

The Stories We Fashion About Conflict

Stories are important to disputes, especially the ones we tend to fashion: the beginning story, the refined story, and the operative story.

The beginning story is a boiled down version of how you see a conflict in which you are embroiled. This is the story you might use to describe the situation to a trusted friend. It could be raw and unedited, with complexities and histories worn away by the process of running the story through your mind, perhaps hundreds of times. A beginning story might also include factors and/or people who are affected by the conflict. A beginning story is told from your perspective, and understanding the conflict more broadly is helped if you can consider how and why others would tell a different story. This leads to the refined story.

Refinement is what the second story is about. Woven into the refined story are ingredients of identity, emotion, and empowerment. Developing the parts of the refined story is important because it clarifies roles and motivations. It opens up the possibilities. Knowledge is power. The more you know, the more skillful you can become.

The identity aspect of the refined story involves characteristics about you and whoever else is involved in the conflict. First, consider yourself. Who are you in relation to the conflict? In what ways has the conflict impacted who you are, both positively or negatively? Who do you want to be? Now, how about other person? Who are they in the context of the conflict, how have they been impacted, and who do they want to be?

A second ingredient of the refined story concerns emotions. What do you feel in relation to the conflict? How do you want to feel? What could you do to feel better? How about the other person? What do you think they are feeling and how do they want to feel? What could YOU do to help the other person feel like they want to feel? It is important to understand that emotion will NOT effectively be shoved aside. However, by giving appropriate voice to emotion, it can become more ally and less obstacle.

A final ingredient of the refined story is empowerment. Describe the power relationship between you and the other person. What similarities and differences do you and the other person have about what you want to accomplish? Note - the question is not *how* you want to accomplish anything, but what you want to accomplish. What will help you accomplish your goals? What conduct is most likely to assist you in accomplishing them? What external resources would be important to accomplishing your objectives? Given your analysis of identity, emotion, and empowerment, what vision do you have of the optimal outcome of the conflict?

Now for **the operative story**. The operative story is informed by your refinement

efforts. Fleshing out the operative story involves your answers to questions, such as these:

What is the first step to forward the action in the direction you favor?

What options are available to you to work through the conflict, and which is most appealing at this time?

What do you need to accomplish the optimal outcome?

Can the optimal outcome be broken into pieces or stages?

Is there a downside to the other side knowing what you need?

If not, how can you help the other party better understand what you need?

How can you gain a better understanding of what the other party needs?

Can you help the other party give you what you need?

Does being respectful help or hinder you?

Is it more beneficial for you to be primarily cooperative or competitive?

What communication skills can you draw upon and, if you need others, what are they?

Seeing conflict in relation to the stories we start with, and those we are able to develop, can shift perspectives. This process opens the possibility of more constructive engagement in the face of what may seem like an intractable war. Competing sides need not share a story orientation, however it becomes increasingly difficult for one party to remain stuck and small when the other is not confined, when the other party models something more hopeful. Good engagement!