Beyond Blame

Introduction

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A Personal Journey Through Conflict

It is late at night. I cannot sleep. Every time I close my eyes, I see before me a scene in which I stand helpless, mute, unable to express myself. I think of several things I could have said, brilliant responses that would have moved my adversary to tears, speechlessness, or, better yet, recognition that I am right and he is wrong.

In my dreams I can say these things, but I cannot seem to mobilize such persuasive arguments in the midst of real conflicts. "Why must he treat me this way?" I beseech the sandman, who will not release me from consciousness. "Why will he not be more reasonable, more cooperative, more *like me?*"

My breathing slows. I finally find a comfortable position. The demons are buried in sand and I am floating away. Suddenly, my eyes pop open once again. "Now, wait a minute," I remind myself. "Did he really mean it when he said…?" "Next time he does that I am going to…" Indignation. Rage. Shame. Frustration. Fear. Tension. Uncertainty. Blame. No wonder I cannot sleep.

Even Experts Lose Control

I am an expert in human relationships. I resolve disputes for a living. I mediate conflicts, cool down hostilities between spouses, business partners, siblings, parents and children. I am a therapist, a trainer and supervisor of therapists. I have written a dozen books on how to do therapy. So it is with particular reluctance that I admit the extent to which I have allowed myself to become deeply troubled about relationships that have caused me great anguish and frustration. Furthermore, I cannot think of a time when this has not been the case.

I bring this to your attention not to perpetuate the myth (and it *is* an exaggeration) that most therapists are crazier than their clients, but to make the point that even with the best possible training and decades of experience helping others resolve disputes in their lives, everyone loses sleep over relationships in conflict.

I felt driven to figure out why interpersonal conflicts are unavoidable, why they occupy such a disproportionate amount of my time—thinking about them, reliving the most painful moments, obsessing about things I wish I had said or done, deciding who is most to blame, resolving to do better next time, and, worst of all, berating myself because, after all, I am the expert, and I should be beyond such mortal frustration.

In my search for answers to these questions I encountered a lot of

reassurance from colleagues and authors of books on the subject. "Conflict is constructive," I read repeatedly. "Don't worry. You are not alone." I heard echoes of these sentiments from concerned friends. Yet this advice, however well meant, only contributed to greater feelings of impotence. This was true for more specific suggestions as well—to be more assertive, more firm, more flexible; to ignore the offending person's behavior; to not take the conflict so seriously. All of these simple platitudes are things I have heard myself say to clients a thousand times.

After studying the literature on human conflict in anthropology, ethnology, psychology, sociology, and political science, after interviewing several thousand people about their experiences during interpersonal disputes, I have learned that the key is not found in getting people to treat me differently. Neither is it in changing the way I respond to provocation, nor removing myself from threatening predicaments. And I now know that figuring out what is wrong with others, identifying why they behave so differently from the way I would prefer, defining the ways they are responsible for my suffering, is somewhat interesting but not all that useful.

Looking Inward Rather Than Outward

The thread that runs throughout almost all of my conflicts with others is the tendency to concentrate on the other person's role in obstructing my goals.

The focus of most of my energy is on trying to place blame on other people, or on things outside of my control, rather than addressing what I am doing, or could be doing, to resolve disputes and reach my stated objectives.

This knowledge did not come easily; it took the forceful courage of one longtime colleague and friend, who pointed out a familiarity in my complaints about a particular person. Had there not been other times in my adult life in which I had been locked in conflict with someone who resembled the current antagonist? And was I not reacting in much the same way in which I had responded to others in the past?

These questions were liberating! Perhaps I no longer had to feel like the victim of unfair treatment. Maybe I could change the very fabric of my relationships, just as I purport to help others to do. If I could just get to the bottom of what is most disturbing to me, neutralize its effects, and move on to the things in life that matter the most! Indeed, this is exactly the path that I followed, one that is very familiar to me in my work with others, and one that helped me move beyond blame in order to focus on what is within my power to control.

Once I was able to stop holding another person responsible for my suffering, no matter how insensitively or manipulatively he acted, I was able to focus attention on my own role in the conflict. What is it about him that I find so

threatening? How is it that he is able to get under my skin so easily? Why do I feel so sorely wounded by a person who really is not all that important to me?

I acknowledged my responsibility in seeking out not only characters who would disappoint me and withhold approval, but also those whom I could blame afterward for making aspects of my life less than satisfactory. Since there is certainly no shortage of people in the world who revel in trying to satisfy their need for power and control, I would always be able to find another candidate to victimize me. With this realization, my anger and indignation suddenly turned into disgust at myself. When was I ever going to learn? Was I doomed to spend my life struggling with the same core issues over and over again?

My personal journey through conflict went back through time. I began to look at the patterns of my life—By whom had I felt most rejected? In which relationships had I felt most belittled and helpless? I was able to conjure up images of all the people with whom I had had significant conflicts—from the first- grade teacher who had terrorized me with the claim that she could always see everything I was doing to a professional mentor who had ended our relationship abruptly without explanation. I visualized a gathering of these folks, perhaps a dozen of them together, sharing their frustrations in trying to deal with me. They offered one another sympathy and agreed that I deserved exactly what I had gotten.

It occurred to me that if such a convention of the antagonists in my life did take place, there probably would be remarkable consensus about what I am like. They would say I am too sensitive and thin skinned. I am too impulsive; I don't think before I open my mouth. There is something about me that is threatening to them.

Whether I agreed with this assessment or not, 1 was now well on my way through the *inner* journey of conflict. The problems that I was experiencing— and had repeatedly encountered before— were not just the result of people being difficult; nor were they only the consequence of miscommunication or interactive effects in some relationships. Every conflict is played out on a stage populated by others in the present. But just as importantly, these conflicts are re-enactments of previous struggles as well as depictions of events as we imagine them to be. Naturally, there is a lot of room for distortion and misinterpretation.

Finding the Patterns of Conflicted Relationships

In my efforts to understand and work through the conflicts of my life I have consulted many colleagues, supervisors, therapists, and friends. I have read virtually every book I could find on the subject. I sought help from my adversaries, asked them about what I was doing that triggered their overreactions. I tried many different conflict resolution strategies, most with

short-lived results.

Because of my fascination with the topic of conflict in relationships, I developed an expertise in working with difficult clients in therapy. I was determined to face what I most fear. This resulted in a book for therapists, a collection of research articles in a professional journal, and a series of workshops for professionals throughout North America and New Zealand.

While this knowledge and experience were certainly helpful in understanding the dynamics of what goes wrong in some relationships, what finally made the greatest difference for me was letting go of my demands that others change to be more like me. There is no use in blaming someone because he chooses to operate under rules that differ from mine. I can make decisions about how I interact with him in the future. I can feel like a victim and wallow in sympathy from others and pity from myself. Or I can turn away from my preoccupation with what others are doing or not doing and instead concentrate on resolving issues from my own past, putting these insights to work in such a way that I commit myself to act differently in the future.

I have been down this road with enough people—children fighting with their parents; siblings who will not speak to one another; spouses on the verge of divorce; friends estranged from one another; people in conflict with supervisors, co-workers, ex-spouses, neighbors—to know that there are few

undertakings as difficult as coming to terms with conflict, both with others and within oneself.

What This Book Will and Will Not Do

You may have certain expectations about what a book such as this should do for you. A magical cure would be nice, but you are probably sufficiently familiar with this genre to limit your hopes to learning a few "techniques" or "strategies" that might make your life a little easier.

It has become fashionable of late to reduce complex human phenomena to a few simple premises that can be distilled further into several sequential steps to overcome most any problem. Thus whether you are interested in losing weight, stopping smoking, ending an abusive relationship, recovering from the ending of a good relationship, finding a better job, overcoming depression, reducing stress, conquering addictions, breaking bad habits, overcoming procrastination, finding love, or resolving conflicts, there are thousands of self-help manuals available that give you the steps to follow in order to achieve perfect harmony with yourself and all the universe.

And there is no scarcity of advice and guidance about how to deal with relationships in conflict. Some experts will tell you to learn negotiation skills, or the art of confrontation, or how to get others to do your bidding, or even the strategies of waging war. There are literally hundreds of plans that you might

consult as a blueprint for neutralizing hostile actions.

Before I realized that the process of working through interpersonal conflict is more internal than external, I attempted to integrate what experts in the field of conflict resolution consider most crucial. Such a generic program includes several sequential steps, all sound advice if one's goal is to focus exclusively on changing other people's behavior.

1. *Create an optimal atmosphere for negotiation.* This includes providing a setting that is free from distractions and intrusions, one in which an attitude of cooperation rather than competition prevails. Both parties involved in the conflict feel safe enough to experiment, flexible enough to compromise.

2. *Describe the nature of the conflict from all perspectives.* Until a complete picture is created of what a dispute is about, it is impossible to address grievances. This means eliciting personal points of view from both people as to how they experience what is happening.

3. *Understand the behavior of your adversary.* Empathy is part of the picture—that is, imagining what the other person is experiencing, why he or she may be defensive or hostile or uncooperative. Equally important is understanding the context of the person's behavior. Is this a chronic pattern of obstruction, or is it specific to interactions with you? Is this person reacting to fear and stress, or is there some perverse hidden agenda operating? Figuring out the other person's

motives and intentions is crucial to finding a means to resolve the dispute, or at least a way to protect yourself from further damage.

4. *Identify historical issues that may be involved in the struggle.* People argue not only about what is going on in the present but about what has happened previously. It is crucial to bring into the open unresolved issues, perceived injustices, and underlying feelings of resentment that have been lingering beneath the surface. This strategy is considered constructive only when the past is brought in in an effort to understand the present rather than to rehash old fights.

5. *Declare needs that are not currently being met.* When each person takes responsibility for articulating his or her own issues, interests, needs, and feelings, effort is expended on finding solutions rather than excuses.

6. *Share decision making equally.* Resentment often stems from the belief that other people are controlling your life and dictating the terms under which you must function. When you feel that you are being manipulated or dominated by someone else, you harbor continuing resentments that affect your interactions. Most of this lingering hostility is diffused when the conflict participants make an effort to decide together what will be done.

7. *Develop alternatives that will meet stated goals.* If you are operating flexibly and negotiating from a position of compassion and strength, eventually you will find some solution that is

satisfactory. This presumes that you are patient, that you have moved beyond finding fault or assigning blame, and that you are working together as a team to develop options that are acceptable to both of you.

8. *Initiate action designed to meet mutual goals.* Deciding on what you will do and how you will do it are certainly important steps. However, unless you have committed yourselves to some plan of action, all the good intentions in the world are meaningless. During this stage in the process each person declares what he or she will do differently in the future and what will happen if he or she does not follow through on this commitment.

9. *Reach a consensus on future actions.* An important theme running through this book is that conflict can be the most constructive or destructive of human interactions. It is not enough simply to resolve a particular dispute. The important thing is to learn from this exchange so that future interactions will be more caring and helpful.

Following the steps in this process is certainly a good idea. In fact, this is a *great* plan—as far as it goes. But in order to deal with conflicts in life, it is first necessary to move beyond blame. This includes bringing under control the indignation you feel toward others who do not treat you the way you expect; it also involves accepting that although you share responsibility for interpersonal disagreements, there is little to be served by blaming yourself for the difficult situations in which you find yourself.

What Is Unique About This Book?

This book has several unique aspects:

1. It is integrative in orientation, combining theory and research from diverse fields with a clinician's pragmatic concerns for helping people make a difference in their lives.

2. There is a focus throughout the book on taking responsibility for conflicts rather than blaming others for one's troubles. Attributing the causes of suffering to others may lead to short-term relief while creating escalating conflicts and producing long-term damage.

3. Some books are primarily insight oriented or action focused; this book is both. It helps counteract the tendency to put conflicts "out there" and instead brings them inside, where something can be done about them.

4. Since attention is moved away from deciding who is at fault for conflicts, here emphasis is placed instead on what one can *do,* both inside his or her own head and outside in the middle of disputes, to respond more effectively.

5. No matter how patient, reasonable, and skilled one may be, he or she still will encounter others who do not operate by the same rules of conduct. This book explores why some people appear so difficult and why they fail to live up to our expectations for what we consider appropriate behavior. It examines why some people attempt to control others, and how blaming them for

their behavior only makes things worse.

6. Whereas other works concentrate on conflicts within marriages or partnerships or friendships or with supervisors or between children and parents, this book takes a look at what all of these relationships have in common.

The Book's Process

Beyond Blame follows a process that is not unlike that of psychotherapy or any systematic learning endeavor. First it helps you assess what it is that you find most disturbing and disruptive. Next, you are helped to understand how these problems developed, what other issues they are related to, and how they are connected to lifelong patterns of avoiding responsibility and blaming things and people outside your control.

The book explores some of the unconscious forces at work that maintain continued self-defeating behaviors in conflict situations. This may include an inclination to avoid confrontation whenever possible, indulge in the victim role for sympathy, or take some perverse pleasure from being able to blame others for your suffering. If you can assume you're not at fault, then you do not have to invest the hard work that is involved in changing. Instead you may complain that life has dealt you a bad hand, that you have had a string of bad luck, that you have not been treated fairly, that you are unappreciated by others.

Then it is decision time. Are you willing to pay the price to move beyond blame? Yes, you say tentatively, not altogether sure what you are committing yourself to. Caution is certainly appropriate under the circumstances: if you no longer choose to blame others for your conflicts and subsequent misery, then what is left is the realization not that you are at fault, but that you are responsible. This feels both burdening and exhilarating. On the one hand, you have nobody but yourself to blame when things are not going the way you would like. On the other hand, it is within your power to alter the course that conflicts are taking, even without the other person's consent or cooperation.

How this is accomplished is relatively less important than the determination to make it happen. It is not so much a matter of technique as it is an attitude—a willingness to keep trying different strategies until you get the results you want. Even when conflicts are irreconcilable, you still have options concerning how you will live with the predicament.

Clients in therapy are often frustrated because they want and expect easy answers, even though they know that is highly unlikely. Anything in life that is really worth doing involves work, usually with few shortcuts. The change process presented in this book is not a passive one. You can't just thumb through pages, reading words, nodding to yourself when you encounter things you like and then moving on to the next book. In order for significant change to take place in your conflicted relationships and in the ways you handle them, you

will have to respond actively to what you read. Specifically, this involves several activities.

1. *Read carefully and critically.* Take notes. Talk to yourself. Argue with me when you disagree. Don't fight me— wrestle with the ideas. Discard what does not fit for you, but not before considering its possible validity. When an idea is particularly threatening, ask yourself why. Write about your reactions in a journal.

2. *Connect new ideas to what you already understand.* Make this material fit into your life, your values and attitudes, your unique situation. If you consider the spiritual, emotional, life-style, and philosophical influences that guide your life, you can appreciate the work you will need to do.

3. *Talk with others about what you are reading.* In order to make new ideas part of you, use them in your daily interactions with others. By now you probably have already been stimulated by a few things that have been mentioned here. Ask others what they think about these matters. Conduct your own research studies to confirm or refute what you have read.

4. *Practice.* Thinking and talking are fine, but without action on your part, you will remain nothing more than an enlightened but miserable wreck. Try out new ways of dealing with others. Experiment with what it is like to move beyond blame. Note the parts you like and those you do not. Change the way you define yourself, and others will soon follow.

The Process in Action

Beyond Blame is organized around a process of understanding and working through conflict that follows a series of progressive steps. Each chapter builds on the awarenesses and commitments developed in the previous sections and helps you internalize new concepts and apply what you have learned to specific conflicted relationships.

Let us look at an example of how this process might be applied. Nat was a person whose rage had gotten him in trouble so often that he landed in my office by court order: either he had to bring himself under control or he would end up in jail for provoking fights. This was a man who thrived on conflict as the nutrient that energized him through the day and well into the night. Yet he was utterly at a loss as to how he ended up in conflict with others so often—at work, at home with his children, even in restaurants and at parties. If there was a fight somewhere, he would always find himself in the middle of it.

Nat was actually quite an engaging and charming fellow. However, his anger was easily aroused. He might be involved in a most satisfying exchange with someone when all of sudden some button would get pushed and he would launch into offensive, aggressive behavior. He was being completely honest when he said that he had no idea what was triggering these reactions.

How was Nat ever going to identify unresolved issues that were so deeply

buried in his unconscious? Three years of psychoanalysis was not the only solution. Another was the process that Nat went through with the assistance of a professional guide. That is the same path that you must take if you are ever to get beyond blame, control how you react in conflict situations, and respond in strategic, effective ways. Here is the process to follow:

1. Identifying What Sets You Off

People close to you have been telling you about it your whole life when you overreact to situations, exaggerate your victim role, and respond to situations in obviously self-defeating ways. For Nat, this took the form of feeling challenged by any man whom he perceived as functioning in an authority role. Usually such "trigger objects" appeared unusually confident and competent, perhaps even arrogant. Contact with these people signaled a reaction in Nat in which he had to cut them down to size, to take them on—if not verbally, then physically. Always in this scenario, Nat would tell himself that they were provoking him, that he had no choice but to defend himself.

Likewise in your own life, certain kinds of people and particular situations set you off in such a way that you lose control. These stimuli seem to elicit almost automatic reactions in you—unfortunately those in which you may exaggerate or distort what is happening and then overreact both in the ways you interpret what is going on and in the means by which you respond to it.

It is crucial that you recognize the consistent patterns with which you respond to others if you are ever to understand what is going on and then be able to do something about it. Once you have determined the possible sources of your reactions, the hard part is to use this self-knowledge to promote action rather than inertia. Insight may as easily be used as an excuse for avoiding action as it may be employed as an impetus for initiating change. You have known people who have been in therapy for years, who understand all too well why they are so dysfunctional, yet still persist in the same patterns. Self-understanding is nice, but unless insight is converted into action, it can sabotage efforts to change.

2. Exploring the Origins and Causes of Your Conflicts

You act in certain ways because you have learned to protect yourself from future harm based on past traumas. Once you have identified when you tend to overreact—who gets to you and what specific situations you dread—you will next want to figure out how this pattern evolved.

This stage was easy for Nat (especially with me pushing) since he could readily see how the people he fought with were mostly reincarnations of his abusive father. As a child he had felt powerless to oppose his father's will, but now as an adult he was determined to take on anyone crossing his path who was perceived as controlling.

3. Allowing Yourself the Discomfort

My primary purpose in the preceding stages was to turn up the heat a bit, to get in your face and ask you to look at the blame you direct outside of yourself for things that have not gone your way. If you noticed yourself feeling defensive, perhaps even a little angry at me for not understanding how difficult it has been for you, then you are in the middle of this next stage in the process.

When you notice yourself engaging in chronically ineffective behavior, when this pattern has been brought to your attention, it becomes more difficult for you to continue it and remain oblivious to the implications and consequences. Forever after, an annoying whisper will haunt you: "Look, you are doing it again. Blame others all you want, but it is your choice to continue this pattern."

When Nat picked an argument with me one day, rather than get into conflict with him, I took a step back and pointed out that I thought he was afraid of his feelings for me, that he was starting to trust me and value our time together. He could not tolerate the power he perceived I had over him: if he liked me, then I could hurt him. He protected himself by starting a fight in order to prove to himself that I was just a jerk like everyone else. When I brought this pattern to his attention, as he later learned to do for himself, he tried to hide an inadvertent smile of acknowledgment. He claimed this exchange "ruined" him: "It's just no fun picking fights anymore, Doc. Once I realize what I am doing—

taking on my father, inflating my own power, avoiding a closeness with other men—I just don't have my heart in it anymore."

This is an example of insight at its best: when a realization about the way you behave creates sufficient dissonance that you have to change in order to feel comfortable again. If I tell you that the reason you blame others for your misery is because you do not want to take the responsibility for making things different, *and you believe me,* the next time you attempt this defense it will not work as well for you. You will hear my words, in your own internal voice, say, "Don't kid yourself! It is not *their* fault. What did *you* do that you might try doing differently?"

4. Taking Responsibility Without Blaming

As you know by now, the theme of this book is choosing to move beyond blame—toward others and yourself—and instead concentrate on what you can do to alter the situation.

Nat lamented his predicament, "How can I ever change this lifelong pattern, especially when others keep trying to push me all the time?" He had a lengthy list of all the techniques he had tried that had not worked for him: counting to ten before responding, taking deep breaths, using T rather than "you" as the pronoun of choice—all valid ideas. Rather than focusing on how others and the world were not cooperating with his new intention to act

differently, we narrowed attention to what was within his power to control. He had choices about the extent to which he would allow other people to provoke him, and he had many options other than fighting as ways to respond.

5. Committing Yourself to Act Differently

It is one thing to muse about how nice it would be if only things were different; it is quite another to make a commitment to function differently in the future. After all, you have made thousands of promises to yourself—to lose weight, to get a better job, to stop a habit, to start an exercise program—that you have not followed through on or stuck with.

So, why would this decision to deal with unresolved issues and chronic problems be any different?" I asked Nat.

In a moment of rare candor, Nat sheepishly admitted that he could not be sure that this time would be any different. Maybe he was doomed to spend his life locked into a vicious cycle of reliving the same conflict with his father over and over again.

"That's a distinct possibility," I responded, choosing not to reassure or rescue him. "But that decision is up to you." Incredible as it may seem, sometimes changing a life pattern is a matter of conscious choice.

6. Experimenting with Alternative Strategies

If understanding a predicament or choosing to behave differently were all one had to do to resolve unfinished business or change dysfunctional patterns, we would all be like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz:* we could just click our heels together three times and wish ourselves back to Kansas.

Unfortunately, Witches of the East do not leave us alone just because we *understand* they are in a bad mood because a house fell on them. Similarly, deciding to put the past behind us and get on with things is not only a matter of making up our minds to do so. Definite action is required, strategies that are quite different from what you are already doing.

Nat stopped reacting to others as if they were his father. Even more exciting for him, he was finally able to confront his father (rather than surrogates) with his feelings about their relationship. He was able to work through the anger and resentment, even forgive his father to a point where he was able to resume a guarded relationship. Nat no longer allowed himself to be set off by actions that had little to do with the reality of what transpired. That is not to say that he gave up his combative style; actually, he sort of enjoyed a "healthy" fight now and then, especially when it resulted in eventual reconciliation and mutual understanding. However, Nat's fierceness, his frightening power to intimidate, became muted as he exercised increasing control over what he permitted himself to react to and how he chose to

respond.

In Chapter One we will approach the subject of what sets *you off.* Who are the people who push your buttons? And what is going on *in you* that makes you so vulnerable to manipulation or hurt?

About the Author

Jeffrey A. Kottler is professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He has worked as a therapist in a variety of settings—including hospitals, mental health centers, schools, clinics, universities, corporations, and private practice. Jeffrey is an internationally recognized authority in the area of human relationships, having authored thirteen books on the subjects of teaching and therapy.

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Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling (1992, 2nd ed., with Robert Brown)

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