

# **The Origin and Resolution of Conflict**

By Ike Lasater

With Julie Stiles

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Recently, I took part with my colleague, John Kinyon, in a multi-day mediation within a department at a major university. This department had been in conflict for three years, and the effects of the conflict were widespread, affecting not only the work but also people's mental and physical health. For a couple of days we met individually with folks, then in groups of two, until we finally met with the entire department for one afternoon. After I left, I realized that even though the specifics of this situation were different than any other conflict I had worked with, there was still a feeling of familiarity. I had seen it all before, an underlying pattern that, despite the surface dissimilarities, seems to be present across all interpersonal conflicts. I began to get a sense of a conceptual way of understanding how conflict originates. I'd like to present these insights, as I think awareness can help us find different ways to deal with the misunderstandings that can eventually lead us into long standing conflicts.

### The Human Condition: Pattern Recognition and Interpretation

The dynamic that I see at the basis of all human conflicts originates with a fact of human neurology—we are pattern recognition animals. We take in immense amounts of information through our senses all the time, but we only make sense out of a small portion of that information, and the way we do that is by looking for patterns. We all have a massive storehouse of past experiences, and the learnings we gleaned from those experiences structure the way we take in new information. Thus, in any situation, moment by moment we're not consciously taking in all the information that's there, yet we still use much of the information we aren't even conscious of in recognizing or applying our past patterns. Based on our previous life experience, we may lay past patterns onto current experiences that do not match. When this is the case, we cannot learn what there is to learn in the current situation; the pattern we are mapping onto it is different from the reality that is in front of us.

When we interact with another person, we're not only not going to get all the information, we're also not going to interpret that information fresh the way the person we're with would like

us to receive it. In Star Trek, the Vulcans, such as Dr. Spock, have the ability to mind meld; they can essentially get inside the experience of another being by joining their mind to the mind of the other being, even one of a different species. We, as humans, do not have this ability, yet it is one many of us would like to have. We can never truly know another person's experience—we can't be a fly on the wall inside someone else's mind. In order to understand one another's experience, we communicate, attempting to transfer information. Communication is always imperfect, however; we are taking in and interpreting the communication based on our own past pattern-making, and thus will not get what the other person means in just the way the other person wants us to get it. They may be using words and intonation, body language, and facial expressions that are imbued with certain meanings from their life experiences, and even if we have had a very similar life experience we're still not going to get it perfectly. Anything less than perfect opens up the door to misunderstanding.

### We're Not Vulcans, After All

The problem, as I see it, is not so much that this is the case, it's that we don't act like we know any of it. We don't act like we know that we're not getting a perfect Vulcan mind meld transfer, or that our communications with others are inherently imperfect. I know that before I started regularly reflecting back what I heard others say to check it with them, I had the illusion that I knew what they were communicating. Even more deluded on my part, I also believed that I could interpret their intention. I was sure I was right about both what they said and their intention in saying it; even if later—once we were in conflict—they would try to clarify their intention, I wouldn't believe them, and would hold on to my own interpretation.

If we think of our communication as a kind of data transfer—from one mind to another—we can use the computer as an analogy. Computers have different forms of error checking safeguards with the transfer of data; error checking bits are attached to packets of data, and the computer can check to see if those bits have changed after transfer and if they haven't, there's some confidence that the others haven't changed either. Our imperfect way of communicating using speech and non-verbal cues contains errors in it, but typically, we don't check to see if an error has occurred when we communicate with others. We simply assume that our communication was error-free. Only when we are confronted with an obvious

misunderstanding, often in the form of a conflict, do we recognize the need to check whether the message we sent was the one that was received. We would never tolerate this level of indifference or imperfection in our computer data transfer! Why do we allow it in our communication?

### Reasons We Don't Check

Besides the simple answer that we haven't been trained to do so, there are also many reasons psychologically why we might avoid checking with someone when we've reacted to something they have said or done. First, we can form an interpretation around anything—around what someone says or does, or even what they do not say or do not do. None of us can ever know what might stimulate a reaction in someone else—we might simply be preoccupied and walk into a room without looking at someone, and find later that they interpreted our non-action as “ignoring” them. Thus, when we find ourselves in a reaction, it can sometimes be difficult to admit what exactly set us off. We might fear we are revealing ourselves too much in letting someone know how we perceived his actions. We are taught to show strength and invulnerability, and requesting to know what someone meant might be too vulnerable. Generally, we prefer not to show we are hurt, and if someone says something that we find difficult, we would be admitting our hurt to ask them to clarify their intention in saying it. If they fail to say something we would have liked to hear, we may feel too embarrassed to ask them to help meet our needs.

So, to recap a bit, this is the physical reality we find ourselves faced with: within an imperfect communication system, people interpret their experience through their pattern recognition scheme, they generally don't question their interpretation, nor do they check it with the other people that are involved. From that interpretation, they then form firm beliefs about their experience, themselves, and the other people. Whatever these thoughts are will generate the neurotransmitter release that creates feelings consistent with those beliefs and that interpretation of the situation.

Once the situation is in the past, what we tend to remember are these feelings. We don't often recall the specifics of the particular instance, and especially if we have not made an attempt to translate what happened into observation language, we often do not remember the observations.

## The Start of Conflict

For example, let's say two friends, Mike and Tim, have an interaction and Mike interprets that Tim has betrayed him. Mike will have the feelings that are consistent with having the thought "I've been betrayed:" maybe hurt, anger, or disappointment, or a whole series of feelings. Removed in time from that event, he tends to remember the feelings and the conclusion "I've been betrayed," but not the specifics that led to that interpretation. If Mike does remember details, they are likely to be very limited; perhaps he recalls a single phrase, and holds onto that and attaches to it the interpretation "I've been betrayed." Every time he thinks about that situation he floods himself again with the neurotransmitters that are consistent with having the thought of being betrayed.

Now if Mike were to check at the time, asking Tim what was his intention or what was behind what he said, Mike might be able to short circuit this process. As more and more time passes it becomes more and more difficult to change the dynamic, because he doesn't remember the whole story; he believes his interpretation—"I've been betrayed"—is the truth.

I have seen and experienced over and over again the dynamic that results. If or when Mike communicates with Tim after this, what Mike wants from Tim is acknowledgement about his belief that he was betrayed. Of course, this may or may not be Tim's interpretation of what went on. Even if Tim is willing to join in the conclusion that he betrayed Mike, he had reasons why he did what he did that he wants to have heard and understood; thus, even if he's willing to agree, it is a "yes, but..." More often, Tim will not agree that he betrayed his friend. At this point, the conflict shifts; it is in part about what happened back in time at the original stimulus, and also takes on the added factor of the present fact that Tim is not willing to collude with Mike's reality.

Now, Mike has two sets of pain stimuli, and two different levels of the conflict to unwind. There is what happened in the past when Tim said what he said and Mike interpreted it as betrayal, and there is what's happening in the present, with Mike wanting acknowledgment and understanding through having Tim agree about the betrayal. When Tim refuses, it's a new stimulus for pain for Mike.

To further complicate things, of course, Mike is probably not going to be upfront about

what he needs; he may not even be aware of it. If it is stated openly, it is likely to be in the form of a demand or even a threat; “I won’t be friends with you anymore,” or in the most extreme cases “I’ll kill you.” In any case, Mike still doesn’t get what he really wants.

I’m sure you can see how complicated this can get very quickly. And so far, we’ve only looked at it from Mike’s point of view. Let’s add Tim’s perspective.

It was whatever Tim said that was the original stimulus for Mike. Mike's reaction in the moment might be silence and withdrawal and not communicating to Tim that he has interpreted it as betrayal, so Tim may not know at that time what's going on. If Mike does speak up, Tim has reasons for his actions; he may say that Mike misinterpreted his intentions, or misunderstood what he said. Or, perhaps he says that it’s not about betrayal, it’s about being honest in the relationship. Mike still has not received what he wants—acknowledgement of his reality and the pain he is in—so he will hold on to his interpretation. Tim is then also wanting and not receiving acknowledgment of his reality, and is hurt out of that. Each person is essentially saying “if you were in my reality, you’d see why I’m saying this, and you have to acknowledge it.” When this extends into their continued relationship, the hurt and conflict are maintained.

At this point, both Mike and Tim have interpreted the situation in ways that are a stimulus for hurt, and thus both view themselves to some extent as a victim and want acknowledgment from the other of the other’s wrongdoing, which would justify their feeling themselves a victim. We have two people relating to each other as if they are the victim of the other, and who, if they continue interacting, have a continuing series of stimuli for pain. Within each person, simply thinking about the situation can cause a re-stimulation of the pain, a re-opening of the wound. Unless they learn the skills to break the cycle, each time the actors re-engage they tend to interact in ways that create another round of interpretation consistent with the cycle.

### The Spread of Conflict in Groups

If Mike and Tim are part of a larger group, perhaps an organization, they can draw other people into the conflict by going to them to get their collusion. In my view, when people go to others to talk about an interpersonal conflict, they are really seeking empathy; they want some understanding about why this situation is so distressing. They may also want a reality check; they

want to make sure their version of reality makes sense to someone else. The way they talk about the situation, however, tends to ensure that they do not get that need for empathy met. Instead, the interaction often serves as a re-stimulation of their pain. If they do get agreement from the person they are talking to, it usually comes as a strengthening of their beliefs, their “enemy images,” of the other person and their wrongdoing, not as a connection with their own needs.

If both parties are even somewhat successful in pulling others into their view of reality of the situation, then the conflict, which began as an interpersonal one, can extend to a larger group. People then tend to balkanize themselves into separate parts of the organization, or might even leave, voluntarily or not. In the case of the university I mentioned earlier, the conflict had started so long before that, even if some people knew the original cause, it didn't really matter; it had become so widespread that the entire department was involved and divided into camps.

## The Cultural Context

All of this occurs in the milieu of a mainstream world culture that in many ways contributes to the formation and continuation of conflicts. First, the accepted syntax, which we all learn as children, encourages particular interpretations and experiences. We say “I'm angry because you...” instead of I'm angry because I have an interpretation of what happened that causes me to be angry. In saying it, we also believe it. Once we are in a conflictual situation, our predominant strategies are either to withdraw or to engage with vigor, and in either case to be right over the other person. Neither strategy provides the kind of healing or resolution that are satisfying.

Besides these two strategies of withdrawing or engaging with vigor and being right over the other person, there is also another system set up to resolve conflicts, which is the court and jury system and common law. The common law system historically began because the King wanted there to be a way for people to not use self-help when they were wronged, because that led to reprisal and feuds and murder in the streets. If someone stole something or there was an accident or tort where someone was physically injured or property was damaged, there needed to be a system of conflict resolution that removed it from the streets. The value was that you would get the conflict resolved without taking it into your own hands, but the system was not set up to reconcile the parties and restore the community. The common law system, including our courts

today, provide a valuable service to society in balancing things from the law's point of view; however, there is often not a sense of emotional satisfaction or being at ease and comfortable in meeting your antagonists in the community thereafter and being able to work with them in other contexts. It is not set up to repair the relationships between the antagonists, and therefore, it doesn't repair the community.

This discussion of how conflicts begin is really my belief about how it happens, based in part on my own experience of watching myself and others interact. However, we really don't store the data this way, and when I work with people in conflicts, I don't find it useful as someone supporting people in conflict for me to try to go back and figure out what the different acts were on each side. Usually, by the time people come to me for mediation, the conflict could be described as "well-entrenched," and there's no agreement as to what the original act was that began the conflict. Either each person has a list of acts committed by the other person, or they just remember that they were wronged and they have the conclusion they came to—he acted like a jerk, she was a bitch, he was an asshole, he betrayed me, she abandoned me—but they don't remember the particulars of what was said or done. I have begun doing some work around restorative circles, and this is one aspect that makes restorative circle work so powerful. When people agree to come to a circle, they identify and agree on a specific act that the circle is meeting about. The clarity of this agreement as to the act creates a container that makes the process proceed more smoothly.

If you accept this view of the origin of conflict—interpretation of a situation that leads to hurt, unchecked with the other, leading to further misunderstanding—and the typical ways I've broadly defined that we tend to deal with it—avoidance, intense engagement that stimulates more pain, or legalistic avenues that resolve the apparent conflict but not the human element that is driving it—then certain things follow with regard to resolving conflict. The first, most basic element, is that people get heard—they get their need for empathy met. I have found it difficult, if not impossible, for conflicts to resolve if the parties do not feel heard and understood as to the pain they are in. When we are in too much pain, we are unable to hear the pain of another, and tend to stay entrenched in our own viewpoint, unwilling to step out of it and see another perspective. After someone has received empathy, it helps for each person to trust that the distress they've been experiencing matters. It's particularly sweet if they can develop a trust that it matters to the person who they are in conflict with. If that occurs, they typically express a

desire to understand why the other person did what they did. Finally, there may be specific agreements, requests, or strategies designed to reconcile the parties, to re-introduce them back into the community, perhaps including the transfer of money or other actions to balance the situation.

## The Promise of NVC: Prevention and Resolution

The promise of Nonviolent Communication, in my experience using it over the last few years, is twofold: it has methodologies within it to promote clarity of communication that can nip the whole trajectory towards conflict I've spoken of in the bud, and once a conflict has arisen, it has methodology both to resolve the conflict and to restore the relationships and the community. In the first instance, we can ask a question like "would you be willing to tell me what you heard me say?" through which we make sure that the message sent was the one received, or we can reflect back what we heard someone else say towards the same end. We can also ask "how do you feel hearing what I've said?" which gives a sort of barometer reading of where the person is—if you expected them to be pleased with what you were saying, and they indicate that they are ticked off, it's perhaps a sign that the communication needs to be clarified. These kinds of methods can help us be aware of our own and other's interpretations and reactions, and derail conflicts before they can get started.

Once a conflict has started, NVC provides strategies for reconnecting people who are at odds. Conceptually, the way I think about what I'm seeking to do when I mediate is to help the people involved get their need for empathy met. In other words, I help each person be understood at least by me, but even better yet, by the person they're in conflict with—to be understood as to how painful and distressing this has been for them.

Often, in the course of using this method, people begin to understand the distinction between pain and suffering. This consequence arises out of continuously separating the actions or words of the other person, and the interpretation of those actions or words. Someone may do something that inflicted harm—through physical violence or words—and then there's also an interpretation of the conduct. People begin to get clearer, through being understood at least by me, if not by the other person, about how much they are stimulating their pain themselves. In the Zen tradition, this is called the second arrow; the first arrow is what you receive from someone

else, and the second arrow is what you add yourself—you shoot that arrow through your interpretation. What you receive from someone else may cause pain, but what you add is suffering.

Another consequence, if this method for conflict resolution is carried out fully, is that both protagonists also get to understand the contexts, the motivations, or the good reasons that the other person did what they did. Usually, until a person's distress is acknowledged and understood by someone, hopefully the person they're in conflict with, they won't be able to hear the context or motivations of the other person, much less ask for these.

When a person feels understood, and they have a clarity within themselves about why the situation has meaning to them, the things that happened to generate the conflict can then be uncovered and addressed. For instance, there might be a misunderstanding; when a person is in a lot of pain they're not even able to hear the other person, but with their need for empathy met to a certain extent, they're able to hear that there may have been a misunderstanding. This may or may not resolve the conflict in and of itself, as there may have been subsequent conduct that each person also reacted to, and those interpretations also may need to be surfaced and empathized with before each party is able to fully hear the other.

### Keeping Conflict Alive: Regional Conflicts

Now, these ideas may seem irrelevant to some conflicts, in particular those situations we see in the world today where ethnic groups are in conflict over events that happened long ago, sometimes even centuries. My sense is that the beginning of the conflict, way back when, still bears a similarity to what I've been discussing. I think that everything happens with individuals, and it then gets built into larger systems and group identities, in much the same way that it spreads in an organization. The individual experiences some kind of trauma that they interpret through a lens, and act out of that trauma towards others, who interpret through their own lens, and so on and so forth. In the case of long-standing ethnic conflicts, however, we can't necessarily go back and find those individual instances, and that wouldn't necessarily be valuable anyway. The conflict is occurring now, and the participants have their own interpretations and their own pain out of which they are acting.

Even if we can't see back to the origin, it is clear to me that these long-standing conflicts

are easily re-stimulated, and that re-stimulation is often built into the culture of each side, as well as into individual families. I think in our culture today we underestimate the power of cultural and ancestral identity and how pain can be passed down through generations, even in unconscious and unintended ways. Not too long ago, I flew from coast to coast of the United States sitting next to a first generation Armenian immigrant, whose parents and grandparents all have memories of the Armenian genocide perpetrated by Turkey in the early 1900's. Growing up at the knee of someone who has been through a traumatic experience and tells stories about the wrongs done to them shapes the lens of a child, particularly when that trauma was at the hands of another group. Studies show that the children of holocaust survivors still carry the trauma of those events, and sometimes that trauma can be traced down three or four generations.

Culturally, re-stimulation of pain is sometimes built into rituals that are labeled as honoring certain people or memorializing an event. I have been in Pakistan on Kashmiri day, when they commemorate the loss of Kashmir to India, and while it is a way to remember, it also serves to re-stimulate the pain in an entire culture. I was also in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, on martyr's day, where it almost seemed to be an imperative that people celebrate the "martyrs," those who have killed themselves in service to the cause of the Tamil Tigers (the LTTE). This, too, seemed to be ideally designed (even if unintentionally) to re-stimulate the original cause of the conflict.

With these types of situations, at this point we are downstream of the origin, sometimes well downstream, but the question remains the same as in individual conflicts; how to heal now instead of continuing to re-stimulate pain? As with individual conflicts, the healing of cultural or ethnic conflicts is also individual, and involves each person recognizing and connecting with his own and his "enemy's" humanity in a deep way. When enough people begin to do this work, the healing can then be built into the culture.