it comes to social security.	Is there an element of the social security issue that transcends party lines?	I see that you feel strongly about this aspect of social security. What life experiences have led you to develop this perspective so strongly?
From resolution to engagement	He's such a classroom bully. Send him to the principal now so he can learn to be nice.	We should address the issue of classroom behavior.	If this classroom were running smoothly and we all felt comfortable, what would be happening? How could we create that future?
From resolution to transformation	The only way to save the owl is to prohibit logging.	Can we discuss logging techniques that might protect owl habitat?	Let's create some community dialogues about land use in the Pacific Northwest.
From cynicism to civility	Our weekly staff meetings are such a waste of time, and management is thoroughly unreliable.	These staff meetings provide an opportunity for relationship building and ensuring productivity.	We have a vision for our workplace and some goals we are striving to meet. We need to work together to achieve them. Let's take a look at the vision and goals.
From solutions to platforms	We either need marriage counseling or divorce planning.	We have a 15-year relationship that is in turmoil. What should we do?	Let's try to spend every Tuesday evening discussing our relationship and make it a high priority. Who else should be involved? What issues are most pressing? What will be the riskiest things to address? How should we conduct the discussions? Where should we conduct them? Do we need a third party to guide us? What other resources do we need?

Interactive Case Study

A COMMUNITY CONCERN

Context: This situation offers a land use and community issue that engages multiple perspectives and parties in a “conversation” about their future. A large retail giant, SuperMart, has proposed building a store in a previously rural area that is in midstages of growth. The exploration of the case will look at orientations that invite the constructive management of difference. Two role-plays will occur: one offers a glimpse of the sphere of challenge or harm; the other moves toward the sphere of value.

Opening exercise(s): There will be a community meeting where a developer will present the plans for the new SuperMart to be built in Our Town. For years, this area had been irrigated farmland. The family farmers had enjoyed selling their produce at weekend farmers’ markets and in small grocery stores. Over the past decade, many of the farmers have gone out of business or retired, as larger grocery stores and other retail offerings have begun to move into the area. The proposed site has been vacant for seven years. Geese, fox, and small animals can still be seen running across the field. The local school is located one block away.

Each stakeholder group will conduct preliminary research using the Internet, interviews, media, and other discussions. Each group will build a set of interests, experiences, hopes, and goals. After each group has done its homework, the class will participate in a role-play of this case and a series of discussions focusing on a variety of issues from this chapter. After the discussion, you will have a second role-play.

Divide the class into the following sets of stakeholders:

- SuperMart Representative
- Developer
- Neighborhood Association
- Local Business Association
- Environmentalist Group
- Local School Board

First Role-Play

For the first role-play, have someone be a convener or facilitator. This could be the mayor, the developer, or a city council member. Take some time in this role-play to explore the positions and interests of each stakeholder group. Allow everyone a chance to speak.

Discussion

Meet with your small groups to reflect on what happened in the opening role-play and what this means for your identity as a stakeholder group. Guide the discussion along five areas of focus:

Focus #1:

Complexify Culture: Within stakeholder groups, consider your group's culture again. Describe it in more complex terms. What are the unique distinctions that people within your group hold? Are these in-process in any way? Try to describe your culture as situational, flexible, and responsive to the challenges that come your way.

Focus #2:

Engagement: Have a discussion to consider the interests of the other stakeholder groups. What may be motivating them to hold their positions so strongly? What experiences might they have had to enable this stance? Using some of the points from this chapter, consider some methods of engagement for the upcoming meeting.

Focus #3:

Transformation: Consider the story that you have hardened in your mind and in your speech. Within that story, what are the dilemmas that arise? What gray areas are there for you? What do you wonder about as you consider this story and its implications? Can you create a "sacred space" where the moral of your story may change?

Focus #4:

Civility: In planning for your interactions in the upcoming meeting, remind yourselves, "engagement does not mean agreement." How can you speak with respect and invite respect for yourself? Plan for a way to keep the conversation going.

Focus #5:

Platforms: Using the metaphor of a platform, consider moving past quick solutions to a consideration of a platform that holds processes for durable change. Consider the web of relationships as a positive resource.

Second Role-Play

Hold role-play #2 with the new ideas created from new orientations learned in the focus discussions. What has changed? What did you notice about the interactions?

Endnotes

¹ Kevin Avruch, *Culture and Conflict Resolution* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1998), pp. 14–16.

² Avruch, p. 20.

³ Avruch, p. 5.

⁴ Avruch, p. 60.

⁵ Bernard S. Mayer, *Beyond Neutrality: Confronting the Crisis in Conflict Resolution* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 23–28.

⁶ Mayer, p. 145.

⁷ Mayer, p. 184.

⁸ Mayer, pp. 188–190.

⁹ Mayer, pp. 206–209.

- ¹⁰ Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger, *The Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
- ¹¹ Bush and Folger, pp. 13–14.
- ¹² Bush and Folger, p. 21.
- ¹³ Bush and Folger, pp. 22–23.
- ¹⁴ Sara Cobb, “Creating Sacred Space: Toward a Second-Generation Dispute Resolution Practice,” in *Bringing Peace into the Room*, eds. Daniel Bowling and David Hoffman (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), pp. 215–233.
- ¹⁵ Cobb, p. 218.
- ¹⁶ 1 February 2007, <http://www.naso.org/sportsmanship/badsports.html>
- ¹⁷ Mick Hume (January 28, 2005), “The Most Dangerous ‘Ism’ Now Is the New Cynicism,” 2 February 2007, <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/0000000CA8AB.htm>
- ¹⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- ¹⁹ Ronald Arnett and Pat Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope and Interpersonal Relationships* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 13.
- ²⁰ Arnett and Arneson.
- ²¹ Arnett and Arneson, p. 284.
- ²² Arnett and Arneson, p. 301.
- ²³ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- ²⁴ Lederach, p. 5.
- ²⁵ Lederach, p. 47.