

Interpersonal Conflict and Conflict Resolution

Interview with Carol Lee Smith

I'm Carol Lee Smith, and as a lawyer who has worked in the field of mediation and conflict resolution for a long time, I find it really interesting to think about how we put together a structural approach to what we do about conflict and the techniques that we can develop around addressing that conflict and also interpreting what's happening. So my interest in thinking about these things - whether it's from a kind of professional perspective, as a mediator, or from the perspective of how to work with people who are learning to understand conflict and address it constructively in their professional situation is to think about how those aspects of process and technique and skills we all bring to that fit together.

One of the things that's really important to understand and think about us as human beings generally, but it becomes very important in thinking about conflict, is that reason and emotion are very closely connected. So we've thought about those things for a long time as being something that you separate, but in actual fact you can't. So it's important to respect that when we're in a conflict situation we may feel - we're going to - we often feel a sort of heightened emotional experience, and that is both something that we have to think about how we're going to manage, but it's also an opportunity to understand that emotion and an emotional response is kind of a red flag for us. It's a red flag; it's also a marker of something that's important, something that we need to pay attention to.

And it then becomes something that is a trigger for us to maybe do some analysis about what's happening: Why are we feeling this way? Like why is it that the woman in the parking lot is feeling such a heightened response to the fellow who is parked beside her? What is it about what he's doing that's making her feel that way? And then that ultimately takes her to a place where she thinks about - she kind of goes through that process. She thinks about: What is it that's happening here? I'm having this response; this is a conflict moment for us. What might be behind it for him? You know, what is that reflection - what might be there for him? And then doing some interpretation about: What is it that could possibly have brought him to this place and to be unloading on me. Not to take that to a place where she has to accept that that's okay, or accept that that's something she needs to, you know, not feel conflicted about, but to take it to a place where she's doing some analysis about how to understand it, and then ultimately what she

might do about it in a way that doesn't put them in that kind of positional clash.

So it can be helpful to reflect on how sometimes we have a different response to conflicts like this if we're in a professional situation versus what we're like when we're in a personal situation, and the module illustrates that in a couple of ways, and one of them is the - the position and interest segments - the two doctors who were in a conflict versus the father and son who were in a conflict over whether the son is going to come home at midnight. And you know you see the conflict escalate really quickly in that exchange, and I think it also illustrates how important it is to understand in that kind of interpersonal situation. The conflict can escalate really quickly cause the stakes are very high. When it happens to you - when it happens to each of us - we might have that emotional response. So the emotional response in and of itself is a clue to go looking for what might be at work, and whether there is something that you haven't seen, that you - if you take that sort of perspective from the, you know, the third place, what is it that you might see, and if you go looking, what do you uncover?