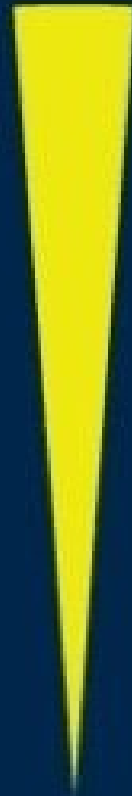


THE FIVE PERCENT



FINDING SOLUTIONS TO  
SEEMINGLY IMPOSSIBLE CONFLICTS

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PETER T. COLEMAN

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE FACULTY OF THE INTERNATIONAL  
PROJECT ON CONFLICT AND COMPLEXITY



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**PETER T. COLEMAN, *PhD***

***DIRECTOR OF COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR COOPERATION  
AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION***

with major contributions from Robin Vallacher, ***PhD***,  
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Naira Musallam, ***PhD***, and Katharina Kugler, ***PhD***,  
of the Project on Conflict and Complexity

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For Mort Deutsch and Leah Doyl  
the coauthors of the best chapters of my li

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## acknowledgments

THIS BOOK BEGAN WITH THE SIMPLE QUESTION, Why are some conflicts impossible to solve and what can we do to resolve them? This is a question I have been working on with my colleagues and students at Columbia University for over fifteen years. The answer is both complex and simple. The research that went into answering this question has been very complex. It involved in-depth case studies of impossible conflicts, expert interviews, lab experiments, mathematical formalism, computer simulations, and a thorough review of the scholarly literature. This led to an elaborate and nuanced understanding of these types of conflicts. But the ideas and methods for addressing the problems that came from this research, and from extensive interviews and conversations with conflict mediators and peacemakers of all stripes, are simple, basic, practical, and straightforward. The practices are the main focus of *The Five Percent*.

This book is the product of our team. We are a motley crew: an unlikely mix of sociologists, psychologists, an anthropologist, an astrophysicist, complexity scientists, conflict specialists, and peacemakers. We were brought together by a deep, shared commitment to addressing the misery and mystery of impossible, destructive conflicts. Our Dynamical Systems Team is composed of Robert Vallacher, Andrzej Nowak, Lan Bui-Wrzosinska, Andrea Bartoli, Larry Liebovitch, Naira Musallam, Katharina Kugler, and myself, Peter T. Coleman. Our work together is never easy, always fruitful, and has thus far been the highlight of my career.

But let me be clear: the insights shared in this book were born out of the confusion, conflict, and nonlinearity that come only from working with such a talented, opinionated, multidisciplinary team of ours. None of us could have accomplished this feat alone. Consequently, the ideas and methods outlined here often go against conventional wisdom in the field of conflict resolution. In fact, they tend to challenge it directly. This is part of our mad method: to create enough tension in our field to break through the current frames of understanding in order to begin a new conversation where we must all *think different* about the possibility of resolving impossible conflicts. Fortunately, our work has been generously supported by the visionary James S. McDonnell Foundation and the Community Foundation of Boulder. It has also been enlightened and supported by a host of extraordinary PhD students, including Christine Chung, Lukasz Jochemczyk, Wieslaw Bartkowski, and Ryszard Praszkiar. We are greatly indebted to them all.

We also want to thank all the eminent scholars and practitioners whose work has served as a foundation and inspiration for ours. They include Mary Parker Follett, Kurt Lewin, Morton Deutsch, Dean Pruitt, Herb Kelman, Chris Mitchell, Ronald Fisher, Louis Kriesberg, John Paul Lederach, David Johnson, Dean Tjosvold, Bill Ury, Roger Fisher, Heidi and Guy Burgess, John Gottman, Philip Tetlock, Dietrick Dorner, Gareth Morgan, Laura Chasin, Bernard Pearce, Stephen Littlejohn, Paul Diehl, Gary Goertz, William Zartman, Jacob Bercovitch, and Stephen Cohen. Also, we wish to thank the incredibly supportive staff of our center, the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College, Columbia University, including Beth Fisher-Yoshida, Claudia Cohen, Molly Clark, Juliette De Wolfe, Jeff Schiffer, and Manpreet Sadhal.

Finally, I want to personally thank my family for their patience, care, support, and fun before, during, and after the writing of this book. My love, Leah, my children, Hannah and Adlai, and my infamous siblings, Bob, Cookie, Bob H., Michelle, and Patrick. They keep me happy, humble, and

sane in an often seemingly intractable world.

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## introduction

### ***THE IRRESISTIBLE POWER OF THE PAST***

It began with a single act of hubris. Tantalus, the ruler of an ancient city in Greece and a favorite of the gods, decided one day to test the gods' omniscience by chopping up and cooking his own son Pelops, and serving him to them as a meal. Although the gods were on to this deceit from the beginning, one of them, Demeter, was distracted by her troubles with Hades. She feasted on the boy's shoulder before realizing what was happening.

Furious with this deception, the gods banished Tantalus to the deepest part of the underworld, starved and tortured ("tantalized") him for eternity, and cursed his entire family. So began the protracted misfortunes of the House of Atreus (Tantalus's descendants), which have served as the primary source of all tragedy from Homer and the great Greek dramatists to Shakespeare and O'Neil.

Life went downhill in the House of Atreus after Tantalus. His daughter, Niobe, whose fourteen children were slain by the gods, was turned to stone. The gods brought Pelops back to life, but he ended up killing his father-in-law (who coveted his own daughter) in order to marry his bride. Pelops then had two sons, Atreus and Thyestes, who murdered their half-brother (the illegitimate son of Pelops) to please their mother. Later, Thyestes seduced Atreus's wife and stole his golden fleece before fleeing into exile. Believing himself forgiven, he later returned to enjoy a meal at his brother's table that turned out to be Thyestes's own children.

Then things got complicated. Atreus's two sons Menelaus and Agamemnon married two sisters, Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra. Helen's kidnapping started the Trojan War. Then, to appease the gods in order to set sail for war, Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter, Iphigenia. He came home from the war ten years later only to be murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, before she was dutifully executed in turn by her own son Orestes. He later was driven mad by the Furies who of course were obligated to punish matricide.

So it went in the House of Atreus for generation after generation. Tragedy beget unspeakable suffering and sparked more tragedy for all who followed: Iphigenia, Electra, Orestes, you name it. *All* of this ancient legend goes, all of it—the murder, incest, cannibalism, betrayal, seduction, matricide, patricide, war—sprang from the deeds of one man. His one act set in motion a chain of events that no human could stop. The curse of the House of Atreus was simply too powerful to resist. Time and again, the members of this misbegotten family, often against their own will and better judgment, were "driven into evil by the irresistible power of the past."<sup>1</sup>

#### SOME PROBLEMS NEVER GO AWAY.

Experts estimate that about 5 percent of our more difficult conflicts become *intractable*: highly destructive, never ending, and virtually impossible to solve.<sup>2</sup> They occur in families, between friends at work, among neighbors, and in the geopolitical arena. Like the gods' curse on the House of Atreus, they seem to have a power of their own that is inexplicable and total, driving people and groups to act in ways that go against their best interests and that sow the seeds of their ruin.

Intractable conflicts are grueling. They tend to worsen over time and rarely just go away. Despi

all the progress that has been made over the past seventy years in understanding and negotiating most types of conflict, this 5 percent has remained unworkable.

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The research on intractable conflicts tells a bleak tale. They tend to enrage us, trap us, frustrate us, drain us of energy and other critical resources, and seem to never go away no matter what we do. They, in fact, *attract* us, pulling us in and dragging us away with them. We often think we understand these conflicts and can choose how to react to them, that we have options. We are usually mistaken, however. The 5 percent rule us. Once we are drawn in, they take control. Like this.

## ***WORLD WAR II REDUX***

A few years back, a small group of friends and colleagues gathered for dinner one night at an apartment in the West Village in New York City. They were all members of an elite research and development team at a top international consulting firm, each from a different country: Korea, Scotland, Israel, Germany, the United States, and Poland. Having all joined the firm at around the same time, they had become very close, bonding over their demanding workload, the late nights, the high cost of living in New York City, and being strangers in a particularly strange land. They were an outstanding team at their firm, collectively nicknamed the “Alpha Dogs.”

That night, the Israeli host of the party had prepared a tasty Middle Eastern supper, which they all enjoyed along with several bottles of red wine. As often happened, at some point in the evening the conversation veered into politics. The Israeli mentioned that she and several of her close friends had recently traveled to Poland to participate in the March to Silence. This was an increasingly popular pilgrimage that Israeli Jews made to visit sites of atrocities in Poland related to the Holocaust, as a way to silence deniers of the Nazi campaign of genocide against Jews. She shared in some detail how powerful and transformative the experience had been for her.

After a long silence, her Polish colleague spoke up. He said he resented the fact that the march took place *only* in Poland. He explained that because the Nazis had successfully destroyed most of the camps in Germany by the end of World War II, there were few German sites left to visit and memorialize. Since the Nazis had left the sites intact in Poland, his was the primary country where the world went to remember the terror and shame of the Holocaust. After all, he stressed, it was the *Germans* who had built the camps, and millions of Poles had perished in them as well.

It was at that point that World War II broke out again in that living room in New York City. The conversation immediately became heated as the past became present, and latent wounds, shame, and rage came rushing to the surface. How could the Poles possibly deny their complicity in the Nazi atrocities after centuries of pogroms and other forms of anti-Semitism had so flourished in Poland? How could the Germans speak such nonsense, given their unprecedented history of fascism and heinous crimes against humanity? How dare either of them take those positions, particularly in the company of someone whose Jewish ancestors had perished in the camps? A couple of the friends (Scottish and Korean) attempted to help calm the others, but this simply inflamed things. The audacity of them trying to minimize these issues! Didn't they realize what was at stake here? After an hour of so of mounting tensions verging on threats, the dinner broke up. And after that night, the group was never the same.

The firm's management attempted to address the group's tensions, as this team had been exceptionally creative and productive and represented a considerable training investment by the

company. They brought in two sets of consultants, including a conflict mediation firm, and each worked with the team over several months. But they failed to mend the divide. At the end of one particularly intense session, one of the members smashed a computer monitor in fury.

No matter what happened, every time the triggering issues came up the colleagues found themselves instantly back where they started—enraged. A few of them did go on to work together again, but the bond they had once all shared was shattered, and what had been a very talented R&D group collapsed.

**FIVE PERCENT CONFLICTS ARE EVERYWHERE.** They happen to all of us at some point in our personal or professional lives. For although 5 percent sounds uncommon, consider all the actual and potential conflicts you experience on a daily basis, from minor disagreements or frustrations in your immediate relationships (siblings, friends, coworkers) to more major disputes with, say, estranged spouses, petulant neighbors, or abusive authority figures. When you think about how ubiquitous conflict is in our lives, the 5 percent rule starts adding up. Sooner or later, you too will be affected.

When they happen, the 5 percent can trap us for what seems like an eternity and, like Orestes, leave us exhausted and in despair. They may even have little to do with us *directly*. They can be longstanding conflicts between our friends or our loved ones, or between other people or groups at work and in the community. (Imagine the dilemma faced by the other members of the Alpha Dogs after the team imploded, split, and polarized.) But that does not matter. They suck us in and bring us down with them anyway.

Much of the research on these conflicts comes from the international domain, from places like the Middle East, Colombia, Cyprus, Sudan, Angola, Northern Ireland, Kashmir, and Mozambique. But although the differences between geopolitical and personal or work conflicts are great, the study of intractable international disputes has important and direct implications for addressing some of the more difficult conflicts found in people's day-to-day lives. Conflicts need not be violent and large scale to be intractable. Many lives have been destroyed by personal conflicts where no blood was shed.

But there is also another and far more important (and unnerving) reason to be concerned about intractable conflicts: it is almost impossible to know whether any given conflict will degenerate into intractability. Under "perfect storm" conditions, even a trivial incident over something minor can evolve to an averse state of affairs that feels unstoppable. I once mediated a community dispute where a minor altercation between neighbors over how tree sap from one neighbor's trees stained the paint job on the other neighbor's car escalated into a protracted series of increasingly violent encounters. On the other hand, what might strike you as a particularly serious conflict between people might prove to be resolvable in a reasonable amount of time, without bringing about toxic feelings and long-term hostilities.

It is important to understand that the surface features of a conflict—the seriousness of the issue that provoked it, the personalities of the antagonists, the level of violence it invokes, whatever—do not necessarily predict whether it will turn bad and remain that way for a long time. To understand intractable conflicts, we must understand the underlying and often invisible dynamics at work. We must understand their curse. So, although you are most likely a reasonable person with good social skills and intuition, you probably have limited insight into the opaque forces that can generate the destructive forms of conflict—conflicts that can control your life.

I remember vividly my experiences in the minutes, hours, and days immediately following the



attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. I was in New York City at the time, living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with my wife and two small children. I had just begun teaching my first course of the fall term at Columbia University at nine o'clock that morning, when the news about the planes hitting the towers started coming in. My wife, Leah, had just dropped off our children at the school downtown. My son, Adlai, was in pre-kindergarten and my daughter, Hannah, in the fourth grade. The cell phone lines were jammed making communication impossible, so I ran, literally, six blocks south to my children's school. We eventually found each other and walked home through the streets with hundreds of debris-covered survivors. We spent the next several days huddled together, immersed in the swirling confusion of the events and the information and misinformation coming through the media. We soon learned that some of the parents of my children's friends had perished in the attack.

I remember perfectly the overwhelming feelings of anxiety, confusion, frustration, bitterness, and rage that stayed with me for weeks. These emotions combined with another powerful pull—to clarify for myself who had done this, who was responsible, who had committed these atrocities—and an urgent need to respond, somehow. It almost didn't matter how.

Teaching my theory of conflict resolution course at Columbia that fall term was trying. The 9/11 attacks, the role U.S. policies may have played in fostering them, and the hunt for those responsible were frequent topics of class discussion. Almost immediately, the class split into two camps: a large pro-American camp ("We are victims, blindsided by these unspeakable acts, hold no responsibility for them whatsoever, and should move to annihilate this enemy!") and a small but very vocal camp critical of America's role ("The U.S.'s addiction to oil and its policies and covert/overt practices in the Middle East brought on the attacks. We are largely responsible for the increasing divide between Islam and the Western world and should therefore take responsibility for these tensions!").

The ensuing conversations were painful and demanding. Holding the center was exceptionally challenging for me, a conflict-resolution expert whose family had been threatened by the attack. Furthermore, the extraordinary complexity of the conversation was simply overwhelming. It included the history of relations of the "parties": the United States, Al Qaeda, bin Laden, the Taliban, the Afghanistan government, Israel, Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi government, etc.; the many relevant governmental policies and covert acts implicated; the role of America's endless thirst for energy; the part played by multinational oil corporations; the differences between terrorism and heroism, and many, many unknowns.

Those experiences have been on my mind these days, as I listen to the national debate over the Islamic community center and mosque to be built near "ground zero." The polarizing rhetoric of the debate forces people to choose sides. Are you for or against the victims of 9/11? For or against terrorism? For or against tolerance and peace? Perhaps this is inevitable while the wounds of 9/11 are so raw. But when rhetoric leads to overly simplistic gut reactions to complex problems and relationships, it often has the unintended consequences of further perpetuating the very problems we face.

These are what we call *conflict traps*: situations where people's reactions to conflicts make the very conditions that instigated them worse. We see this all the time. It happened in South Africa in the 1960s, when the apartheid Afrikaner government responded to nonviolent "stay-at-home" work stoppages by black Africans with brutal force. That contributed to another thirty years of conflict. It happened in France in 2005 and 2007, when the French minister of the interior reacted to antigovernment riots and car-burnings by immigrant community members in a manner that ultimately increased alienation and inflamed more conflict. It happens in Israel-Palestine, on both sides, all to

often. And it happens in our homes. Virtually every time parents respond autocratically and punitively to an adolescent's attempts at independence by "trying out new behaviors," they simply increase the probability that such behaviors (talking back, breaking curfew, dying his or her hair) will continue and become more extreme. These conflict traps feed on themselves and can become self-sustaining, pervasive, and virtually impervious to outside influence. They can become the House of Atreus.

Worse, when these dynamics become self-perpetuating, people lose any sense of agency in the conflict, which typically leads to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair.

But do not despair!

The ideas and research presented in this book will help you to make sense of these seeming impossible conflicts and discover new strategies for managing them constructively. At the heart of the book is the idea that there are powerful forces at work in these types of situations shaping what people see, feel, think, and do. In other words, when you find yourself in the grip of one of these conflicts, *do not trust your senses*. There is much more to the story than meets the eye. We are learning that human psychological and group processes—how people feel, think, and behave together in the midst of intractable conflicts—resemble the way complex systems throughout the universe behave. Based on decades of scientific research on complex systems, it has become possible to model the way these conflicts develop strong patterns, stabilize, and resist change. Most important to understanding these patterns is a phenomenon called *attractors*, organized patterns in the behavior of systems that emerge, endure, and of course attract.

Picture how a whirlpool organizes in a river current, a tornado in a summer storm system, or a violent maelstrom out at sea. All are strong, attracting structures formed by the dynamics of the surrounding conditions. Or, better yet, think of how people's heart rates stabilize around a certain beat per minute, or how their blood pressure seeks a particular level, or even how their weight has a specific set point. These, too, are attractors. They are all ongoing processes affected by many things that stabilize into particular patterns. And even though they may change temporarily (we may lose several pounds on a crash diet), odds are they will soon return to their set point or original pattern, the attractor. Attractors can be seen in patterns found in microbiological cell life in the sea, in traffic patterns in cities, in planetary orbits in space, and in the psychosocial dynamics of thinking, feeling, and acting within groups and societies in conflict.

If you look at the geographic breakdown of Democratic-versus-Republican voting within each of the fifty states in the United States over the last three presidential elections, you see a fascinating pattern. The world has been changed dramatically since 2000, by 9/11, Al Qaeda, a world financial crisis, the rise of China and India, innovations in communications technologies, the spread of H1N1 virus, the worst environmental catastrophe in U.S. history (BP oil spill), and so much more. Yet despite this, the Blue-versus-Red voting breakdown within every state has barely budged. Our country and the world around us are transmuting. They are being buffeted by extraordinary forces from every direction, but U.S. citizens keep voting the same way in the same places. This is an attractor. This is an illustration of patterns of behavior that people feel drawn to reenact repeatedly and often automatically, even when they may at times prefer not to.

The study of attractors provides us with new perspectives and insights into how the many different aspects of complex problems assemble themselves into tightly coupled systems that resist change. This is critical. More manageable conflicts may be complicated, may be destructive, may even cause violence and misery. But this does not make them intractable. Intractability happens when the many different components of a conflict collapse together into one mass, into one very simple "us versus them" story that effectively resists change.

In this book we apply this idea of intractable conflicts as attractors to understanding and addressing life's most difficult conflicts. Of course, not all the physical and social systems that complex scientists study are the same. However, research is showing that the *logic of their basic dynamics* is the same. That slime molds and weather patterns and cancerous growths and some conflicts in families, at work, and in the geopolitical realm in fact function the same way.

These ideas are new and can be very powerful and useful, but they are also demanding. They require us to suspend what we think we know about the more difficult conflicts in our lives, to be wary of our gut instincts, to doubt our own eyes, and to try to see these situations anew. This is *not* easy, but it can make for a much better life for those of us trapped in, even attracted to, the 5 percent.

THIS BOOK DESCRIBES THE 5 PERCENT PROBLEM and what can be done to address intractable conflict. I have no doubt that expert peacemakers working with difficult conflicts in all types of settings around the world have developed a variety of useful insights, intuitions, and methods for addressing these conflicts constructively. However, this book presents the first systematic, integrated, evidence-based model for understanding the 5 percent, and offers a coherent set of principles and practices for resolving them. Its four sections include various illustrations and examples of (seemingly) impossible personal, professional, and geopolitical conflicts.

In the first section we lay out our sense of the *problem* of the 5 percent: why mainstream approaches to resolving conflicts do not seem to help and why they are so intractable. In the second section we describe our *approach*: what we have learned from psychology and recent advances in complexity science that can help to address these types of conflicts. In the third we detail and illustrate our *method*: three basic practices gleaned from our approach for addressing impossible conflicts. The concluding section provides a summary of the *5 percent solution* by illustrating the main ideas and methods through a case description of the intractable sixteen-year conflict and the unlikely outbreak of peace in Mozambique in 1992. We then extrapolate from this case and from the model to offer a few thoughts about employing these ideas and tools to increase the probabilities of peace in other daunting conflicts, such as in the Middle East. Finally, we outline the types of instruction and evidence-based training particularly useful for thinking and working with this approach. In the appendix, we provide an overview and link to a website that offers readers access to a computer simulation tool and tutorial for analyzing, visualizing, and resolving their own seemingly impossible conflicts.

For resolution, even of the 5 percent, can and does happen. Coincidentally, this month (November 2010) Britain and France, two nations that have spent centuries confronting each other on the battlefields of Agincourt, Trafalgar, and Waterloo, signed a landmark cooperative defense agreement. It included the creation of a joint expeditionary force, shared use of aircraft carriers, and combined efforts to improve the safety of their nuclear weapons, which commits the two nations to sharing some of their most carefully guarded secrets. Despite the deep-seated power of their bellicose histories, French president Nicolas Sarkozy proclaimed that the mutual security agreement displayed “a level of trust and confidence between our two nations which is unequalled in history.”<sup>3</sup>

The impossible became possible. The curse was broken. How? Read on.

## ***THE PROBLEM IMPOSSIBLE CONFLICTS***

### ***FEAR AND LOATHING IN BOSTON***

They met together in hiding for six years. They had to. They moved their locations often, and spoke with few others about the meetings.

It felt hopeless. They all felt trapped by events. The horrible shootings that had occurred on Beacon Street had forced them to come together in secret to meet with the enemy. Now they were caught between a terrible dread of violence and retaliation on one side and their unshakable belief in what was right and true on the other.

Each despised the other group. They had all worked tirelessly for years to block and counter the other side's every move. They knew them as immoral, irrational people. Even meeting with them could easily taint their own reputations and cost them their careers, their standing in the community and possibly even their lives. And yet here they were, face to face, in a small stuffy office in Watertown, Massachusetts, immobilized by shame, fear, and duty. Ordinary people captured by truly extraordinary events.

They were six women, all activists and local leaders from the Boston area who had been fighting for years on the front lines of the war over abortion. One was a lawyer, another a rector. One was a chemist, another a president and CEO, and two were executive directors of not-for-profits. Three were pro-life and three were pro-choice.

Before the first meeting, the pro-life activists prayed together in a booth at a nearby Friendly's. They had never before met directly with the others across this divide. But they knew them. They knew their rhetoric and their tactics. They knew how their minds worked, the hate they spewed, the wrongs they had committed, and the blood on their hands. They were clear on the *fact* that abortion was the murder of innocent children. They knew the research on what happens to a fetus during abortions and had seen graphic films of helpless unborn children being caught by the powerful vacuums of the abortionists. They knew stories by heart of women who, because of botched abortions, could never have children again.

The pro-choice women saw things differently. They knew that abortion was an extremely difficult and painful choice, *and* that the right to make that choice was a fundamental human right. The loss of this right was a slippery slope back toward the total control of women by men. They knew of too many cases where the lives of girls had been ruined by being forced to give birth to a child when they were too young. Wasn't it clearly better to let them wait until they were mature enough to love and care for a child? They had also known women forced to give birth despite the known dangers to their own health who had suffered serious consequences as a result. And they knew the science. They knew that in nature billions of sperm cells and millions of eggs were discarded from human bodies every day as a natural biological process. This was the *real* cycle of life. When women were denied control of the

own bodies, of their own destinies, it was clearly a violation of their most basic human rights.

Both sides knew the facts. They knew they were *right*—it was unquestionable. But they also knew that the other side would stop at nothing to champion their cause and that their own group had to do everything in their power to stop them. That much was certain.

And then John C. Salvi III walked into the Planned Parenthood Clinic in Brookline, Massachusetts that cold day in December 1994 and shot Shannon Lowney, the receptionist, to death. He then drove two miles down Beacon Street to the Preterm Health Services clinic and opened fire again, shooting Leanne Nichols, a volunteer, ten times with a rifle at point-blank range saying, “That’s what you get. You should pray the rosary.”<sup>1</sup> By the end of the day, two women were dead and five others were seriously wounded.

The quiet Boston suburb of Brookline was traumatized. The pro-choice community was devastated. Pro-life proponents across the country were ashamed and appalled. Fear of further violence reigned. The governor of Massachusetts, William F. Weld, and Cardinal Bernard Law of the Catholic archdiocese of Boston called for talks between the two camps. So when Laura Chasin of the Public Conversations Project reached out quietly to these six women and asked them to meet for a clandestine dialogue, they came. Despite their best judgment and despite the fact that every cell of their beings cried out to *stay away from them*, they came and met with the enemy.

It was hell at first. Despite agreeing at the onset to act in a respectful manner toward one another, tempers flared. They had to constantly fight their basic instincts to ridicule and condemn the other side, feeling driven by a searing combination of rage, disgust, and righteousness. Yet they returned. Month after month, year after year, they came together and spoke across the abyss. They slowly learned to work together in spite of their initial sense of the futility of such talks and their very real fears for their own personal safety.

And then something extraordinary happened. *The rift between the two groups became even greater.* After years of increasingly constructive dialogue—learning about the other women’s personal lives, their courage and integrity; working together to avoid further violence in the community and coming to respect each other deeply and to care about one another—they nevertheless found themselves even more polarized over the issue of abortion.

Ironically, by agreeing to drop their inflammatory rhetoric and to speak carefully and intimately about their concerns on the issues, they all found themselves even more deeply committed to the original cause. They had become both closer to one another and further apart. They wrote: “Since the first fear-filled meeting, we have experienced a paradox. While learning to treat each other with dignity and respect, we have all become firmer in our views about abortion. . . . We saw that our differences on abortion reflect two world views that are irreconcilable.”<sup>2</sup>

An impossible conflict? Perhaps. But there is more to this story.

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## chapter 1

# ***CONFLICT RESOLUTION METHODS THAT WORK—AND WHY THEY DO NOT HELP WITH THE 5 PERCENT***

TRY TO IMAGINE A WORLD WITHOUT CONFLICT. Can you see it? Even if it were possible, it would be so unbelievably tedious.

Conflict is everywhere in life. It is central to almost everything we do. That includes informed decision making, active learning, healthy relationships, careful parenting, thriving families, innovation at work, fruitful business negotiations, good governance, and important social movements like the women's, civil, gay, and human rights movements. And conflict makes everything more engaging. Imagine a novel, play, movie, or television show without conflict. Or an intimate relationship where you always get along. Or a day in your life without any conflict. Okay, you're right, that would be great. But go a week or a month without conflict—so boring.

Fortunately, we already know a lot about many types of conflict and how to manage them constructively. You might not know it from reading the morning newspapers or watching the evening news, but not all conflicts dissolve into crisis.

Decades of research, trial and error, and practical reflection have clued us into a host of strategies that can be immensely helpful in resolving our conflicts constructively. Popular books like *Getting Yes*, *Getting Past No*, *Difficult Conversations*, *Critical Conversations*, and many others have outlined these tools. Whether we are negotiating with our boss for a raise in salary, problem solving with our families over household chores and curfews, mediating in schools and communities between violent gang members, or negotiating-persuading-cajoling-pleading with diplomats in the back halls of the UN General Assembly, there are useful tools out there that can make a big difference in resolving our conflicts effectively and enhancing the quality of our lives.

The issue is *not* that conflicts are bad and should be eliminated, as tempting as that might seem. That would not work for long. The issue is how, when, and why do conflicts result in good things that stimulate us, motivate us, excite us, and lead us to deeper understanding, better relationships, greater creativity, and a more just world. And how, when, and why do they go bad on us, make us miserable, and eventually trap us.

Here are a few simple rules of thumb about conflict and constructive conflict resolution gleaned from the current literature:<sup>3</sup>

- **Know what type of conflict you are in.** Some conflicts are win-lose (in order for me to win, what I want you *must* lose something—money, property, political office, etc.), while others are purely win-win (we can both get exactly what we want if we're flexible and creative and work together to discover new solutions). But the vast majority of conflicts are a mix of both types (competing goals *and* shared or complementary goals), and all three types (win-lose, win-win, and mixed) require very different strategies and tactics to make them work. Learning how to identify these different types of conflict and how to respond appropriately is central to most

conflict resolution training programs today.

- **Not all conflicts are bad.** Conflicts often make us anxious, and some can become quite painful and destructive, but these tend to be rare. More often, conflicts present us with opportunities to solve problems and bring about necessary changes, to learn more about ourselves and others, and to innovate—to go beyond what we already know and do. However, it is very easy to forget this because the conflicts that stand out in our memory tend to be the bad ones.
- **Whenever possible, cooperate.** Research has consistently shown that more collaborative approaches to resolving win-win or mixed-motive disputes (in other words, the majority of conflicts in our lives) work best. Therefore, we should try to approach conflicts with others as mutually shared problems to be solved together. This may not always be possible, but it is often much more possible than we think. It also makes it more likely that everyone involved will get what they need, that any agreement reached will last, and that the conflict will not escalate or spread.
- **Be flexible.** Try to distinguish your position in a conflict (I want a 4 percent raise) from your underlying needs and interests in the relationship (I actually need more money, respect, parking, and time off). Your initial position may severely limit your options. Creativity and openness to exploration are essential to constructive solutions.
- **Do not personalize.** Try to keep the problems separate from the people when in conflict (do not make *them* the problem). When conflicts become personal, the rules tend to change, the stakes get higher, emotions spike, and the conflicts quickly become more unmanageable.
- **Listen carefully.** Work hard to listen to the other side in a conflict. Accurate information is critical to sound solutions, and careful listening communicates respect. This alone can move the conflict in a more friendly and constructive direction. And this is the only way to determine what is *really* at stake in a conflict: *divisibles* like money, time, and property, or something deeper and more meaningful (and loaded) like values, principles, or religious beliefs.
- **Be fair, firm, and friendly.** Always attempt to be reasonable, respectful, and persistent in conflict. (But do not cave in! Find a way to make sure your needs are met.) Research shows that the *process* of how conflicts are handled is usually more important than the *outcomes* of conflicts. It goes a long way in determining people's sense of justice or injustice in the situation.

These fine principles and guidelines can make a powerful difference in most of the conflicts in our lives. Together, they constitute the centerpiece of most approaches to developing and refining our basic skills in *integrative negotiation, creative problem solving, constructive controversy, mediation, town hall meetings, large-group consensus building*, and other practical methods of constructive conflict resolution. Applied correctly, these methods can go a long way toward moving *most* of our conflicts in a positive and satisfying direction, and enhancing our general health and well-being.

But not with the 5 percent.

The 5 percent seem immune to such strategies and tactics. Repeatedly, they have proven to be insufficient in dealing with deeply embedded intractable conflict. Just recall the myriad good-faith attempts at conflict resolution and peace making that have failed in Israel-Palestine, Sudan, Cyprus, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia, Somalia, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Kashmir, North Korea, and other enduring conflicts across the globe. Research shows that mediation attempts in these situations often have little impact other than possibly delaying the onset of new spikes



violence. In fact, there is some evidence that mediation makes matters worse, as it is associated with greater likelihood of war between long-standing rival states. (However, this might be due to the fact that it is the more difficult conflicts that require mediation).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, mediation appears to be, at the very least, ineffective in these settings.

The same can be said about many attempts to “resolve” polarizing community and family disputes closer to home. Often, when people try to negotiate or mediate particularly difficult issues—like building abortion clinics, hate speech on the radio, assisted suicide, or the right to wear religious garments when working for a private company—their interventions backfire, driving disputants further apart into more hardened positions. They do not seem to help at all.

Why don't these usually effective methods work with the 5 percent? The obvious answer is that the 5 percent are simply more difficult: more heated, entrenched, and complicated. But it is more than that. It also has to do with several interrelated challenges: the limitations of the scientific paradigm on which many of the current models and methods of conflict resolution are based, the unique nature of the 5 percent, and the fact that they are exceptionally difficult to comprehend. Each of these aspects is discussed below.

## ***TOP TEN LIMITATIONS TO STANDARD APPROACHES TO SOCIAL-SCIENCE RESEARCH***

Standard approaches to research in the social sciences are often based on a set of assumptions about science, intervention, and change that limits their applicability for addressing the unique, long-lasting challenges of the 5 percent. They include the following:

**1. They compare fluid things to fixed things.** Mary Parker Follett, one of the great unsung heroes of conflict resolution and management theory, said it first. Follett was a social worker and brilliant visionary who worked with labor-management conflicts in business and industry in the 1920s. She was an adviser to President Theodore Roosevelt and one of the first women invited to address the London School of Economics. She was also the first to recognize that the social sciences had a strange view of things such as leadership, worker relations, and human conflict: they saw them as static things. Science, commonly, looks to certain fixed attitudes, personality characteristics, reward systems, needs, opportunity structures, and so on and proposes that if people or situations have some quality, (for instance a positive attitude or common interests), they will respond to conflict constructively. While rules derived from such correlations may sometimes hold true, this kind of thinking neglects the one thing we know to be constant in life: *change*.

All people, attitudes, personalities, goals, needs, and situations are fluid things that are constantly shifting and changing. Life is fluid. When we try to nail down some quality, X, as a stable entity (for instance that Rob is a contentious person), we are already violating what we know to be certain: that Rob does and will change. This of course is particularly true during the long course of a protracted conflict. Recognizing life's fluidity helps account for the fact that so much research on the effects of different personality variables (like authoritarianism, general trust levels, gender, and conscientiousness) on conflict resolution processes has proven to be largely inconclusive and confusing.<sup>5</sup> They a



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