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chapter one

the art of conflict

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> The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.
>
> *F. Scott Fitzgerald,* The Crack-Up

When we intervene in conflict, whatever our role, we inevitably address how people think about their disputes. We may believe that we are trying to hammer out an agreement, change the way people communicate, or help them through a healing and recovery process. However, we do not really change the dynamics of a conflict unless we change how those involved see the challenges before them, the people they are in conflict with, or the way in which the conflict has arisen and developed.

This is also true for ourselves. Unless we change how we make sense of our own conflicts, we are unlikely to change the fundamental way in which we approach them. These changes may be minor or transformative; they may be conscious or unrecognized; and it may never be clear to anyone, including ourselves, just what happened to alter these narratives. But unless disputants understand and experience their situation in an altered way, they are unlikely to improve their approach significantly, and the impact of our intervention will not only be ineffective but will probably be unrecognized.

Although changing how people think may seem like a daunting task, it lies at the heart of how we repeatedly make a difference in conflict. Conflict professionals, as a field of practice, have equated

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our impact on conflict with the intervention roles we play (mediation, facilitation, arbitration, advocacy, systems design, coaching), the tactics we use (reframing, active listening, looking for agreements in principle, identifying underlying interests, empowering participants), the forums we employ and create (negotiations, policy dialogues, consensus decision-making processes, restorative justice programs, settlement conferences), or the purposes we bring (resolution, transformation, healing, peace building, communication, decision making, engagement). All of these are important defining principles for how we approach our work in conflict, but none really gets at the heart of how we make a difference. Though important tactics, processes, and roles, exactly *how* do they move a conflict forward in a more productive direction?

In *Dynamics of Conflict* (2012), I discuss five essential elements that we bring to the table as conflict interveners that make a difference in the way people interact. In essence, we

- Create a new structure of interaction
- Bring a set of skills that help promote more constructive interchanges
- Introduce a specific approach to intervention
- Bring our values
- Incorporate our personal qualities

Each of these helps frame the way we work on conflict and is an important avenue for making a difference. But just how do they make a difference?

I suggest in this book that the core of what we do is to help disputants change their approach to seven fundamental paradoxes about the nature of conflict. We can understand each of these as a dilemma, polarity, contradiction, duality, or paradox that frames how people view conflict and that limits their ability to be flexible

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and creative. Everyone involved in a dispute, including conflict professionals, tends to stumble over these polarities or tries to find easy ways to rectify the very real contradictions they represent. The more people succumb to dualistic thinking in response to these polarities, the more they become trapped in a conflict. And the more we as interveners buy into these dualities, the less effective we are in helping others find a constructive way to move forward. However, if we're able to see these polarities as guideposts for finding a way through conflict—and that each element of them is an essential part of the larger truth that conflict presents—we can achieve profound and meaningful intervention.

We can view these polarities collectively as the *conflict paradox*—the inevitable and defining contradictions that we face when deciding how to approach a conflictual interaction. In essence, the conflict paradox is about the intellectual and emotional maturity that we bring to conflict. The higher the stakes, the greater our tendency to view these polarities in a more primitive or immature way—to believe that we must *choose* between one side or the other and to see one element as right and the other as wrong. For example, we may view the situation as either hopeless or as very resolvable. We may feel that we cannot trust the other side or that we should fully trust them. We may decide to engage fully in conflict or to avoid it entirely. We may believe that we take either a thoroughly cooperative stance or we zealously compete. In this way, conflict induces a dualistic and simplistic way of thinking. But effective conflict work requires a more sophisticated, nuanced, and complex approach that recognizes that in most instances, both sides of these polarities must be embraced, and we have to get past understanding them as contradictions. The central premise of this book is that these polarities are genuine paradoxes. They appear to offer either-or choices or divergent realities, but the higher truth is the one that embraces the unity of both elements.

This does not mean that we necessarily accept in a nondiscriminatory manner the truth or the validity of all approaches to

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conflict. We may continue to believe that one side has the moral high ground, the more reasonable approach, the greater need, or the more persuasive argument. But it doesn't serve us well to allow this belief to lead us into a primitive view of the conflict or the potential approaches that can be taken to it. And it is our job as interveners to help disputants see the situation they are in and choices they face in a more sophisticated way.

We do this by working on seven essential dilemmas that disputants face in approaching a conflict. Each of these is generally experienced as a polarity or dualism—a pair of opposites that require a decisive choice between them. The challenge we face is to help others—and ourselves—move to a more nuanced, more complex, and less bifurcated view. Of course, disputants seldom understand it in these terms. As a result, they often fail to recognize the process of choosing how to view a conflict or even the fact that we are choosing a view at all. However, in conflicts large and small, intense or mild, we must find a way of working with these dualities. The way we do this determines to a large extent how we think about conflict and therefore how we react to it.

We will discuss each of these conflicts in a separate chapter. Taken together, they constitute the conflict paradox:

- **Competition and cooperation** We view these as opposite strategies that disputants must choose between. A more nuanced view may suggest a mixed strategy, combining cooperative and competitive moves, but it's even harder to grasp that competition requires cooperation, and without competition the motivation to cooperate is absent. Almost every move we make in conflict involves both cooperative and competitive elements; without one, we really cannot have the other.
- **Optimism and realism** Optimism without realism is not meaningful; realism without optimism is a dead end.

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A constructive approach to conflict can occur only when both are at play—when we are motivated by optimism and guided by realism.

- **Avoidance and engagement** We cannot avoid or address all conflict. In addition, all conflict moves involve a mixture of conscious and unconscious decisions about how and what to engage and avoid. The decision to address one conflict inevitably involves a decision to avoid another.
- **Principle and compromise** People tend to act as if compromising on important issues is unprincipled or cowardly. We believe we must decide whether to carry on a conflict in a principled manner (i.e., in accordance with our most important values or beliefs) or to compromise on something essential to us; yet we never want to forgo our essential principles, because they are the guideposts that help us through all of our decisions in conflict. But without compromise, we can do nothing to advance them.
- **Emotions and logic** We frequently hear that the key to dealing with conflict or being effective in negotiations is to be rational and to hold our emotions at bay. However, emotions are an important source of power and an essential tool for moving through conflict constructively.
- **Neutrality and advocacy** The line between these approaches to conflict is much thinner than we may think. Conflict interveners have to be effective advocates for disputing parties and for the process while bringing an impartial perspective.
- **Community and autonomy** The dynamic tension between our need for community (interdependence with others in our lives) and autonomy (independence) infuses our thinking and action throughout conflict.

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All disputants have to deal with these polarities, and all interveners have to find a way of helping parties find their way through them. Together, they define the conflict paradox; simultaneously, they are our greatest challenge as interveners and offer us the greatest potential to make a genuine difference. We can see every move that someone makes during conflict as an expression of at least a momentary choice about how to handle these dilemmas, and every intervention by a conflict specialist as an effort to help people approach them in a more nuanced and sophisticated way.

What We Bring to the Table and What the Table Brings to Us

As in all professional endeavors, what we as interveners think we are all about and what is important to us are not always the same as what our clients want or what the circumstances allow. For example, conflict professionals tend to believe that the purpose of our intervention is to find an outcome that meets everyone's needs as much as possible—a fair, reasonable, balanced way forward through a conflict. But this is often not even *close* to what disputants want or to what a decision-making structure may allow. Consider the following scenario:

> Pauline had worked for HZD Industries for three years. She had filed several grievances during this time, mostly against her immediate supervisor, Luis. None of these had led to a favorable finding for Pauline, who felt exploited and misunderstood by "the system." After a couple of unsatisfactory performance appraisals (both of which Pauline dismissed as yet another example of Luis's determination to "get her"), HZD's management terminated Pauline. Again she grieved, and came to mediation requesting reinstatement, a pay raise, and an apology from the company.

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In a circumstance such as this, it may be that the company wants to agree on a reasonable severance package and that Pauline's most important goal is to receive guidance and financial assistance while moving on to a new job. If that is the case, there is at least some overlap between each party's goals and the purpose of the interveners. But it may also be that while management feels obligated to go through mediation, they also believe that they have already given all they can or "put up with enough" from Pauline. And perhaps Pauline is simply determined to give them a piece of her mind and to find a way to "publicly shame them." In that case, our goal as interveners may well be at cross-purposes with those of the parties. We may realize while working through these competing goals that this case has no business being mediated—or it may cause us to redefine our objectives in some way.

Every intervention poses this dilemma, in a sense, because interveners and disputants inevitably have different goals or needs. Where an intervener may want to lower the level of conflict or end it altogether, a disputant may want to have her say and to get her way as much as possible. And while interveners see the necessity of giving everyone involved a voice at the table and an opportunity to promote their legitimate interests, disputants are usually more interested in making sure their own voices are heard and their own concerns addressed. They do not necessarily care whether other parties are satisfied or have had a significant voice in the outcome.

These differences are not signs of poor faith, but they are important. They reflect the different roles that disputants and interveners play in conflict and the necessarily different values and goals that accompany them. One result of these differences is that disputants and interveners often come down on different sides of a paradox. Our response as interveners often is to try to balance an overemphasis on one element by promoting the opposite. Unfortunately, if we merely seek balance—instead of trying to move beyond the polarity—we may evoke resistance and can actually create a more

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entrenched view of the choices that people face. For example, consider the following possible approaches that interveners might take in Pauline's case:

- Pauline and HZD see themselves in a competitive relationship and feel the need to compete effectively. In response, interveners may want to urge them to cooperate and look for integrative outcomes.
- Pauline and HZD feel pretty hopeless about coming to any agreement, and as a result interveners feel that they should be encouraging and optimistic.
- Pauline and HZD view this as a matter of principle, whereas interveners try to encourage compromise.
- Pauline and HZD want to assert their independence (autonomy) from each other by denying that they are in any way dependent or vulnerable to the other, whereas interveners may want to encourage them to look at their interdependence (community) by focusing on potential areas of mutual interest.

Because of the difference between what we bring to the table as interveners and what the disputants want—or what the structure of the interaction demands—interveners are always negotiating our way through these polarities. This is the heart of our challenge. We do not meet this challenge, however, by asserting only one side of the polarity—usually in opposition to the element that we believe is perpetuating a conflict. We meet it by embracing both aspects—in Pauline's case, the need for her to compete effectively if cooperation has any chance to succeed. We must seek the truth that encompasses both sides of these polarities (remember that genuine optimism must be realistic). When we truly grasp that what we perceive to be polarities and mutually contradictory choices are not that at all—but are, in fact, paradoxically, essential aspects of the

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same reality—then we can begin to make a difference in how we approach a conflict.

How Contradictions Make Us Who We Are

Why is it that conflicts or disputes are the defining characteristic of our field? These terms are the central concept in the names of most major professional organizations in the United States (for example the Association of Dispute Resolution, the Dispute Resolution Section of the ABA, the International Association for Conflict Management) and elsewhere (for example, LEADR Association of Dispute Resolvers in Australia and New Zealand; Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution [CEDR] in the UK; the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes [ACCORD] in South Africa). Most graduate programs also organize their names around the concept of conflict or dispute intervention. The major alternative is to invoke a *role* (mediation—International Academy of Mediators) or a *type* of conflict (Association of Family and Conciliation Courts) that references, conflict by implication. We have become so accustomed to this that we don't question it, but it is not completely obvious that we should be organizing ourselves around conflict as our defining focus. We could define ourselves in terms of communication, decision making, peace building, negotiation, or problem solving. However, though we often use these terms as secondary descriptors for our work, they are not usually at the forefront of our primary professional identification. Instead, we focus on conflict—which I think is a good thing.

The entire human experience is defined by conflict. We evolved through conflict. Conflict is a principle force governing the growth of social and communal organization; it is a driving force in our maturation and development. Our economy is driven by conflict, as is our political process. We organize entertainment, sports, and recreation around conflict, and we learn through conflict. Conflict in this sense does not necessarily mean violence, animosity, or

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destructive behavior (although that, of course, is often part of the picture). Rather, it refers to the interplay of opposing forces and competing interests. The central role of conflict in our individual, familial, communal, and societal lives is why it is such a powerful phenomenon to wrap our professional identity around, and why our work brings us so close to the heart of the human experience and in so many different arenas—from international conflicts to family disputes, from grievances to large-scale environmental struggles. It is why the lessons learned in one area or level of conflict can shed light on the dynamics in very different arenas. It is why it makes sense for us to think of our field of practice as extending beyond the specific substantive types of conflicts we may be involved with and beyond our particular approach to conflict.

There is something about the nature of conflict itself that informs our understanding and our intervention no matter what our practice, which lends a depth to our frameworks and a significant collective meaning to our work. This does not imply that if we are experienced in one arena of practice, we are automatically qualified to work in others. A divorce mediator is not necessarily skilled at addressing complex environmental conflicts; an organizational conflict specialist is not automatically qualified to work on issues of elder care. But there is a common thread to all these approaches, and we are more powerful practitioners if we are open to learning and applying lessons gained from widely different areas of practice. As important as it is to develop the specific skills and obtain the particular knowledge that any one area of conflict intervention requires, it is also imperative that we continue to delve into the nature of the underlying unifying concept that ties the different strands of conflict work together. One of the universal thrusts of all approaches to conflict and of work in all arenas of our practice is the need for interveners to deal with the conflict paradox in some way. Although they can appear in broadly different forms, the seven key polarities are almost always present when we deal with conflict.

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In fact, paradoxes and dualities are part of every element of our lives—and they provide the foundation for some of our most powerful intellectual traditions. Virtually the entire course of philosophical investigation into the nature or our existence is organized around the interplay of ostensibly conflicting or contradictory ideas, forces, or concepts. For example, Plato and Aristotle differed on whether the world of appearance (the realm of senses) or the world of forms (the realm of essence) should be the primary focus of philosophical investigation (Copleston 1985). The creative tension between these two philosophical approaches can be viewed as the foundational tension for the entire course of Western philosophy. We can see it in the contending theologies of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine (Kenny 1994; Burnell 2005) in the centuries-long debate about the distinction between the soul and the physical self (Crane and Patterson 2000), and in the argument between Descartes and Spinoza over whether there is a genuine distinction between the immaterial mind and the material body (Spinoza 1985; Descartes 2008). Current research in neuroscience has revisited and reframed the debate between Descartes and Spinoza about the interconnection between feelings and thinking (Damasio 2003). The central role of contradictions and their resolution into higher order of contradictions is at the foundation of both the Hegelian and Marxist concept of dialectics, where one historical reality breeds a contradictory reality, in turn leading to a higher-order reality that combines elements of each (Hegel 2004; Marx and Engels 1972).

Paradoxes and contradictions are central to modern science as well. The bulk of twentieth-century theoretical physics was dominated by the struggle between relativity and quantum mechanics. Both theories have addressed a seemingly paradoxical phenomenon—the behavior of light in particular as both a particle and a wave and of the duality of matter and energy more generally. The tensions among these apparently contradictory

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insights continue to be an essential creative driving force of modern physics (Lindley 2007). (For a discussion about how the wave particle dichotomy in physics parallels challenges faced by negotiators, read Ran Kuttner's "The Wave/Particle Tension in Negotiation" (2011). The theory of evolution deals extensively with the interplay between competition and cooperation in the struggle for species survival. We will return to this in the next chapter when we consider that particular paradox.

A Developmental Perspective

Developmental psychology provides important insights into how we respond to conflict. Most developmental psychologists argue that we proceed through developmental stages by resolving, in ever more sophisticated ways, basic conflicts between our individual needs and the demands of our environment. For example, Jean Piaget (2001) describes two fundamental mechanisms by which infants and children develop an awareness and the capacity to make sense of the world around them: assimilation and accommodation. He describes assimilation as involving the incorporation of new information within our existing way of thinking; in accommodation, we change our thinking to account for new information. Throughout life, there is ongoing interaction and struggle between these two approaches that is essential to our cognitive development. As we mature, we develop more complex and therefore adaptive methods of making sense of the world, but these two approaches are continually in play.

Piaget's work has been modified and adapted by others, most notably by Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), who focuses on the child's moral development; Carol Gilligan (1982), who has brought in the perspective of feminist theory; and Robert Kegan (1994), who has incorporated a cultural and environmental perspective. Kegan suggests that as we reach more advanced developmental levels, we increase our ability to handle complexity, and he makes particular

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reference to our capacity to deal with paradox, contradiction, and dialectical processes.

Conflict provides us with both an opportunity to grow and a vehicle to regress. As disputes escalate, we are more likely to resort to ways of thinking and behaving that are characteristic of earlier stages of development. Our challenge in working on conflict is therefore to help promote more complex thinking that accepts ambiguity, the truth in seemingly contradictory realities, and the truth in the contradiction or paradoxes themselves.

There is a well-known fable about two Jews in conflict who consult their rabbi, who in traditional village culture was not only a religious leader but an arbiter of conflicts as well. One version of this parable relates the tale of a married couple who have been fighting furiously and are considering a divorce. The woman goes to the rabbi and complains about her husband's poor record as a provider, father, and partner. After listening carefully, the rabbi replies that he understands her point of view and that, indeed, she is right. Then he speaks to the man, who says that no matter how hard he tries, how much he contributes, and how patient he is, all he gets from his wife is criticism, rejection, complaints, and anger. The rabbi again listens carefully, appreciates his point of view, and tells him that he is, indeed, right. After the man leaves, the rabbi's wife, who has heard all of this from the next room, confronts her husband, saying that they presented conflicting stories and can't both be right. After due consideration, the rabbi turns to her and says, "I understand what you are saying. You are right."

In a sense, this is what all effective conflict intervention is about—developing a greater capacity to accept the truth in seemingly contradictory realities, needs, and points of view. There is not only truth in each side of a polarity, but the polarity itself conveys a truth. A key intervention challenge, therefore, is to help people approach situations that are likely to induce more primitive ways of thinking with instead a more complex and sophisticated mindset.

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How Conflict Promotes Less Complex Thinking—and Simpler Thinking Promotes Conflict

As clashes escalate, disputants are more likely to see their choices in simpler and starker terms, and they are more likely to cast the conflict as a matter of right or wrong. As a result, they tend to latch on to one side of a polarity and to assume that their adversaries are doing the same (although not necessarily the same side). Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim (1994) suggest that escalated conflict is characterized by a switch to more aggressive tactics; a tendency to see the conflict as more all-encompassing in terms of issues, people, and consequences; and an increase in zero sum thinking (i.e., a win for one equals a loss for the other). They also suggest that as people become more embroiled in a conflict, they are likely to change their desired outcome from "doing well," to "doing better than others," to "wanting to hurt" those with whom they are in conflict. In other words, our thinking becomes more dualistic as conflict escalates.

All of us tend to look for explanations of what is happening in conflict that reinforce the positions we have taken or the actions we have engaged in. One of our reactions to feeling affronted or mistreated is to create a narrative that justifies our behavior and emotions—and one way we do this is to use what I have described elsewhere (Mayer 2012a) as explanatory "crutches." We ascribe others' actions to their being "stupid, crazy, or evil." Though there may well be stupidity, irrationality, or maliciousness involved in conflict, these "crutches" are very simplistic ways of understanding what has gone on, and they tend to justify our own behavior, even if it, too, could be viewed as "stupid, crazy or evil."

Another approach is to consider how we explain behavior that we experience as injurious. Are we likely to blame an action that we do not like on someone's character or on circumstances ("dispositional" versus "situational" attributions, to use the language of attribution theory [Allred 2000])? For example, if you have promised to meet me at a restaurant and you do not show up—do

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I ascribe that to your being irresponsible, flaky, self-centered, or unreliable or to your being held up in traffic, under a different assumption as to where or when we were to meet, in an accident, or unwell? In reality, all behavior is a combination of personal and situational factors; but the more serious the impact an event has or the greater our emotional reaction to it, the more likely we are to narrow our thinking about the causes of it—and the more likely we are to ascribe dispositional attributions. Consider an example from a significant international dispute: When Russia annexed the Crimea in 2014, popular explanations of this centered around the devious and authoritarian personality of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and criticisms of the American response focused on the personal failings of President Obama. While it is perfectly legitimate to criticize leaders for their approach to conflict, international disputes are rooted in a much broader set of factors, and it is important to understand these if we are to craft an intelligent response.

Conflict also narrows our view of the choices we have. We are more likely, for example, to believe we must either stand firm or capitulate (to "blink first" or not), to accede to someone else's needs or to protect our own, to behave in a principled way or to compromise, to exert power or to be passive. In fact, we can look at each of the polarities discussed in this book with this lens. The more serious the conflict, the more likely we are to believe we have to choose one side of a polarity, to view the other as coming entirely from one side, or to believe that one element of a polarity is a better way to be in conflict. For example, we may view ourselves as cooperative, principled, rational, objective, and out for the greater good of the community (or family, or country, or organization). We therefore see those we are in conflict with as competitive, irrational, emotional, unrealistic, and out for themselves alone. And the more a conflict escalates, the more we are likely to see things this way. So the more we see things in these polarized terms, the more we *contribute* to conflict escalation—even when we don't want to. We tend to assume that the side of the polarity

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we have chosen is the wiser or more moral element and that the approach of those we are in conflict with is not as good as ours (we are realistic, they are naive; we are principled, they are not; we are committed to the greater good, they are out for themselves). The value we put on our approach to a polarity, coupled with our tendency to dismiss the approach of others, deepens the conflict.

How We Promote More Complex Thinking

Our first challenge as conflict professionals is to make sure we are not swept into a more primitive and polarized way of thinking ourselves. We can start by simply identifying the polarities and the framing of these polarities that is occurring. For example, Pauline—from the case described earlier in the chapter—may be defining her situation as a "matter of principle." Perhaps the company defines it similarly, and therefore suggests that compromise would be "unprincipled." As discussed in chapter 5, this is a very potent but unhelpful duality. Our first step is simply to recognize this dualistic approach to the conflict paradoxes. A dualistic approach to one paradox reinforces a similar approach to others, and it is helpful to recognize this as well. For example, the more the disputants believe that they have to choose between principle and compromise, the more they are apt to feel they also have to choose between cooperation and competition. They may also believe that they can't be both impartial (objective) and effective in advocating for their convictions.

But we may find in any conflict that some polarities are less cogent or operative than others, and this may offer an opportunity to promote a more sophisticated approach. For example, Pauline may not be naive about her chances of prevailing; by embracing the reality of her alternatives, she finds cause for being optimistic about the ultimate impact of standing up for herself. She may also be able to embrace the roles of emotions and logic in reinforcing each other in this situation. That provides the intervener, or those

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negotiating with her, with some purchase in changing the overall way in which this conflict is understood.

If we can identify which polarities parties are buying into—and be aware of our own tendency to fall into some of these—we take an important first step in working toward a more complex understanding of a dispute. But simply achieving awareness isn't enough. We must then seek ways to challenge disputants (and ourselves) to move beyond a polarized or dualistic view of the choices we have in conflict—and, in particular, to take a more integrative approach to each of the seven dilemmas discussed in the following chapters.

There is no cookbook formula for how we do this. We get at it by posing new questions, framing the conflict differently, discussing the choices people face in a less dichotomized way, and helping people change the narratives with which they explain conflict. But the most important way we do this is by adopting a more integrative view ourselves. Interveners continually struggle to counter the pull of a more primitive, dualistic view of conflict and to promote a more complex, mature view. New incidents, re-stimulated emotions, the need to maintain in-group cohesion, and painful histories of conflict often reinforce simplification. Virtually every intervention conflict interveners undertake is in some way intended to make disputants' thinking (but not necessarily the issues themselves) more complex. As interveners or participants, we are torn by these forces as much as anyone else. The paradox here is that the more we engage in a conflict, the stronger the pull to polarize our understanding. The more we want to move in a constructive direction, the more important it is to see beyond the polarities.

Though this is the biggest challenge, paradoxically this also offers the biggest opportunity we have to make a significant impact. We can choose to take a more sophisticated view of conflict, and by so doing, we can make a difference in how others view it as well. And we don't have to ask anyone to give up his or her passion, commitment, power, or goals to do so. Instead, by reinforcing a complex view of conflict, we offer disputants a more effective way

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of understanding how to pursue their own interests. The chapters that follow present numerous examples of how this challenge arises in conflict and the ways both interveners and disputants have met it. Some of these efforts have been intentional; most have been natural responses to unproductive polarities. Not all have been successful.

Reflections from Practice

The most moving moments I have experienced as a conflict intervener have occurred when the parties involved begin to view each other differently—when they are finally able to move beyond their own stereotypes of each other and understand their choices differently. To employ a term that is overused in our field, these have been "transformative" moments on occasion; however, they have not always been large or dramatic transformations. Almost always, such transformations result from small changes in perception or understanding. Over time, the cumulative impact of these changes enables people to alter their view of a conflict and therefore to approach it differently. Sometimes, this has been very dramatic; at other times, these changes have been hardly noticeable. Seldom have these occurred because I have intentionally pushed for them; but by consistently working to create a more differentiated and complex view of conflict, I have inevitably had a part to play in these developments.

One of the most interesting changes occurred in a labor management conflict—when through a fairly amusing set of developments, the head of a bargaining team had to confront his own attribution biases.

> Alex was a long-term union activist, a skilled negotiator, and the chair of the negotiating team for a very large industrial union. Negotiations had broken down during the previous round of collective bargaining and

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a strike ensued—hurting not only the company and its workers, but also the economy of the region in which the industry was located. As a result, the union and management leadership, including each of their negotiating teams, agreed to attend a weeklong training on conflict and negotiation for which I was one of three trainers.

We decided to do an exercise based on the "Prisoner's Dilemma" (which I discuss further in chapter 2), in which participants were divided into teams that engaged with each other in a series of interchanges. In each exchange, the teams had to choose whether to deliver a competitive or cooperative message. If both cooperated, they would each receive a good score for that round; if both competed, they would each receive a poor score. However, if one cooperated and one competed, the competing team would score extremely well and the cooperating team extremely poorly.

The exercise involved ten rounds of exchanges. Before the final round (which was worth ten times the score of previous rounds), each team could select a representative to negotiate a deal with the other team. This team member would then have to take the deal back to their entire team before making the actual exchange. By coincidence, one team's representative—Tyrone—was the actual head of the negotiating team for management. Alex represented the other team. They agreed to exchange cooperative messages during their negotiation, and Alex's team did exactly that. But Tyrone's team reneged on the agreement and submitted a competitive message, thereby scoring a great point gain at the other team's expense. Alex was furious—even though this was just a game. He insisted that this was exactly how management always behaved,

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that it demonstrated why they could not be trusted, and that it was clear evidence for why the union had to take a hard line.

However, it turned out not to be that straightforward. The teams in the training were intentionally mixed, so that each had members from both management and the union. Alex's closest associate in the union was the union's second lead negotiator, Robert. During this exercise, Robert was on Tyrone's team. When Tyrone returned from the negotiation before the tenth round, he advocated for his group to abide by the deal he had reached. Robert, however, urged him to renege, saying it would be "fun" and that Alex would appreciate the move and have a sense of humor about it. Tyrone reluctantly agreed to go along with this.

When this came out in the post-exercise debrief, the whole mood in the room changed. Robert owned up to his role somewhat sheepishly, and Alex experienced some very distinct cognitive dissonance. His friend and ally had been the cause of the behavior that he had ascribed to management—and had condemned. Fortunately, Alex was also able to see the humor of the situation by this point—and he accepted that he was acting on stereotypes and had overreacted. Throughout the rest of the training (which was part dialogue, part negotiation, and all conflict intervention), this experience—which occurred at the very beginning of the workshop—served to mitigate the otherwise strong tendency of all sides to see any conflict in polarized terms.

This was a dramatic, powerful, and amusing interchange that exhibited both the strength of the polarization and some very interesting ways in which polarization can be broken down.

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For example, the venue for interaction was changed, diverse players were involved, the embers of empathy and insight were fanned, and we made shameless use of cognitive dissonance. But in very small ways, conflict interveners take similar action all the time. Consider this much more modest example—where *I* was the one who was engaging in dualistic thinking.

> A while back, I was riding my bicycle along a road that follows the north shore of Lake Erie near my home in Ontario. Though not a major roadway, there is a fair amount of local traffic as well as many bicyclists. I was cycling at about 29 kph (19 mph—I checked), when a car with Michigan license plates slowed down next to me, and the driver shouted something at me that sounded like, "Do you know that you are going 30 on this road?" and then drove off (the speed limit in that location is 60 kph, or about 37 mph). Actually, all I was sure that I had heard was the driver saying "you are going 30." The rest is what I thought I heard.
>
> I was riding about two feet from the side of the road, so the driver had to slow down to wait for traffic to pass before he could safely get past me, but this took only a few seconds. I assumed the driver was complaining about my biking on the road, and I shouted after him, "I have a right to be on this road. We share the road—sorry if I was not going fast enough for you!" I was annoyed and feeling righteously indignant. The driver shortly turned into a driveway and parked. I thought about stopping and asking him what his problem was—but decided to go on with my ride instead. The good news is that my adrenalin kicked in and my pace picked up for the rest of my ride.
>
> Clearly, I saw myself as a virtuous bicyclist and the driver as a bullying motorist who probably spent his

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time drinking beer in front of his large, wall-mounted, high-definition TV (my stereotypes were running rampant). I chose briefly to engage in a competitive (albeit in my mind principled) way, and then to avoid any further interaction. I thought my emotional reaction was fully justified.

And I might just have left it at that. But as it happened, I was also teaching a course on conflict at the time of this incident—and we were discussing the topic of "attribution theory" (Allred 2000). So I posted this description on our course web page and asked for students to comment on how this illustrated the concepts of attribution theory. The discussion opened my eyes to how many alternative ways I could have looked at the situation, to how reactive I was, and to how my behavior might have contributed to ongoing stereotyping between motorists and bicyclists. To be sure, I was aware of some of this or I would not have used this as an example; but even with all my work in this area, I was amazed to realize just how polarized my thinking was at that moment. Turning my experience into an exercise forced me to take a few steps back, hear diverse points of view, and generally submit to a significantly more complex analysis of the interaction than I was prone to engage in on my own. It turned out to be a rich discussion and a great learning experience for me.

We all experience everyday interactions of this nature, which can be both irritating and energizing. Whether these are trivial or momentous, we are challenged in each of them to create a narrative of what has occurred, our part in the interchange, and what our response choices are. Sometimes these narratives help move a conflict in a constructive direction; at other times, they limit

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our flexibility, polarize our thinking, and contribute to destructive interactions.

We are more likely to resort to dualistic thinking when we are upset, angry, or scared; when we have a long history of negative interactions with those we are in conflict with (or impute such a history by stereotyping); when important values are at stake; when we feel very vulnerable; when we are protecting our sense of who we are; when we believe we are defending others we care about very deeply; and when our ability to communicate with others is limited.

Mostly, we create these narratives instinctively. And we are not apt to change them, once created, very readily. However, we can and do change them, and in the process, we can become more conscious of our cognitive process. Equally, we can help other people become more conscious of theirs.

How we do this is the essence of the conflict intervener's art. The heart of our challenge is to recognize the conflict paradox and to work on the key polarities that are discussed in this book.