A conversation with Bernie Mayer

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Introduction

Bernie Mayer, Ph.D., author of four books related to conflict engagement joined Bryan Hanson, Michael Miller, and William Leggio to discuss the relationship between a leader’s ability to transform complex environments and the leader’s capacity to engage constructively with conflict. Throughout the interview, Dr. Mayer shared concepts from his two most recent books, *Staying with Conflict* and *The Conflict Paradox*. Among the many important takeaways for current and aspiring leaders, Dr. Mayer emphasized the importance of: recognizing the enduring nature of conflict, the roots to the conflict that emerges within organizations, the influence cultural and power dynamics have on conflict, and the understanding that conflict is actually healthy for an organization.

Interview

William: Dr. Mayer, thank you for being part of this article, which will be featured in our upcoming issue for Creighton Journal of Interdisciplinary Leadership, which is themed preparing leaders to transform complex environments.

Bernie: I'm very pleased to be here.

William: We're really excited about this, to have this be our feature and headline article. We'll start with our first question that we all formulated. What skills do you believe are required for leaders to successfully navigate conflict associated with organizational change?

Bernie: It seems to me that one of the most important skills for a leader is to be comfortable with conflict. What I've seen with a lot of people in leadership positions, and I have struggled with this myself when I've been in a leadership position, is that our instinct if there's a conflict, is to try to get past it very quickly and resolve it immediately.

Yet, we know that conflict is healthy for organizations. Suppressed conflict makes the problem the organization faces worse. A productive and almost welcoming approach to conflict leads to more creativity and more productivity.

In many ways, the skills that I think we need to start with as leaders are personal skills. It's working on our personal ability to handle conflict, to
appreciate conflict, and to recognize the value it adds. Now that doesn't mean we don’t also need to have the skills to handle it when it gets out of control or destructive. We need those as well.

I think what goes along with that is a key challenge, which is to understand what is really important to people. I think we focus so much on how to fix things and how to suppress the unpleasant elements in our work that we don't recognize, underlying conflict, the place people are coming from that represents something really important and meaningful to them. Obviously, the list of specific tactics can go on, but I think it really starts with those things.

William: **For being comfortable?**

Bernie: For being comfortable and appreciative of the importance of the role of conflict and being open to understanding what is really important to people beyond the superficial things that often become the stalking points for conflict, the real issues.

Bryan: **Thanks, Bernie. My question is similar in nature. It relates to the concept of conflict competence. How would you describe conflict competence? What is it? How is it developed? How does it contribute to the skills necessary to manage conflict?**

Bernie: I think all of us have found a way of handling conflict in our lives. We wouldn't have made it to leadership positions, or to adulthood, if we didn't. I'm not saying we've become great at it or are always constructive in our approach, but we have our own way of doing it. In a way, building on what I said before, conflict competence really starts with understanding how we handle conflict and what works and what doesn't.

Now it seems to me that a conflict competent leader is someone who starts with that and then moves on to understanding how to help people say what's really important to them, how to help people listen to what other people are saying, especially when they disagree with it, and how to recognize the cultural framework or the cultural milieu in which an organization functions. In some organizations, it's really easy for people just to say what they want, to get on each other's case, and to be very assertive. In other places, that is viewed as being very oppressive and not okay.

I think there are a couple other essential skills that go along with conflict competence. One is understanding power dynamics. The nature of organizational life is that there's always power dynamics at play. There are usually hierarchies of power. We can say, "Look, I have an open door. Come in. You can talk to me, whatever you want." That may or may not be realistic depending on the nature of your power position in the organization, or the nature of how power flows.

The other thing that I think we really need to recognize is gender and ethnicity issues and culture issues more generally. In almost any workplace, probably in any social setting in our world, gender issues are often a sub theme for a lot of what happens in conflict. We need to understand that as well as cultural issues more generally.

I also think we need to understand something about negotiation. I think we have to have a good understanding of how to help people bring together the need to address the interests of others they're in conflict with while advocating for their own interests as well. That's essentially at the heart of
good negotiation, which means knowing how to help people be effectively competitive and constructively cooperative at the same time. That's important.

In a general sense, I think leaders need to understand system dynamics. How systems operate, how energy flows through systems, and how systems seek to enforce the rules of the system are often at the heart of a lot of not so constructive conflicts that develop in organizations.

Bryan: Great. I do have one follow-up question. One thing really stuck out as important and we talked about it at the beginning. People just have to know how they typically engage in conflict. Then, you talked a little bit about the paradox of constructively competitive conflict engagement and cooperative engagement and how understanding how to manage that paradox effectively is important. Where do you find or how do you find that balancing two extremes can really help a leader be successful?

Bernie: As you know, I just wrote a book called Conflict Paradox, which talks about the bifurcated ways in which we look at the world and particularly at conflict. One of the polarities I looked at is how we think about it when we think we've got people in conflict who are being competitive. We often take the view that we need to help them cooperate and stop being so competitive. I think there's an unreality there because of the nature of the world we live in. What makes a good organization is a certain amount of competition. The question is how do you compete in a cooperative way and how do you use competition to promote cooperation? I don't actually like to use the word balance. In my book, I avoided it because it implies that you take a teaspoon of cooperation, add it to a teaspoon of competition, mix it together and it all comes out right. It is really a matter of understanding that competition and cooperation are not that different. Every time we're competing, we're cooperating in order to compete.

For genuine cooperation to occur, it has to be something other than simply a nice phrase or sentiment. We can talk about collaboration all we want, but for it to be effective, it has to incorporate the competitive needs of the circumstance. I think any of us who played sports, which is most of us, realize that. Sports are competitions, and you don't have effective competition without significant levels of cooperation. We could talk much more, and in a more detailed way, about what that actually looks like in a managerial situation or a leadership situation.

Here's one maybe little example of that. For many years, there has been a widely held belief that what we really need to do when we bring groups or teams together who are having issues and need help problem-solving is to help them brainstorm. The idea of brainstorming is to come up with as many different ideas as possible without critiquing them because that's supposed to help maximize collaborative potential and creative potential. That is the accepted wisdom, but quite a few studies now have shown that actually doesn't work. You get a much more creative output if as people come up with ideas, you let them be critiqued. You let people have at it. For example, if you suggest something and I say, "Well, I don't think that would really work, Bryan, because of this," and I go on to say, "What about this?", and you say, "Oh, come on--you don't understand what I mean" , that actually creates a more creative, collaborative, productive atmosphere than if we just did the supposedly collaborative thing and then listen to everybody's ideas.
Bryan: Some creative discourse throughout.

Bernie: You guys are all in leadership positions. What do you think conflict competence for a leader means?

Bryan: Just to address it, I think you tie that in very well with conflict competence and working with that paradox. I like how you said it's not so much a balance. That's what conflict competence means to me. It's just being mindful and aware of each situation and understanding how I am in tune with what's going on here. How am I going to interact in this space to really be most constructive or effective in that situation? I think that's where the conflict competence plays a big role as a leader. It's scanning, being aware and mindful of how we are within that situation and how we influence those dynamics within the situation.

Michael: Perhaps to add to that, I think communication is very important as well. We, as leaders, need to be very cognizant of what we're listening to that other people are saying or asking for, what their positions are, what their concerns are, and where they're coming from as it pertains to a particular issue.

William: I would certainly say understanding presence and truly active listening. Truly listening to what's being said in that moment and being comfortable to engage in conflict in some sort of strategy that you feel is effective or best suited, but also being open to being able to adapt as well.

Bryan: Absolutely.

Bernie: Just to build on to the communication ideas you guys were talking about, one of the things that I have always thought was essential to being an effective mediator that is very hard to teach is the ability to track things at multiple different levels at the same time. I think that's true for a leader too.

Let’s say you're bringing a group together and you want to put forth a vision for a direction the team or the organization might embrace. When you do that you need to attend to what you have to say, how you're saying it, how it's coming across, what people are communicating back to you non verbally and verbally, what your goals are for the discussion itself, and how you might facilitate that discussion—all at the same time. You're doing this all the while you're presenting something to the group.

Now, I think the best leaders are the ones who can attend to those multiple different tasks at the same time—those who can handle the multi directionality, if you want to think of it that way, it's all communication. So as I'm talking to you, you're communicating to me and to each other. I'm picking up on this and adjusting how I'm communicating to you accordingly. As I'm listening and you're talking, I'm communicating to you something that would encourage you to communicate to me in a certain kind of way. That's not such an easy thing. It's not that hard to describe, but it's not that easy to do—and for the most part we are not even aware we are doing this.

For me, when I am the best as a leader, as a teacher, as a mediator, as a husband, or as a parent is when I am able to do attend to these multiple aspects of communications. Where I think some of that comes from is the presence you were talking about. You have to really be present and centered...
and not have your mind going off in 100 different places, which sometimes we're good at and sometimes we're not so good at.

Michael: Another question for you in reference to your book *Staying With Conflict*, you indicate that due to varying degrees of complexity not all conflicts are equal. You go on to describe some conflicts as enduring. How does an enduring conflict differ from other forms of conflict?

Bernie: Let me answer your question and then ask it in a slightly different way. The thing about enduring conflict is that by its very nature no agreement that we could come to is going to end it. An example would be our fundamental different views in this country about immigration. That's been with us since before the constitution. It's an old issue. It represents some fundamentally different values.

We can come up with agreements about specific aspects of the immigration issue, but no matter what we agree to, there will continue to be different values, different narratives, and important identity issues that will perpetuate the overall conflict. The next time there's an economic downturn in an area with an immigrant community, policies about immigration will again become contentious.

To me, an enduring conflict is one that, by its very nature, can't be fixed through reaching a particular agreement. That does not mean, however, that nothing can be done to ameliorate the issue or to guide the conflict in more constructive directions. The slightly different question that I want to ask is, what is the enduring component of almost any conflict we may face? Not all, but very many conflicts have that component in it. A grievance at a workplace about who gets a preferred vacation time, is an issue that you could very possibly reach a resolution. A creative agreement could end the concern about the vacation time.

In grievances such as this, there is also often an element about more fundamental and long term concerns: am I treated with respect? Are decisions made around here in a fair way? Do I have voice? Am I heard? Or from management’s perspective: do employees always feel entitled and never really take any ownership for the real problems the organization has? These kinds of issues are present in most conflicts. I think of enduring conflict as an aspect of conflict or a face of conflict. Most of the times conflict has multiple faces, and leaders are often faced with the question of which of these to focus on.

Michael: What would you suggest to a leader as far as any specific approaches to take when confronting or having to address a conflict that might be described as enduring?

Bernie: I think one question we almost always have to face is do we actually address the enduring element? Or do we just figure out what we can fix or solve for now, and move on? I think sometimes that is what we do. Sometimes you have to just solve that grievance about Christmas or vacations, or what to do about a particular hiring, without addressing enduring elements of the disputes. There may, for example, be a real disagreement about the allocation of resources, which reflects differences about organizational priorities and the underlying difference about whether to go ahead with a hiring. But sometimes, you just decide about the hiring. If however, a leader never addresses the enduring elements, that will lead to dysfunction.
A leader also has to ask, when and how can I address the deeper issues so we can at least recognize them? Let me return to an earlier example. Suppose we want to talk about immigration in our society, which we certainly are doing right now, not very productively in my opinion, but nonetheless, we're doing it. When do we just talk about what we can do to modify our current policy about immigration, or how we might handle an influx of refugees and when do we talk about our basic values about our national identity?

At what point do we say, "In order to get past this, we need to go a little deeper. We need to talk about what our values really are here. What is our identity? There's no issue that becomes more profound I think than when you're dealing with race, gender, and culture.

A leader has to decide what is it we really need to talk about those things and then how do we frame it? Even if we're not going to talk about it, how are we framing the immediate issue in the organization so that it at least recognizes that there is an ongoing element—so that we don't pretend it's all about what to do about this specific case. It's not all about this instance or policy of sexual assault on campus or sexual harassment. You can come up with a policy, but you'd better also look at the underlying dynamics that create the conflict throughout a society.

There's another thing I think a leader can do, which is to think not just about individual communication, a specific communication, how you and I talk, how I help the two of you talk, but systems and structures of communication. That's part of what I was referring to earlier as systemic thinking. We have to think about what are the structures or systems of communication that allow us to deal with the difficult issues. Any of us in a leadership position can ask what systems are there to deal with the deeper issues that come out?

I'm not trying to say we should be spending all our time dealing with these larger issues. You cannot run an organization by always delving into these, but you have to talk about it sometimes in conjunction with the people you are working with and in a collaborative spirit with them. The organization needs to ask the question how? What's the structure? How do I frame it? When and when not?

Michael: It sounds like it's important for leaders to understand that successful strategies to engage conflict doesn't mean a one and done kind of situation. It can be an ongoing process of dialog in order to actually seek to understand what's going on and come up with greater strategies to solve it.

Bernie: I think that's right and sometimes this does not require coming up with creative strategies—just urging all of us to keep talking. The best strategy we have is often simply to keep talking. It's like a lot of what you have to do in marriage sometimes.

William: With your last response you talked a lot about the complexities of the world and society that we currently live in. It's actually a nice lead in to our next question. As the world becomes more interconnected and complex, how can a leader bring various stakeholders into a shared understanding when disagreement exists?

Bernie: Let me tell you what I'm thinking about with this. Is this really different than it's always been even though we're more connected? We have more means of
Connecting. There are all sorts of technologies for connecting. When Franklin Roosevelt had to create a coalition to carry on World War II he had to work with Joe Stalin and Winston Churchill and others, like De Gaulle as well. These were all difficult people. At least their conversations were difficult. He brought them together. What did he have to do to bring them together? He had to keep his eye on the prize. What was this really all about? What was a mutual prize they all were after? He also had to recognize their suspicions, their concerns, and their differences with each other, and not to try to ask them to give those up, but to stay instead together for a larger purpose. He was certainly very effective at that.

In some ways, it gets back to what we were saying. Look at what leaders in the world today deal with, the really difficult issues they face like global climate change or like what they are going to do about the mess in the Middle East or about nuclear proliferation. Or look at what happened with the treaty with Iran. Whatever you think about that, what had to happen for that treaty to get executed was that there had to be a broad understanding of two things: First, what was the essential goal? Second, what were the fundamental concerns of different sides?

It is important not to try to soft sell or avoid these, but to really recognize them. In a way, it gets back to the first question you asked. We had to be aware of our own tendency to want to come up with superficial agreements when they're not a good idea. We have to go deeper. We have a tendency to want to avoid conflict. We have to really listen and give credence to the very deep interests the other sides have.

I think something else is also important, although I'm not quite sure how it goes with everything we've talked about. A good leader also has to be authentic. They have to be themselves. How I could be a decent leader and how you could be a decent leader are probably very different because we're different people. We have different means of communicating and different stories we like to tell and different senses of humor. Through it all, I think a leader has to find a way of doing this and being authentic and themselves and being aware of their own faults. We're all going to screw up sometimes trying to be good leaders. A good leader is one who's not afraid to confront that. That's quite far away from how you deal with global issues, but authenticity is essential to be effective.

William: As leaders engage in complex conflicts or disagreements, in your book you talk about a few concepts, one being provocability, and then some of those conflict paradoxes. Is it important to have understanding of those or do they add to the ability to bring stakeholders at least to the table?

Bernie: I think they do. Let me say something about provocability. That actually comes from a book called The Evolution Of Cooperation by Robert Axelrod. He did a series of experiments using the prisoner's dilemma about how cooperation and competition interact with each other. He came up with several principles that were essential for handling conflict. One was what he called niceness, by which he means that we should always begin with a cooperative opening. We start out with a willingness to be cooperative and to reciprocate cooperative gestures. He also talks about provocability, which means we have to be willing to not just be nice in the face of people taking advantage of us or being hostile to us or engaging in unacceptable behaviors.

The challenge is how do we respond to competitive moves from others? How do we be provocative? Do we do it in a way that opens the door to future
cooperation and not overreact. I think a lot of us tend to cooperate and go the extra mile to listen and try to take somebody else's point of view in. After a certain point, when we feel others have not reciprocated and we feel “done to”, then we're ready to go for it. We're ready to drop the nuclear bomb on somebody. You can just hear this in how people are talking about presidential campaigns right now. It's important to know how to be effectively provokable, but to do it within the overall understanding of where you're trying to get to in the end.

To take another example, we're just now beginning to lighten our sanctions against Cuba after 50 years. It took 50 years maybe for us to realize that the particular approach to provocation wasn't working very well. It wasn't getting us anywhere. It wasn't getting the Cubans anywhere. It was playing right into Castro’s hands in many ways. I think a leader has to be able to think that, "Sometimes I have to lay down the law, but how do I do it in a way that encourages people to get past their animosity or negative behavior?"

I think those of us who are teachers sometimes experience where we have to say to students, "Folks who aren't doing your assignments, there are consequences for you not doing them on time and with care." But we have to do this in a way that doesn't then shut down everybody and put us in the role of a harsh authority figure.

In terms of some of the other things, I think The Conflict Paradox's basic message is that if you want to be a more productive player in conflict, your thinking has to be more complex than that there are good guys and they're bad guys, or that there’s us and there’s them, or there's cooperation and there's competition. You have to figure out a way of saying how do I actually take all of these forces and bring them together?

If I may, can I just take a diversion for a moment into the 2016 election? One of the chapters in the book is on optimism and realism. Let's assume we're a leader of an organization that's facing financial crisis and we want to work with a team. The message we want to give is something other than, "It's all going to be all right, I promise you." It's also something other than, "Woe is me. It's hopeless. We're going under." We want to find a way of giving a message that is realism laced with optimism, optimism laced with realism. Optimism without realism is not genuine. It doesn't come across as genuine and therefore it is not really optimistic. Realism without optimism is not really realistic either. Most of us have cause to think, "Well, if we do something, we can make things better. Otherwise, why are we even trying?"

I said this was going to be about the presidential campaign. It’s not about the Republicans. This is about the Democrats even though so much more recent press has been given to the Republican candidates. I think if you listen to the rhetoric of Hillary Clinton, she speaks the language of realism. There are a lot of people saying, "That's not enough. It's so realistic it seems calculated to us.” If you listen to the language of Bernie Sanders, he speaks the language of optimism. People are saying, "Give me a break. You can say all these things, but it doesn't make sense that it's going to happen. How is it going to happen?"

What are people saying? They're saying they want both. The effective candidate and effective politicians and leaders in our history are the ones who are really able to speak an integration of that. You can listen to Lincoln's rhetoric during the Civil War, or FDR during World War II, for example, and hear pretty clearly how they did this. I think our most effective leaders have always been able to find a way of bringing those things together. There's other
things we could talk about and that I talked about too, but those are two that I think are particularly important for leaders.

William: **Do you see any connections between those concepts and some of those examples that you gave to understanding sources of power or authority or how those are applied?**

Bernie: Yeah, I talk about power quite a bit in most of my writing because I think it's a currency that plays out in conflict. One of the big mistakes we make in how we handle conflict or how we construct the mediation process or public dialogs is that we don't understand the power dynamics. If you want to do something about sexual harassment in your organization, you might create a structure that makes it more possible for victims of that to come forward. You might put into place all sorts of things to protect them. That's great. Then, why has the victim still not come forward? Why, if they do, will they still likely be out of the organization in six months? It's because the power dynamics go pretty deep. You cannot really address those issues if you don't really look deeply at what's going on in the power dynamics between the boss and employees, between clergy and their young congregation members, or between men and women.

I think as conflict professionals, power dynamics is what we've most overlooked in building effective systems of conflict intervention. It's something leaders are often unaware of. They're unaware of their own power. There have been a lot of experiments about power in organizations that show that those in a power position don't realize their power. Those who are less powerful most certainly do.

Michael: **You mentioned realism and optimism. It seems like there are a lot of leaders who have one or the other, but not necessarily both. How do we impress upon new up and coming leaders and maybe even experienced leaders how to get both? I know you mentioned earlier you don't like to use the work balance, but-**

Bernie: How do you get them both in there?

Michael: **How we get them both to be part of the repertoire for a leader to actually do that?**

Bernie: That's a really good question, Mike, because I'm not sure you can get them to do that. You can talk about it. You can have them tell their stories and get them to think in a certain way. You can get them to do a reflective practice process. When I've been in a position to be able to coach somebody a lot of what I ask them to think about is just what did they say? Why did they say it? What part of it worked? What was missing? What else might they have done? Is there a disconnect between what they say they were trying to do and what actually happened, and if so why?

Part of what we look at is the difference between what they say they believe and what their actions reveal about what they really seem to believe. In this way, they begin to figure out for themselves how to change their approach. Unfortunately, the higher up leaders get, sometimes the less open they are to some of that, but I think it's often really helpful.

Here's a prediction, getting back to the election. The person who is going to win this election is someone who can combine those two things in the most
effectively. If it's somebody who's really good on the optimism, then
they're going to really have to work on how to address the realistic questions
that people rightfully have.

If you're going to say, "Look, I just want to get things done," but what?
What is he or she going to get done that really will make a difference in the
world that's going to really address things that people are genuinely
concerned with? In any case, whether we are talking about politicians, Those
are things you can work with people on, but not simply by telling them to be
more realistic or more optimistic. I think it starts out by asking them to figure
this out for themselves through a reflective process.

We could all think about this challenge for ourselves as well. I think this
is probably true for all of us. If you've ever had a medical crisis in your
family, you've had to figure out a way to deal with being both optimistic and
realistic, for example.

Bryan:

I have a follow-up to that just because it just popped in my head. It's
probably a little bit more philosophical. Talking about the development
of this ability to integrate the two extremes of this paradox, do you feel
like that is really possible to do it authentically? Is it just something
that's in a person's nature?

Bernie:

I'm optimistic. I believe people can change, but I'm also realistic knowing
that it's not always so easy. Sure, why even talk about this if it makes no
difference? I think people can change and we all grow. The more profoundly
we're trying to go against type the harder it is, but it can be done. We can do
it. I've changed. Some would say for the worse, but I've changed. I think all
of you guys have too.

That raises an issue about the kind of work we do. I think the kind of
work we do is pretty much built on the belief that people can change and
people can make a difference. Good intentions and goodwill and good
practice and good values do in fact make a difference, do in fact make us
better, do in fact make us better as people, as leaders, as coworkers, as
employees. It's not easy but it happens all the time.

If we're trying to do it too easily, the change is less authentic. The world
is full of self-help books that tell you what are the seven or so things you
need to do--, I liked a lot of how this was dealt with in The Seven Habits Of
Highly Effective People. But even when these books are really helpful, they
often are more concerned with simplifying things than helping us deal with
complexity. You just have to do these seven things and everything is going to
be all right. I think we have to recognize it's deeper and it takes more work.

I just think it's interesting for each of us to think, “how have we each
changed in some way through our thinking about these things and working
around these issues?” One thing that I know I've changed on, it may not
sound that way sometimes, but is that I just don't think I have as much
certainty about everything as I used to have. That's mostly good. Sometimes
it's not so good. How about for your guys?

Bryan:

I think that's a great question. We all can reflect on how we've changed.
To me, when you pose that question it's an ongoing process. Change is
constant and just being able to be more aware. That's one thing that I
feel like I have been trying to manifest in myself, that better awareness of
how I interact in the world and what influence that has on the people
around me. I'm trying to be more proactive instead of reactive to
situations when my perception of how things should be might not be playing out.

William: The power of reflection.

Michael: Very important. We've talked about a lot of things. One question that just comes to mind, you mentioned other self-help books and a lot of other things. There's been I think an enormous amount of energy that's been focused about developing leaders who are able to engage conflict in productive ways. In your work, are you seeing whether or not we're making any difference? Are we further along than we were or it will just always be a challenge that we'll have to continue to work through?

Bernie: We are further along. People certainly, many more leaders, understand our ideas more and get the importance of dealing with conflict effectively. Many world leaders certainly understand the ideas and concepts of conflict engagement and are sometimes very good at it. President Obama was trained in mediation at the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School. I think he was in Frank Sanders mediation class. Whatever you think about him politically as a president, it’s clear his rhetoric often reflects this.

At his very best, he reflects it beautifully like when he went down to Charleston after the shooting in the church there. The way in which he was able to reflect the deep pain and the potential, but the difficulty and the hope of becoming a better society around race, which I think moved people across a broad political spectrum. That reflected his understanding of conflict dynamics.

There's also a lot of lip service to taking a collaborative approach to conflict without it really coming through in practice. I just think it's an enduring issue. Progress will be made in how we deal with conflict, but your grandchildren will probably talk about this same issue in their cultural context with their lingo.

Bryan: Talking about enduring and back to Mike's question about enduring conflict, I think we can now agree that it isn't reasonable to assume all conflicts can be resolved. You also mentioned when we were talking about this that some conflicts are more easily resolved than others. There are some that can be resolved. What advice would you give to a leader to deal with that tension there, identifying the conflicts that can be resolved and working with those and still acknowledging the enduring conflict that's taken place?
A conversation with Bernie Mayer

Bernie: I think the trick, in terms of acknowledging the enduring part, is how you frame it. I was a divorce mediator earlier in my career. I remember I used to say to people all the time, “I know you want to figure out the best co-parenting arrangement you can now, and we are going to try hard to do that. On the other hand, I almost guarantee you that no matter what you agree to now there will be times in the future you'll probably face tensions. Issues will come up. Readjustments will have to be made. Part of what we're doing right now is coming up with as solid a structure as we can for right now, but one which also allows you to take on new issues as they come up knowing that it won't always be easy.” It's that kind of framing of it that allows us to focus on the present with a view to the future and the reality of enduring conflict. That is really important.

Let me talk about how this might play out in a faculty department because I'm in a university position. I'm often asked to help other universities with their own internal conflict issues. Very frequently, the nature of what faculties say is, "Well, what's the use? That person has tenure. They don't have to change." I always have to find a way of saying, "Well, let's figure out what we can work on recognizing that we may be dealing with some tensions and personality issues that are not going away." That's the framing part of it.

The question is what to focus on now, what is it that we really need to help people with right now? But how at the same time to prepare for the ongoing elements of the conflict. I recently worked on a situation that involved who got to teach the most theoretical courses to the highest level of students. That was the highest prestige assignment within that particular discipline as opposed to teaching courses for people throughout the university who were not necessarily particularly interested in the highest level of that discipline. It was actually in a different discipline, but it could've been a high level writing course in an English or creative writing department as opposed to helping less experience writers learn how to construct an essay and pass a course.

Now I think that this kind of conflict is always, always present in university settings. You'd probably find your analogy elsewhere. The trick, of course, is to recognize underlying issues that drive people’s conflicts about teaching assignments and to figure out how to put these on the table. Given the fact that there are these differences and these tensions exist, I might have to find a way to identify that everyone feels they should be offering the highest intellectual caliber course they possibly could. But I also have to find a way of saying that this tension is not going to go away. People will probably experience this 20 years from now. So the question becomes, what are we going to do now that recognizes different contributions and what people feel is fundamentally fair and meets certain agreed upon criteria for course assignments?

What I've described so far to a large extent is about framing the issue and putting the question out there in a way that recognizes it and then focuses people on what they can do. I think what a leader needs to figure out is what's the right format for this discussion to happen? What's their role? Should they be part of the discussion? Are they the ones to lead it? Do they need to bring in somebody else to help?

A leader, to be effective with conflict, needs to know when they need help, when they need an outside structure, when they need just a different structure, when they need to bring their whole team together or just work with a couple of people or perhaps work with people one on one. I think leaders...
who are effective are much more comfortable bringing in outside conflict interveners than leaders who are really defensive about that. Not that a good leader always does that. They have to be strategic about it.

Brian: What I want to hear from Bernie, thinking about this conversation in general, conflict dynamics, and leadership. What closing comments would you give to the aspiring leader or even the experienced leader so they can feel more comfortable in their ability to address conflict dynamics within their organization.

Bernie: I don't want to be contradicting everything I just said, but there's part of me that wants to say, “to thine own self be true.” I don't believe I have the answers for leaders. I believe I know something about some ways of looking at conflict issues that can be useful.

I think a lot of being effective stems from a belief and commitment to bringing out what everybody has to offer, even those people who are sometimes not so easy to deal with. If I were to advise leaders of one thing, it would be just to think about their job as being about helping everybody be productive. Their most important job is to help people be productive.

How can you identify the way in which your most pain in the neck employees or team members or group members can be productive? How can you help them to find a way of contributing given the fact that there may be a lot of obstacles in the way of their doing that? A lot of this starts out with being honest about what you really believe about leadership. If you believe you know better than anybody else and you know what needs to happen and you're just going to use some of these techniques to try to get people on board with doing what you want them to do, that will come out at the end. There are leaders who seem to run very successful organizations by telling everybody what to do. Their employees aren't always so happy, but maybe the organization is doing well.

William: Thank you. Dr. Mayer, on behalf of the journal, thank you very much for providing us with so much insight and intriguing dialog. On behalf of all of us, thank you for your time and giving us a lot to reflect on as we spend time on this issue thinking about how to prepare leaders to transform complex environments.

Bernie: Thank you very much.