

### How We Understand the Public Resistance to What We Offer

If the public seems to accept the value premise of our field and if there is a genuinely high level of satisfaction with the outcome of conflict resolution efforts, why is it that people are so often reluctant to use our services? Why must the public be cajoled, persuaded, and even forced into using mediators? Why do people so frequently approach collaborative dialogues with foreboding, resistance, suspicion, or fear? One common explanation is that they don't understand conflict resolution or mediation, that they need more education, that it is still too unfamiliar. A second is that advocates, particularly lawyers, are threatened by the encroachment of conflict resolvers into what has traditionally been their domain and are therefore throwing up roadblocks and steering their clients away from conflict resolution processes. These dynamics may be present, and probably often are, but they hardly explain the persistence of this dilemma. For well over twenty years, the public has been hearing about and experiencing conflict resolution, facilitation, and other consensus-building processes. Lawyers and union representatives have often (though not always) embraced it, and many are eager to become mediators.

Some at least rudimentary knowledge of conflict resolution is very widespread. William Ury (2000) tells of an experience he had in 1995 on a little island off Papua New Guinea. He was walking by a local bar when some people inside called out to him and asked what he was doing in New Guinea. "I've come to learn about clan war and how to stop it," he said. "Oh you mean 'conflict resolution,'" was the response of a man who, it turned out, had just attended a workshop at his church about mediation (p. 131). Though the education may not be perfect, though there are many institutional roadblocks to the integration of conflict resolution processes into traditional decision making, and though some in the legal and advocacy community continue to show resistance, we are no longer in a situation of being an unknown entity about which the public is little informed. Something more is going on in relationship to the

public's reluctance to use our services—something that has to do with a lack of congruence between the values, assumptions, and interests of conflict resolvers and those of the public we seek to serve.

Two assumptions, both entirely in keeping with our values about conflict, will help us understand and react more productively to the issue of use and resistance. First, we should assume that the public knows exactly what it is doing and does not need some external authority to tell them how to proceed. Second, we should assume that if we dig deeply enough, we can find the level at which our interests and values and those of the wider public we serve are not in conflict—that an integrative solution is possible. If we assume the public knows what it is doing, then we have to go beyond the solution of more education and more mandatory referrals to conflict resolution processes. If we assume that we do have something to offer that is congruent with the public's interests, then we have to identify what it is and how we can offer it.

### What People Want in Conflict

What does the public, that is, people who are embroiled in conflict, want, and how is it different from what we offer? McEwen and others have pointed to an interesting paradox (McEwen and Milburn, 1993). When people participate in mediation, they report high levels of satisfaction, but nonetheless they resist participation. This pattern has endured for years. What is the source of the resistance? There are six needs that many feel will not be met by mediation or other consensus-building processes:

- *Voice*. People embroiled in conflict want to be heard, and heard in a powerful way by people whom they think count. These people are not necessarily those with whom they are in conflict, but instead are the people who represent social authority and cultural legitimacy. In traditional litigation, the judge represents that authority and legitimacy, although the actual experience of appearing before a judge does not always give people a sense of voice. The

premise of confidentiality, while allowing for a more flexible and low-stakes approach to the resolution of conflict, may actually interfere with people's ability to have a voice. This is also true in collaborative dialogues, which seem to provide far less a sense of public voice than do lawsuits, media appearances, demonstrations, and other forms of more public expression (Silbey, 2002).

Moreover, people want their voice to be expressed and heard in a way that reinforces their sense of who they are and is congruent with their values. If people's self-image and belief system reinforce consensus-building approaches, then they may be drawn to those forums, but many disputants are looking for an approach that promotes their sense of themselves as powerful, decisive, and courageous. Consensus-building approaches may not offer this kind of reinforcement.

- *Procedural justice.* When people say they want their "day in court," it is not just about being heard. It's also about being given the same fair opportunity to resolve their conflicts or meet their needs that they feel everyone else is being given. In fact, this might be naive, because the courts do not treat everyone equally. But they purport to, and this is the underlying presumption of a rule of law. Also, people believe that they more or less know the basic rules of the litigation game, flawed though they may be, even though their vision of these may actually be extremely distorted by the romanticization of legal proceedings in the media and popular culture. Whether through the courts or some other forum involving a process that people believe is clear, predictable, consistent, and powerful, people are looking for a process to resolve conflict that they view as just and fair (Welsh, 2001a). The very fact that conflict resolution processes genuinely offer a more flexible, individualized, and often private process can interfere with their ability to fulfill people's desire for procedural justice.

I was once asked to arbitrate a case involving the eviction of a public housing tenant for behavior threatening to his neighbors. Although it seemed quite clear that he would be able to achieve a better housing deal through a negotiated agreement, he insisted on

going through with the full panel hearing because he did not believe his case would have received a "fair hearing" otherwise. In particular, he wanted to make sure that the procedural rights the housing contract gave him were completely exercised before he would agree to leave the housing project, even though it was apparent that he would obtain a better outcome in private negotiations with the housing managers.

- *Vindication.* Disputants in traditional conflict resolution processes usually do not get the kind of vindication they desire, and mostly they know this, but there is always the chance that they might. Disputants do not usually see their conflict in purely utilitarian terms. Considerable normative aspects are generally involved. Disputants often believe that their conflict is not just about perceived incompatible interests, but about right and wrong, and that the needs of the different parties are not of equal worth. Vindication is therefore important—vindication in the sense that the outcome somehow furthers disputants' sense that they are right and that their cause is just. Seldom does this kind of vindication occur. The fantasy of a powerful representative of social norms looking down from the bench and indicating that one party to a dispute is just and righteous and the other shallow and evil may almost always be just that: a fantasy not likely to be realized. But it is at least conceivable. An analogous image is that of the righteous political forces sweeping the evil politicians or organizational leadership away and replacing them with people with virtuous approaches to public policy or corporate decision making. Such pure and simple solutions to serious conflicts seldom, if ever, take place, but they too are at least conceivable.

The premise of most conflict resolution practice is that the normative or value-based elements of conflict are not a productive focus and that people need to let go of their desire for total victory and accept an outcome that will meet their most essential interests. This is true whether we are talking about a medical malpractice suit, a divorce, a grievance, an environmental struggle, or the conflict in Northern Ireland. Thus, the very desire or need for vindication is negated in most conflict resolution processes. The problem is that

vindication may in fact represent people's deepest needs. Legal, political, or public confrontation approaches, although they may make it more costly and difficult to meet other needs in a creative and effective manner, do not reject the need for vindication as a premise to participation in the process itself. Conflictants are often willing to give up on the hope for vindication, but they are able to do this only if they feel they have given their best shot at obtaining it. Seldom do people feel that collaborative processes are their best shot.

- *Validation.* Related to vindication, but not quite the same, is the need for validation—validation of feelings and point of view. Most people who feel hurt, unfairly attacked, or victimized do not want to give up their angry or outraged feelings too readily. Many of us can recall a time when we have been reluctant to give up our righteous anger about something even though we learned that we were mistaken about what had occurred. We may have been happy to learn that the situation was not as awful as we had assumed, but it is still sometimes hard to give up the emotions that have been stirred up. Sometimes people refuse to accept new information simply because of this.

Most conflict resolution techniques do not require people to sacrifice their feelings and may even offer an opportunity to express them that is not available in more traditional methods. Nonetheless, the goal of establishing an integrative, face-to-face problem-solving forum makes it hard to maintain these feelings with the intensity that they have been experienced. By emphasizing personal interaction and the need to understand each other's point of view, most conflict resolution processes almost inevitably require a softening of the expression and often the experience of the emotional side of conflict. They also call on people to begin reexamining their often polarized, stereotyped, and simplistic view of each other. This is both a primary value of conflict resolution procedures and a negative incentive for those who are so committed to their views about others that they do not want them challenged by face-to-face interchange. The validation many conflictants desire is to some extent contraindicated by these typical approaches to conflict resolution.

- *Impact.* Disputants want to experience two types of impact: specific and broad. Specifically, people want to feel that they can have an impact on their own situation. In that sense, they want to feel empowered. The paradox here is that many forms of conflict resolution offer people the potential to have a more direct impact than traditional approaches, but to have confidence in their ability to have this impact, they have to have confidence in their own power—personal and structural. Often people engaged in serious conflict do not have such confidence. Effective conflict resolution processes can help them experience their power and apply it in a meaningful way. But they are often discouraged about engaging in these processes because they either do not sense that they can be powerful in these forums or they want to associate with the power of others, such as advocates. In many divorces, for example, parties are unwilling to give up the traditional use of lawyers as spokespeople or negotiators and to use them instead as advisers or consultants. This may account for some of the reservations that people express about divorce mediation or collaborative law. Even if people can be very powerful as direct parties to a negotiation, they often do not have confidence in or trust this personal exercise of power.

The desire to have a broad influence is a second dimension to people's desire for impact. This is related to their need for connectivity and meaning—to be part of a larger struggle or larger issue. In most conflict situations, disputants see their issue or grievance as part of a larger cause or drama. Each individual grievance in a workplace can readily be seen as a small battle in a larger struggle between labor and management. Each equal employment opportunity complaint can be viewed against a systematic background of institutional racism, homophobia, ageism, or sexism. Each environmental dispute can be seen as part of a larger struggle to preserve the environment or the economic viability of regulated organizations. While some conflict resolution processes address broader issues in ways that enable participants to experience the social impact of their efforts, these are the exception. In most situations, participants are asked to reach agreements about their individual conflict,



and these agreements are often private, confidential, and non-precedent setting. As a result, people often have to disassociate, at least in part, the immediate agreement or conflict from the larger social issue. This can undercut the sense that people want to have that they are part of a larger struggle.

- **Safety.** Finally, people want to feel safe and protected. For most of us, engaging in conflict feels risky and scary. When people overcome their avoidance patterns and take on a conflict, whether by choice or involuntarily, they are often pulled in conflicting directions. They want to feel empowered and effective, but also safe and secure. Conflict resolution processes attempt to provide a safe environment in which people can discuss their concerns without fear of retaliation, but for many, safety is more likely to be found in a different way. For some, safety is more likely to be experienced in a formal process with very clear rules and procedures. For others, it is more likely to be achieved through the use of representatives who will engage the conflict on behalf of the disputants. Ironically, for many people, the use of advocates or formal systems offers the (usually false) hope that they can both engage in and avoid conflict at the same time. Therefore, conflict resolution processes can sometimes seem less safe than more adversarial or advocacy-based approaches.

None of these key needs are necessarily contradictory to the premises of conflict resolution, and the alternatives to which people may turn are often no better at meeting these needs. However, the ways in which we have structured our services and thought about what we have to offer have often implied to disputants that they were going to have to give up their deeper purposes or needs in order to accept our help. If this continues to be the case, and people continue believing that they have to sacrifice their aspirations to achieve voice, justice, vindication, validation, impact, or safety in order to engage in conflict resolution processes, then we can continue to expect resistance to our services from those who are deeply embroiled in conflict. Unless we address these concerns, conflict

resolution as a field of practice will remain marginalized in impact and limited in scope. To address them, we have to challenge some of the most fundamental presumptions we have made about who we are and what we offer.

#### Four Problematic Assumptions of the Conflict Resolution Field

The underlying nature of the problem we face lies in our own self-identity—how we view who we are as a field and what it is that we have to offer people. We are victims of our own overly narrow view of ourselves and what it is we bring to conflict. This view may have made it easier for us to identify what it is we do and to market our services, but it has also led to a constrained view on the part of the public about what they can get from us, and more important, it has constrained our own thinking. We need to challenge four key presumptions about who we are and what we do:

- **We overidentify our work with the third-party neutral role.** As professional conflict resolvers, we almost always see ourselves as third-party neutrals. We may be mediators, facilitators, arbitrators, designers, or trainers. But almost always we see ourselves as neutrals. An essential part of our self-definition is that we don't align ourselves with any one group and that we look at problems "objectively" (whatever that means). In my career, I am almost always hired as a neutral, and my credibility to some extent revolves on whether I can project and maintain that stance. This is a great source of strength, but also a significant limitation on both the services we offer and the readiness of people in conflict to use us. With neutrality comes one source of credibility, but also many sources of mistrust and doubt. Neutrals may offer one means for creating a safe, flexible, informal, and creative forum for interchange, but they do not offer sufficient opportunities for voice, justice, vindication, validation, or impact. Also, to accept the use of neutrals, people in

conflict must buy into a certain presumption of moral, legal, and political equality. Therein lie the limits of neutrality and the suspicion many involved in conflict have about using our services.

Judges are perceived as neutral in some sense as well, but along with that neutrality comes the power of office, of social legitimacy. Judges carry with them the considerable weight of the social legitimacy that they convey. In the sense that they represent societal norms, judges are of course not neutral. In fact, they are expected to convey the potential of societal approbation or societal support through the decisions that they render. Mediators, facilitators, and other conflict resolution professionals do not offer that kind of social sanction. To the extent that people need this sanction, neutral conflict resolvers cannot avoid falling short.

Why is it that we have identified our role so strongly with the third-party neutral role? One answer is that the neutral stance appears to offer a clear message to the public about who we are or what we do. It simplifies our presentation of our values and our role. As neutrals, we purport to be clear about how we will think and behave. The values and ethical commitment that we bring to conflict are conveyed and defined by our commitment to being neutral. There are two problems here. One is that people in conflict often want or need something other than the intervention of third-party neutrals. When what they want is voice, vindication, or procedural justice, for example, neutrals offer very little. People intuitively understand this, but they don't typically articulate it in these terms. Instead, they resist, passively or aggressively, or simply avoid the use of third parties.

The second problem is that neutrality makes sense only as a statement of intention, not of behavior. We bring with us a set of beliefs, values, and interests to every conflict we enter, no matter how firmly we are committed to neutrality. Every action we take, or choose not to take, reflects this, and the disputants we work with are sensitive to this. So asserting ourselves as neutral may appear to clarify our role, but in reality it can easily serve to obfuscate or distort the nature of what we have to contribute.

The role of a third-party neutral is an important and powerful one, but only one of many roles that people in conflict need. They need consultants, advisers, advocates, teachers, representatives, and substantive experts, as well as facilitators, conciliators, and mediators. As long as the field of conflict resolution is so closely identified with the third-party role, it will neither be used nor trusted when people's essential needs are for some other form of assistance. This is not to suggest abandoning the role or practice of neutrals, but rather to enlarge our definition of the field beyond this.

- *We are too focused on collaborative problem solving.* A second essential feature of our self-identity is that we see our role as necessarily connected to collaborative problem solving. Conflict resolution is repeatedly discussed in terms of bringing different parties together to air their concerns, discuss their differences, and seek out collaborative solutions through dialogue and creative problem solving. When collaborative or integrative problem solving is what is called for, we can provide expertise in designing and conducting processes for achieving this. But frequently disputants are neither interested nor ready to seek a collaborative outcome. Instead, they often want help with noncollaborative approaches—ones that they hope will further their cause, achieve victory, and give them the chance to be heard in a powerful and decisive way. In many parts of Europe (for instance, France and Norway), it is unacceptable to use the term *collaboration* to discuss a constructive approach to resolving conflict because that term has been associated with cooperation with evil. (During World War II, collaborators were those despised individuals who cooperated with occupying Nazi forces.) People in conflict are often worried that the collaborative processes in which they are urged to participate will require them to give up something of basic value or to cooperate with what they believe to be evil or malicious.

- *We think our job is to resolve conflicts.* We are in the conflict resolution business after all. Our major organizations and educational programs usually contain the term *conflict resolution* or *dispute resolution* (or *mediation* or *negotiation*). Resolving conflicts is a fine

goal, but defining our field of practice in these terms poses some real problems. Medicine does not define itself in terms of making people healthy or curing illness. Law, engineering, psychology, and economics all shy away from narrow and instrumental self-definitions as well. We should too. The problem is that resolution is just one goal that we might have in relation to conflict, and a fairly poorly defined one at that.

We need to approach conflict in a much more diverse and complex way. Conflict is a process that is not always amenable to resolution, as we usually understand it. Often people experience and express a need for help in resolving conflict, although this can mean many different things (Mayer, 2000). But at other times, people in conflict want help understanding, surfacing, intensifying, or conducting a conflict, and then the goal of resolution can seem far off and almost irrelevant—especially if resolution means something other than victory. If we want to work with people enraged about racial profiling, government officials who feel that a citizens' group is completely unreasonable and inflexible, or individuals who believe their rights as an ethnic minority are being trampled on, then our offer to help them resolve their conflicts may seem totally irrelevant and may even provoke resentment. People in these circumstances believe that the only type of resolution that is currently available is shallow and temporary. Often resolutions or agreements can at best provide temporary resting places in an ongoing process of struggle. Those who offer resolution in such circumstances are therefore likely to be viewed as encouraging the abandonment of a deeply felt cause or belief and are going to be instinctively distrusted.

- *We don't view ourselves as having anything to offer people who want to continue and deepen a conflict.* The corollary problem to an exclusive focus on resolution is a failure to offer anything of value to people who want to remain in conflict, who feel that their purposes will best be served by continuing and deepening a conflict, and who feel that attempts at resolution are shortsighted at best, and possibly dangerous. The conflict resolution field has not given much more than lip-service (if that) to helping people engage in

conflict effectively and constructively. We have viewed this as neither our purpose nor our strength. This significantly limits the role we can potentially play and the degree to which we can affect the way conflict is conducted.

Do we in fact have anything to offer people in conflict that they cannot get more readily and effectively from other sources? Won't people wanting to conduct a conflict always be better off working with a lawyer or some other "hired gun"? Our future ability to have an impact on conflict and to find a more powerful role for our field may well revolve around the answers to these questions.

I believe that the experience, skills, understanding, and concepts that we bring to our work as conflict resolvers can be used to assist people who are committed to continuing a conflict. But to do this, we have to embrace the value of conflict itself in a more committed way than is the norm in our field. And we have to believe that there is a reason for conflict resolution professionals to help people engage more deeply in conflict. This means becoming more comfortable with the roles of advocate, coach, trainer, adviser, and negotiator and accepting these roles as appropriate for conflict resolution professionals. And it means understanding that what we bring to them will be very different and distinct from what lawyers, agents, political organizers, or decision makers bring (see Chapter Seven). If we fail to accept these roles, they will still be filled, but they will be less likely to be filled by people with a commitment to taking an integrative view of conflict and more likely to be occupied by people with a rights- or power-based view of how to approach conflict.

None of this is to suggest that the role of the third-party neutral, committed to helping people resolve their conflicts in a constructive and collaborative manner, is not important and worthwhile. I have spent twenty-five years working as a third-party neutral and I am committed to the value of this work. The work of neutrals will continue to be a necessary and important part of the conflict resolution field. But at the same time, we have to understand the limits of this



role and the problems with clinging to it as our sole approach to conflict. If we are going to overcome the resistance to our work, the criticisms of our efforts, and the limits in our ability to influence the way conflict is conducted, we are going to have to free ourselves from each of these four presumptions (which I consider further in Chapter Four) and develop a wider range of services and approaches that this implies.

### **What Conflict Resolution Offers: The Essence of the Field**

Challenging these assumptions will raise fundamental questions about our identity. What is our basis of unity, our reason for existence, and what connects those of us who identify ourselves as conflict resolvers? If the third-party neutral role is not at the heart of what we offer, what is? Should conflict resolution (or alternative dispute resolution) even be the descriptor we use to identify our work? Conflict resolution as a field consists of self-identified (as opposed to institutionally sanctioned) practitioners. For many, this is only a partial or secondary identification. Conflict resolution is not the field of origin of most practitioners. Most do not have a professional degree from a program in conflict resolution (although conflict resolution degree programs are proliferating), and relatively few make their living entirely from work that they identify as conflict resolution.

As a field, conflict resolution is loosely defined. Our attempts to strengthen this field have focused on institution building—developing credentials, standards for training, professional organizations, and certification procedures. However, whether conflict resolution prospers, grows, and becomes more widely accepted and more influential depends less on developing the infrastructure of a profession than on strengthening the clarity that practitioners share about the heart of what they have to offer and providing services accordingly.

Conflict resolution is more an idea, a vision, a set of values, or even a movement than a professional discipline. What is at the heart of this vision or values that can help us understand what our

potential role can be in conflict? If we are clear about this, we will be able to be more flexible, creative, and influential. I believe six key characteristics are at the core of what brings conflict resolvers together and of what we have to offer to people in conflict:

- *A focus on the integrative potential of conflict.* Regardless of the conflict or of our role, we are oriented toward understanding and achieving the greatest integrative potential a conflict situation has to offer. That is, we are committed to identifying that aspect of a conflict that does not require one party to sacrifice its essential interests in order for another party to meet its (Lax and Sebenius, 1986; Thomas, 1983; Walton and McKersie, 1980). At the same time, to be effective, we must not be naive about this. We must also be willing to assist with the genuinely distributive elements of conflict when a limited amount of value must be apportioned. Nevertheless, we bring a set of values and tools to encourage that the integrative potential of conflict is not overlooked.

- *A needs-based approach.* Some refer to this as an interest-based approach (Fisher and Ury, 1981; Moore, 1991; Brett, Goldberg, and Ury, 1988). I believe the essence of our approach extends beyond interests to a broader range of human needs (Mayer, 2000). Whether we define this as interest or needs based, the essence of this approach is a commitment to understanding conflict and negotiation in terms of the needs people have that are motivating them and that must be addressed for them to be satisfied with the progress of a conflict process. The most skillful conflict practitioners are able to discern and help different parties understand the rich and complex range of interests at play in a conflict. This can be differentiated from a focus on power or on rights as a means of understanding and conducting conflict.

But more significant, it means understanding the complex and often subtle relationship between power, rights, and interests and making sure that a focus on power or rights does not overshadow an understanding of needs. The focus on needs is what helps people think wisely and in a mature manner about the nature of a conflict and the

different possible roads through it. Related to this focus is a widely (although not universally) held commitment to carrying on conflict nonviolently—or at the very least to see violence and other coercive approaches to the application of power as a very dangerous tool to be applied with great caution.

- *A focus on communication.* Conflict intervenors must be communication experts, because communication is their central tool regardless of their role. What we have to offer people is assistance, advice, forums, and approaches for communication. This does not necessarily mean polite, friendly, direct, collaborative, or even tactful communication, but it does mean effective communication. Conflict can be understood as a means of communicating between people with different needs. Often the challenge for conflict resolvers is to find a way for conflict to be used to help people communicate with each other effectively, constructively, and with a minimum destructiveness.

In *Thirteen Days* (New Line Cinema, 2000), the popular film dramatization of the Cuban missile crisis, there is an interesting scene between Robert McNamara, the U.S. secretary of defense, and an admiral who was directing the fleet that was set to intercept Russian ships approaching Cuba. The admiral orders one of the ships to shoot star shells (harmless shells, fired as a warning) over the bow of a Russian ship, prompting an angry and tired McNamara to insist that no shots be fired without presidential authorization. The admiral says that these were not shots but just warning signals that were part of the U.S. Rules of Engagement that had been in place since the time of John Paul Jones. Frustrated, McNamara says: "You don't understand a thing, do you, Admiral? This is not a blockade. This is language, a new vocabulary, the likes of which the world has never seen. This is President Kennedy communicating with Secretary Khrushchev."

In a sense, all conflict is about sending clear and understandable messages, and even when people do not want to settle, they still have something important to communicate. Thus, communication is at the center of conflict.

- *A commitment to empowering disputants.* When people are in crisis, they often turn to others for assistance. The challenge for intervenors is how to help without disempowering. As a society and as helping professionals, we often respond to crisis by taking away power from the people in crisis. Conflict is often a form of crisis, and social institutions, such as the courts, often intervene by taking power away from disputants who are seeking help with the conflict. But to cope effectively with the crisis, people usually need to be assisted in becoming more empowered, better able to take control over their own lives. The best of intentions can often backfire and perpetuate a problem. This is true whether we are talking about psychological, familial, medical, economic, or community crisis. Across many different fields, an empowerment model of some sort is being advocated for people who are in crisis. Conflict intervenors face the challenge of helping people embroiled in conflict work their way through that conflict without further disempowering them.

- *Process focused.* While many conflict resolvers have entered into this work because of an interest in and knowledge about the substantive issues involved in conflict (for example, divorce, sustainable development, ethnic relations), what is special about a conflict resolver's role is this person's understanding and focus on process. Whatever the process may be—mediation, arbitration, collaborative decision making, negotiation, public agitation, or something else—one key role of the conflict professional is to help design, plan for, and conduct an appropriate process. While others may be more focused on the substance of the issues, conflict resolvers are particularly needed for their ability to anticipate and influence how the process unfolds.

- *System focused.* People embroiled in conflict tend to focus on their immediate needs, the particular relationships that they are feeling conflicted about, or the specific issue on which they are focused. But conflict is always about more than that. Conflict lies embedded in a system of relationships, needs, power exchanges, and historical dynamics. An action undertaken with a very immediate and particular purpose in mind can often have a far broader impact



on a whole series of relations and interactions than the parties who are involved realize. Conflict can be thought of as a characteristic of complex adaptive systems (Jones and Hughes, 2003), and it is never completely predictable or analyzable. However, by becoming aware of the larger context within which conflict plays out, participants can extend their insights about the nature and dynamics of conflict. A key focus of conflict specialists is on the wider impact and implications of different actions undertaken in conflict and of the broader social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental forces interacting with each particular conflict.

How different conflict practitioners understand, appreciate, or act on these values and principles varies tremendously, and individual practitioners do not necessarily accept or embrace all of them. But as a group, particularly in the North American context, these seem to be the characteristics that broadly define conflict resolution as a field and distinguish it from other approaches to dealing with people in conflict.

The crisis that the field is facing will not be overcome by abandoning these principles, but by applying them in more creative, flexible, and realistic ways. As we consider the specific challenges to the field of conflict resolution, the underlying value and importance of these hallmarks should always be our guide. If there is a future for our field of practice, it will be in becoming wiser and more skillful in bringing these principles and perspectives to bear in all aspects of the work we do. But we will realize our potential only if we can face the shortcomings of our practice, the genuine problems that our approaches have encountered, and the limits we have put on ourselves by an overly constricted self-definition.

### **The Limits of Resolution, the Power of Engagement**

In view of the challenges to our field and the nature of the conflict process itself, the identification of our field with the resolution of conflict seems shortsighted and inaccurate. People involved in conflict

need assistance during many other points in the conflict process—in preventing conflict, understanding that there is a potential conflict, raising that conflict to the level of awareness, escalating a conflict to the point where some response is provoked, conducting and carrying on a conflict until resolution may be possible, engaging in a resolution process, coming to resolution, and healing from conflict. If we are to flourish as a field, we have to become more involved in all aspects of this process. Right now, we are limiting ourselves to what may be the safest and most comfortable part of conflict, but this is a serious limit indeed.

We can be much more powerful intervenors if we expand our thinking about our role. On an intuitive level, we know this. It is often better to work with people on how to become more effective in pursuing the goals that have propelled them into conflict than it is to focus on how to find their way out of conflict. We are far more likely to achieve our potential as a field if our core focus is on how to help people engage in conflict effectively rather than on how to resolve conflict. By focusing on engagement, we can continue to bring to bear the key skills and outlooks that we have to contribute, the hallmarks of our practice, and we can address the legitimate concerns and criticisms that have been raised about what we do. Most important, we can become more effective in dealing with serious conflicts in a constructive way. We should think of ourselves as conflict engagement practitioners rather than conflict resolution professionals. Resolution is part of engagement, but only one part.

In this book, I explore more fully the criticisms and limitations of conflict resolution as a field, and I discuss what it means in practice to redefine ourselves as conflict engagement specialists. I do not suggest abandoning our important resolution roles, but of providing a broader context for our work. In particular, I will propose understanding advocacy to be an essential conflict role. Advocates should be embraced into our field. They have much to offer us, and we have considerable skills and experience to bring to this role. I will also suggest that coaching and organizing are essential roles in conflict

practitioners. If these new roles are genuinely embraced into our work, they will redefine our field.

The challenge and the opportunity that this crisis offers is how to widen our self-perception, how to take what we have to offer even more seriously, how to accept and grow from the criticisms and even the indifference that the public has expressed. Only by doing this can we reach our potential as a field of practice and a social movement.