

Bernard Mayer  
*The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*  
(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, 263pp.)

From his long experience as a mediator, Bernard Mayer writes *‘What makes a successful peacemaker or conflict resolver is not a set of processes, methodologies, or tactics; it is a way of thinking, a set of values, an array of analytical and interpersonal skills, and a clear focus.’* It is worth looking at some of the analytical and interpersonal skills he mentions.

The first analytical skill needed is the ability to understand the relative power and authority of the persons or groups involved in a conflict. Groups do not have equal power, as power can express itself in different ways. Negotiation is not a game of chess where each side begins with the same number of pieces. But, as in chess, much depends on the skills with which one uses the power available including one’s personal characteristics. *‘People may derive power from a broad set of personal characteristics that they bring to bear in conflict. Their intelligence, communication skills, physical stamina and strength, concentration, wit, perceptiveness, determination, empathy, and courage are key factors in determining how well their needs will be met in any conflict. Another factor is endurance. How long individuals can tolerate being in a conflict and how well they are able to withstand others’ power is a key aspect of their own power.’*

The analysis of relative power is important to understand when making a first contact with a group. If power relations are too uneven or of too different a nature, training or mobilisation may be needed as a first step before negotiations can start. *‘Sometimes individuals or groups must develop their potential to exercise power and demonstrate their willingness to use it before less confrontational approaches can be effective.’*

In addition to a finely drawn analysis of power relations, one must understand the nature and depth of the emotions involved with each party. *‘Emotions fuel conflict, but they are also a key to de-escalating it...Part of everyone’s emotional makeup is the desire to seek connection, affirmation and acceptance.’* As acceptance is important, adequate ways of dealing with all groups potentially involved in the dispute must be found so that no one can feel ignored

Dealing with emotions is an important skill. *‘Sometimes it may be necessary to let a conflict escalate somewhat, enough to deal with emotions but not so much as to impair people’s ability to eventually deal with the situation constructively. The art of dealing with conflict often lies in finding the narrow path between useful expression of emotions and destructive polarisation.’*

The third analytical skill which Mayer stresses is finding the right level of depth at which to start in the resolution of a conflict. This skill is also called “level of entry”. As Mayer writes *‘Only through interacting over time with key players can we understand the roots of a conflict in a practical and usable way. The art of conflict resolution is highly dependent on the ability to get to the right depth of understanding and intervention in conflict.’*

*; All conflicts have many layers. If one starts off too deeply, one can get bogged down in philosophical discussions about the meaning of life. However, one can also get thrown off track by focusing on too superficial an issue on which there is relatively quick agreement. When such relatively quick agreement is followed by blockage on a more essential question, there can be a feeling of betrayal. This is why the mediator must probe the layers of the conflict, trying to estimate which ground is too soft and which too hard.*

*l The difficulties of finding the right point of entry is illustrated in the difficulties of the “Oslo accords” between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The hard questions were to be left for last in the hope that earlier agreements would build an atmosphere of trust and cooperation which would allow the most difficult questions to be faced later. However, the earlier agreements did not modify the daily lives of the people enough to create an irreversible wave of support for the “peace process”. The earlier accords also did not modify enough the balance of power between the two sides so that the whole process was blocked when the most difficult “final status” questions started to come up. It is true that often we must work on a conflict in a sequenced way because only through progress at a more accessible level can progress be made at a deeper level. However, an overall vision is necessary, and knowledge of how one aspect of a conflict influences the others is important.*

*Of the interpersonal skills, communication is the most important, both for the protagonists and for the mediators. At the heart of both conflict and conflict resolution is communication. Conflict frequently escalates because people act on the assumption that they have communicated accurately when they have not. People can work on improving communication even in very intense conflicts. Communication is one of the greatest sources of both difficulty and hope in dealing with serious conflict. We need to improve our skills of communication through practice and self-analysis as we do in music, typing or sports which must become largely automatic action.*

*All human communication is multi-dimensional. All individuals convey meaning through what they say, how they say it, and what they do not say, through both verbal and non-verbal messages and through both emotional and rational components of their messages. As Mayer notes “Good communication requires focused energy. When people focus their attention, their energy, and their best listening and articulation skills on an exchange, others generally feel respected, even in the midst of conflict... Communicating clearly in conflict takes courage. Delivering difficult messages powerfully, clearly, and at the same time respectfully is often a daunting challenge... Of course, good communication alone can not resolve deeply rooted problems if other conditions are not favourable. Communication is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the resolution of complex conflicts.”*

*Bernard Mayer’s emphasis on analytical and interpersonal skills provides an outline for a possible training programme in conflict transformation work:*

*First is the analytical skill of mapping power: “Who gets what, when, where and how?” This requires a certain historical knowledge – how long have these patterns of power been in place? Are there signs of change? What would be needed to modify the power position of those currently weaker? What are the differences between the power structures in the rural and the town settings?*

*Second is the analytical skill of mapping emotions. What emotions are socially acceptable and under what conditions? What groups are allowed to express emotions more openly than others? What emotions are repressed? What role do emotions play in the course of discussions, discussions in small groups, in larger meetings?*

*Third is the analytical skill of mapping the strata of conflict – a skill akin to that of a geologist who must analyse a mountainside by looking at the visible strata. How old is this conflict? What have been the periods when much silt was deposited? When were the periods when little happened? By looking at these strata, where would one start to dig? How far can one dig before the whole section of the mountain falls? What is the best level of entry if one is to build a shelter in which all the parties can find a place to talk?*

*Finally, there are the interpersonal skills of communication for which people can be trained. While Mayer's book is not a training guide, there is much of value if one were setting up a conflict transformation training programme.*

*René Wadlow*

