

CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICTS: FROM ESCALATION TO RESOLUTION

KRIESBERG, Louis 1998

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(Louis Kriesberg is Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Maxwell Professor Emeritus of Social Conflict Studies at Syracuse University)

The experienced author of this valuable book has tried to provide a comprehensive, realistic approach to conflict resolution theory and practice, and has succeeded remarkably well.

On almost 400 pages he shares his extensive and intensive insight into conflicts as they emerge, intensify, de-escalate and reach outcomes. Throughout the book the social context of conflict in general and conflicts in particular is taken very seriously. The author's definition of social conflict includes both individuals and groups. The appropriate examples from real conflicts which he continuously presents, cover all sorts of destructive and constructive socio-political conflicts. The three cover photos may be regarded as symbols of the kinds of windows which are opened, or opened wider, to readers of the book. They show an individual demonstrator at the Berlin wall, a wide London street filled with placard carrying peace marchers, and Nelson Mandela at the ballot box in South Africa's first democratic election.

What is also clearly emphasised on the cover is that the book focuses on conflicts — constructive conflicts. One of the considerations behind the writing of this book was the desire to understand how people prevent or stop destructive conflicts but instead wage relatively constructive conflicts. While interrelating, in a natural and reader-friendly manner, what can be learnt from theory and practice, the author takes us through the stages inevitably found in conflicts. Two pivotal points in the series of

happenings making up a conflict are highlighted in the sub-title: escalation and resolution. But the actual contents of the entire book give us a most useful, thorough and encouraging discussion of the bases, manifestation, escalation, de-escalation, termination and consequences of conflicts.

A singular advantage of this book is that it is structured in a very meaningful and life-related way, without being prescriptive or dogmatic. In the first chapter a simplified conflict cycle is given as a frame of reference. And in the last chapter a more elaborate version is used in a synthetic, concluding discussion. But then, of the content between the opening and closing chapters, almost exactly one half (49%) is devoted to emerging and escalating conflict, and the other half (51%) to de-escalating and resolving conflict.

In the first half readers are educated, or further educated, with regard to the many ways in which social conflicts (or, in other words, conflicts between human beings with all our similarities and differences) vary. Writing in a thought-prompting and -promoting way, the author consistently communicates the importance of how the partisans of conflicts and the potentially involved bystanders view their struggle. He correctly emphasises that you cannot separate the study of conflicts from a consideration of what people feel about the issues and objectives concerned. What people want to accomplish through a conflict has to be understood properly and taken seriously. How people contest the efforts of others to exercise power has to be explored. (This is no mere repetition of the obvious observation that all conflicts are about power. It is a personalised and socialised perspective on the essence of conflict.)

As can be expected when such an approach is used, the author consistently focuses on the relationships between people. In the first half it is the relationship between adversaries that receive due attention. That, after all, is usually the crucial component of a conflict's origin. In the chapters on conflict there are no less than eight sections on adversary relations. The relational approach is maintained in the second half of the book, where five sections are devoted to changes in relationship, continuing relations between the former antagonists, and consequences of an outcome for adversary relations. Due emphasis is placed on interdependence and integration. As markers of a constructive outcome, not only human rights, equity and justice are mentioned, but also an improved relationship.

In line with this personal perspective, the author has called his chapter on mediation *Intermediary contributions*, and focused on mediating services (thirteen aspects),

mediator roles (nine possibilities) and mediator contributions (six examples). As elsewhere, each item is substantiated with meaningful references to apt cases from real life. And in line with the orientation to being constructive, a problem-solving approach is discussed in more than one context.

In Louis Kriesberg's *Constructive conflicts* we really have a comprehensive, coherent and contemporary book. But above all, as an eminent scholar like Johan Galtung states in his firm recommendation on the back cover, the book is optimistic. What Galtung says about the comprehensiveness of this potential leading textbook in conflict studies can indeed be endorsed wholeheartedly.

Jannie Malan