

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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There are many natural phenomenons in this grand world of ours. The rain, the earth, the alignment of the planets, the nature of the sun, the birth of a child, love, the multitude of languages, the universe as a whole, the recycling nature of the earth, and the existence of life itself. Dare I say that conflict can be counted among the many natural phenomenons? Conflict can be found through every piece of time, through every culture, through all human lives. Conflict, like love, is the thread that holds together the quilt of humanity.

Conflict is common and can and will be encountered in all aspects of life involving human beings. It is not a bad thing in and of itself. Conflict is “rooted in the human condition and is not necessarily an indicator of dysfunction.” Conflict is healthy when it is open and fair and keeps the other person(s) whole. (Guttman 1999). Conflict only becomes negative when it is mishandled and allowed to grow into a force that is harmful. Conflict it not harmful – how people react to that conflict is harmful. I believe that Koester gave a definition of conflict that exemplifies this philosophy. Koester (1998) defined conflict “a perceived divergence of interests in which the primary source of the conflict lies in the minds of people.”

The very commonness of conflict has lead it to be a large part of human consciousness. Due to this, humans have been trying to figure out how to best handle conflict for as long as conflict has existed – an eternity. This venture has led to the study of conflict in organizations and how to best turn that conflict into something positive rather than allowing it to be a negative force in the organization.

Results of Conflict

Organizations pay a heavy price for conflicts, the results of which are often “performance problems, violations of company rules, the need for discipline or termination, and on some occasions violence.” (Anonymous 1999). A more specific look at conflicts in organizations reveals that results may also include “litigation, injury, strikes, bitterness, low productivity, poor morale, cost overruns, wasted time, lost resources, destructive behaviors, damaged relationships, divided communities, and reduced opportunities for learning and change.” (Goldsmith 1999).

While conflict between parts of an organization has serious repercussions, conflict between individuals, especially management, can also have serious repercussions on the organization as a whole. Often the “split downstream in a culture” comes about because of the split between two people at the top. (Covey 1999). There seems to be a mentality

that individual conflicts are only between the two people involved. However, this does not seem to be the case, especially in organizations. What happens between individuals does have effects on the organization. When those individuals are in management and are involved in conflict, the results can lead to large parts of the organization in conflict. When conflict at the top is ignored, the results will be an “organization that competes more passionately with itself than with its competition.” (Guttman 1999). Organizations need to learn to handle individual as well as group conflicts in a productive manner so as to constructively resolve the conflicts.

Causes of Conflict

It is almost impossible to avoid conflicts within an organization. People come from “such divergent backgrounds, think so differently, and communicate so uniquely,” that conflicts are a high probability. (Booher 1999). It is this high probability that has led organizations to attempt to determine precisely what causes conflict. They are finding an abundance of answers.

Organizations are finding that many conflicts are either avoidable or unnecessary. “Most arise from simple miscommunication, misunderstandings, unintended meanings, irrelevant differences, poor choices, ineffective styles, unclear roles and responsibilities, false expectations, different standards, fluctuating economic and political conditions, or personal misfortunes – which often have nothing to do with the issues that are the basis of the conflict and can easily be corrected with learning and dialogue.” (Goldsmith 1999). These miscommunications and misunderstandings which lead to conflict can occur between departments or between individuals in the organization.

Disputes arise between individuals within the organization over a wide range of issues including disagreements over “organizational decisions, implementation of policies, job performance, and discrimination for which managers act as third parties.” (Elangovan 1998). It is these causes that generally lead to conflicts between departments. To discover the root behind individual conflicts is to discover the root behind group conflicts.

Overall researchers have found that the causes of conflict can be divided into five major categories. First there are conflicts over personalities. Second there are conflicts over goals. Third there are conflicts over values. Conflicts over circumstance fall into the fourth category of conflicts. The final category of conflicts is that of conflicts over facts. (Booher 1999). While these categories are broad, they give organizations and the individuals within them a first step to discover the root of conflicts. By understanding what category a conflict falls under, decisions can be better made as to how to resolve that conflict in a constructive manner.

Negative feedback has been shown to be a frequent cause of interpersonal conflict. There are several variables that impact the manner in which the feedback is received and whether or not conflict arises from that feedback. One such variable is the motive in which the feedback is integrated into one’s self-concept. Such motives may include

“self-enhancement, self-assessment, self-verification/consistency and self-improvement.” A second variable is “the intrapersonal reactions of the receiver of the feedback.” In other words, how much thought was given to the feedback by the receiver and is there the presence of negative affectivity? Another variable would be the characteristics of the feedback. There are three major factors within this variable – “the relevance of the feedback, the importance of the topic area, and the degree of negativity.” A fourth variable would be the characteristics of the relationship. Gender and the closeness of the relationship appear to be the two biggest factors at play here. Research has shown that “the closer the relationship, the more likely one is to collaborate and less likely to compete,” which ultimately leads to a lower probability of negative or harmful conflict. (Rudawsky 1999).

Results of Conflict Resolution

The goal of conflict resolution is “not to mesh the different opinions, but rather to acknowledge them and discover their value.” (Tamir 1999). Indeed conflict resolution serves many purposes, not the least of which is to benefit the organization and their moneybags. However, conflict resolution ultimately benefits those involved. Conflict resolution leads to a higher level understanding of the self and others around the self. By discovering the value in differing opinions, growth becomes possible.

Conflict resolution, while difficult leads to a healthier individual, a healthier group, and a healthier organization. Indeed, what must be done to rebuild one relationship will “impact an individual’s character” so that all other relationships surrounding that individual are affected. When two parties involved in a split will do whatever it takes to rebuild that relationship, their efforts will have “a healing effect” throughout the entire culture. (Covey 1999).

Conflict resolution benefits not only the individuals involved, it benefits entire groups. Teaming has become a popular and effective initiative in many organizations. Along with the benefits of this new initiative have come new burdens. Groups who work together are more likely to come into conflict than a single set of individuals working together. Having a process for constructive conflict resolution has become an “essential measure as to whether a team is an effective,” high-performing team. (Yeung 1999). A top team that models the right behavior and good conflict management ensures that the entire organization will remain “a functioning, competitive force” well into the next century. (Guttman 1999).

While previously believed to be a non-issue, a management group’s conflict resolution skills have a direct affect on their subordinates and the organization as a whole. Subordinates observe management and their behaviors and often use them as a model for their work behavior. When management’s modeling how healing takes place, it gives other people hope that they too can “heal broken relationships.” (Covey 1999). Ultimately, however, leaders who create an environment in which conflict is effectively managed do so “not out of altruism, but because conflict management is essential to high performance” teams and organizations. (Guttman 1999).

Managed properly, conflict may enhance organizational performance by “challenging the status quo, serving as a medium for airing problems, fostering creativity and innovative problem solving, promoting reassessment of unit goals and activities, increasing the probability that the unit will respond to change, and leading to improve organizational policies and operations.” (Elangovan 1998). Management has become aware of this and have taken steps to institute processes for conflict management. This appears to be a fruitful venture.

Many organizations today are developing and implementing conflict resolution processes in the workplace. The benefits of such have been found to be cost effective as well as altruistically beneficial. Some of the specific benefits include being able to hold staff accountable for their actions; a decrease in conflict related absenteeism, a demonstrated commitment to the employees which helps to develop their trust and loyalty. Additional benefits include an increase in productivity due to a decrease in conflict and a lower likelihood of wrongful dismissal claims, human rights claims, or other complaints. (Anonymous 1999). Studies have shown that organizations with a stairstepping process for conflict resolution have an effective tool in employee retention. Retention leaders “recognize that conflicts are bound to arise and by having a plan in action and education on that plan, there is a higher likelihood of employees working through conflict.” Without such avenues, employees are more likely to get frustrated and leave the organization, which leads to higher turnover rates. (Tobia 1999).

Conflict Resolution

When it comes to conflict, prevention should be first always. “The cost of reconciliation teaches people and organizations to avoid breakdowns,” to think preventatively instead of allowing the situation to get into crisis mode and then having to rebuild. (Covey 1999). While prevention should be the first measure taken, conflict is inevitable and as such must be dealt with. Some key aspects of conflict resolution include “good listening skills, flexibility, and willingness to change.” Simple communication, however, is at the heart of conflict resolution and can serve as a primary method of conflict prevention. (DeVoe 1999).

Methods of conflict resolution abound in journals and in practice. Booher (1999) breaks down conflict resolution into its most basic form. Basic conflict resolution models include 1) Accommodation, which is used when one person yields to the other person’s plans. 2) Compromise, which is the process of melding both parties’ desires into an equally agreeable alternative. 3) Collaboration, which is the joining together of forces to work things out. 4) Overpowering the other person.

There are also some very basic steps that even a novice to conflict resolution can master. Those basic steps for resolving problems, according to DeVoe (1999), are:

1. Make a date. Ask to talk about the conflict and set up a time and place to discuss the conflict in a non-threatening environment.
2. Allow each party to describe the situation from his or her perspective.

3. Begin problem solving. Brainstorm together to develop multiple options for resolving the conflict.
4. Negotiate a solution. Ensure that both parties are amenable to the chosen solution.
5. Write it down. It's important to formalize the agreement in some way.
6. Implement the solution.
7. Make a date for follow-up. This helps to ensure satisfactory resolution of the conflict.

It also helps to ensure that both parties will follow through on their part of the plan.

While these steps are indeed useful, there is more to be done to ensure the success of conflict resolution. In order for conflicts to be effectively resolved, both parties need to “agree on the rules and boundaries of their future relationship.” In other words, what can be expected, what is an imposition, what should be requested, and what can be demanded? (Booher 1999). By doing this, the parties involved in the conflict are setting the groundwork for dealing with future conflicts in a constructive manner.

Individuals and Conflict Resolution

Reconciliation often takes an inside-out approach, usually involving personal struggle, a sacrifice of pride and ego, and a significant alteration of life and/or work styles. It is this personal struggle that often leads to the realization that “reconciliation is not a 50-50 initiative; someone must take the initiative and invest more to start the healing.” (Covey 1999). The first steps to mending relationships and resolving conflicts often start with one individual, a difficult proposition for most. Covey (1999) developed a series of steps to help that single individual move toward the beginning of conflict resolution. The first step is to apologize. The second step is to acknowledge the individual role or responsibility in contributing to the problem. Making a commitment to pay the price in order to mend the relationship is the third step. The fourth step sometimes requires the acknowledgement that personal sacrifice is necessary for reconciliation. The fifth step is to take action. Actions speak louder than words – an individual cannot talk themselves out of a situation that they behaved themselves into. Often words are dismissed, actions are rarely dismissed. The sixth and final step is to forgive, forget and let go, all essential parts of rebuilding relationships and overcoming conflict.

Once an individual has made a commitment to work toward conflict resolution, there are a few protocols that they must follow. According to Guttman (1999), those protocols for dealing with conflict are 1) Don't triangulate [avoid responsibility by unnecessarily involving a third party]. 2) Don't recruit supporters. 3) Don't accuse in absentia. 4) Don't personalize issues. 5) Don't fall prey to the genetic fallacy [assuming that an issue stems from the inherent animosity of the personal or group of people expressing it].

Within the boundaries of the protocols, individual should take measures to improve their ability to confront, embrace, and resolve conflicts. Goldsmith (1999) lists the following as eight paths to accomplishing this:

1. Discover the meaning of the conflict for yourself and your advisory.
2. Listening actively, openly, empathetically, and with heart will take you to the center of the conflict.
3. Embrace and acknowledge emotions.

4. Search below the surface for the hidden meaning of the conflict.
5. Focus on dialogue, not who is right, to shift the focus from competition to collaboration.
6. Learn from difficult behaviors to develop empathy, patience, and perseverance.
7. Creatively solve problems, then commit to action.
8. Explore resistance and mediations before looking at litigation.

Once an individual has prepared themselves to participate in constructively resolving conflict, there are actions that should be taken by all parties involved in the conflict during conflict resolution. Goldsmith (1999) lists the actions to engage in conflict constructively as:

1. Set the stage for dialogue
2. Disengage the fight or flight response
3. State clearly and without anger, the emotional needs and self-interests, and listen carefully to those expressed by others
4. Look below the surface of what is said to resolve the reason for the dispute
5. Separate the person from the problem, the future from the past, and positions from interests
6. Brainstorm all potential solutions to the conflict
7. Negotiate collaboratively rather than aggressively; look for values, standards, or rules that will help resolve the dispute fairly
8. Use informal problem solving, mediation, and other resolution techniques to overcome impasse, clarify areas of agreement, and reach closure
9. Let go of judgements about the opponent
10. Don't surrender just to make the conflict go away
11. Recognize the larger issues that express themselves through conflict
12. Search for completion

In addition to the protocols, actions, and self-development – there are four rules that individuals should remember at all times when engaged in resolving conflicts. These rules, developed by VanHuystee (1999) help to create a win-win solution rather than having a winner and a loser. The first rule is that individuals should remove lingering emotions or hard feelings from the table before starting a substantive discussion. The second rule is that they should get to the bottom of the position and learn what the reasons are for the position. This is best done in person rather than on the phone because of the large impact of non-verbal body language involved. The third rule is that they need to build new areas for negotiation before deciding how to negotiate a deal. The fourth and final rule is that the individuals need to look at themselves first. They will not be able to identify the real needs of the other party if they cannot identify their own real needs.

Groups and Conflict Resolution

Teams have become integral parts of most organizations. With those teams comes conflict. When conflict does arise it is important for staff members to recognize that conflict is a normal occurrence in the workplace and it won't disappear if ignored. Then

it is an issue of listening and seeking to understand rather than challenge (right away). (DeVoe 1999).

When teams encounter conflict, and they surely will, the conflict needs to be addressed and resolved. There is no such thing as a conflict that was resolved by pretending it did not exist. Guttman (1999) developed some steps for teams to follow when facing internal conflict in order to turn conflict into healthy disagreement, which the team can grow from:

1. Strategic and key operational goals must be clear and agreed upon.
2. Roles need to be carefully delineated so that individuals know what they are responsible for and what they are authorized to do.
3. Protocols, also known as ground rules, must be established to guide group behavior.
4. Interpersonal relationships must be understood and managed.

It is often the case that teams work together with other teams. This also often leads to conflict. Team to team conflict can become destructive to the organization if not handled properly. Maurer (1999) developed four solutions for use when two or more teams are not getting along:

1. Bring the working relationship issues to a higher level. Have managers list common objectives & themes and how they directly influence the success of the overall organization.
2. Develop a list of contributing factors that foster the lack of trust and poor working relationship between the two groups.
3. Pull the teams together and reinforce the common objectives, declaring how the effectiveness of the organizations and individual job satisfaction are tied to an improved working relationship.
4. Communicate, communicate, communicate. Sometimes no matter how much the teams may think they are communicating, the message is not getting through intact or is being lost in transmission between the two groups.

Another solution for conflict resolution that groups embroiled in conflict sometimes exercise is cooperation in conflict. This occurs when two groups who are involved in a conflict with each other are threatened with a larger “enemy.” In an attempt at self-preservation, the two groups put aside their conflict to fight the larger foe. While this is an effective method of temporary conflict resolution – it is only a Band-Aid. Once the larger threat has been defeated and a celebratory period has passed, the two groups will more than likely resort to their previous conflict. (Koester 1998).

Managers and Conflict Resolution

Managers are affected, and become involved in conflict resolution when conflict develops between subordinates, between teams/department, or within teams/groups for which the manager is responsible for. According to Guttman (1999) most executives deal with conflict in one of four basic ways. 1) To confront the issue head-on to change the situation. 2) To let go by changing perception of the situation. 3) To escape by leaving the situation. 4) To submerge the conflict and force it to go underground.

Once managers make a decision to deal with the conflict within their department(s) they tend to have a select resolution tactic for intervening in conflict. The selected tactic is often based on the manager's personality. Cropanzano (1999) has categorized these resolution tactics into four general categories of resolution tactics most often used by managers. First is the advising tactic. Second is the arbitration or adversarial tactic. Third is the autocratic, inquisitorial, or providing impetus tactic. The fourth and last category is that of the avoidance tactic.

Elangovan (1998) realized that managers in organizations often serve as third parties in conflict resolution among their subordinates. He also recognized that there are several strategies with which the manager can approach their role in conflict resolution. Different situations require different intervention strategies for effective conflict resolution. Those approaches depend largely on the "underlying dimensions and influencing characteristics of the conflict." A model was developed to help managers make decisions about their conflict resolution strategy based on the situation. The model takes a decision-tree structure to walk managers through the decision making process.

The decision tree model is based on a helping the manager to decide which of five strategies of conflict intervention to choose, depending on the situational demands of the dispute. The five strategies are described below:

1. Means Control Strategy (MCS) – mediation and procedural marshal
2. Ends Control strategy (ECS) – arbitration and adversarial intervention
3. Full Control Strategy (FCS) – autocratic and inquisitorial intervention
4. Low Control Strategy (LCS) – providing impetus and motivation
5. Part Control Strategy (PCS) – moot

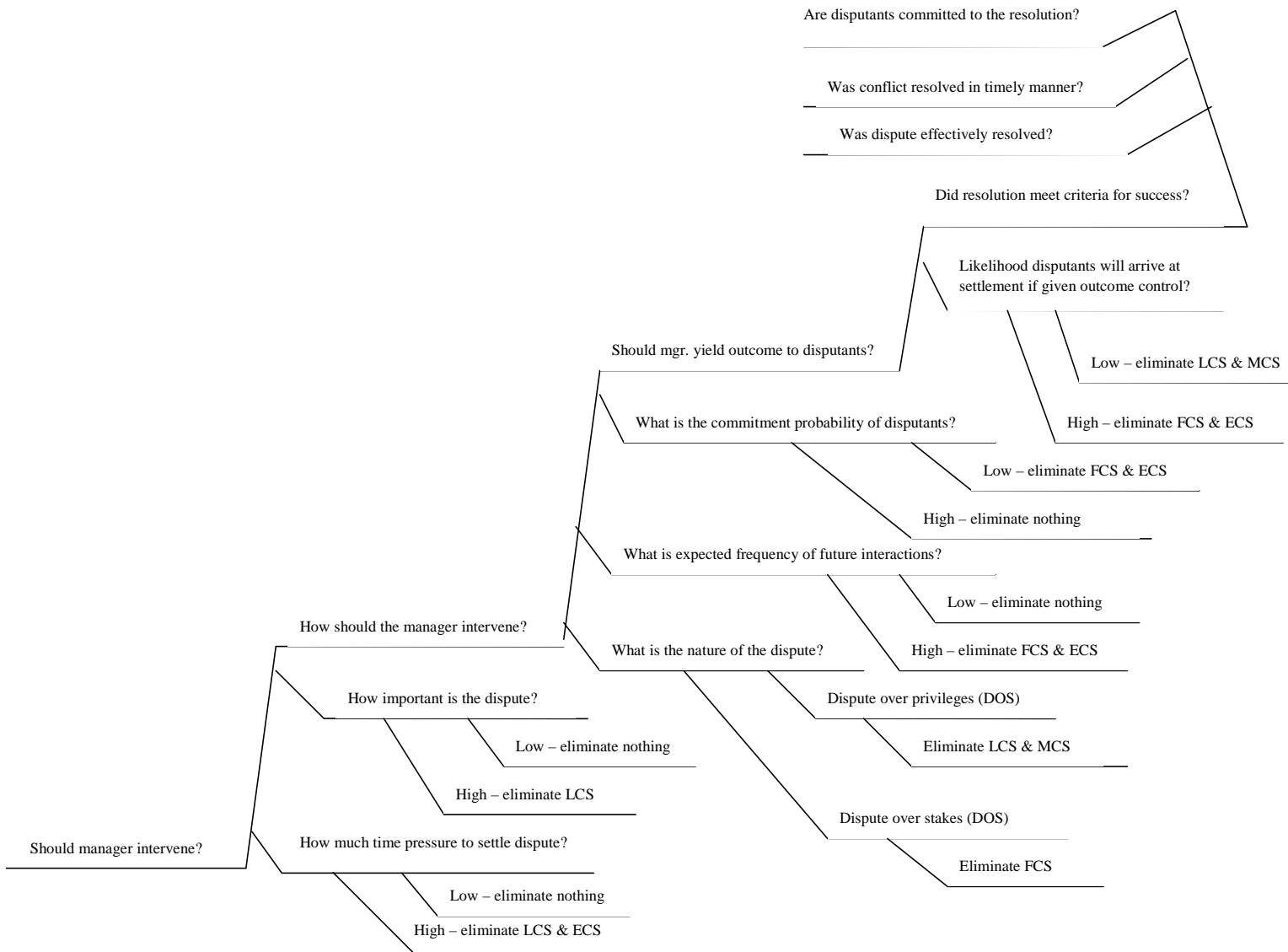
Answering the questions and following the decision tree, the manger can eliminate the strategies that are inappropriate for the situation. By the time the manager reaches the sixth question, the appropriate strategy should be apparent due to the process of elimination. The decision tree can be seen on the next page.

While the decision tree usually leads to the best conflict intervention tactic for the situation, there is a priority rule - which may override the decision tree. The priority rule states that the following priority conditions must be followed to select one strategy:

1. When there is high importance, low time pressure and low commitment probability, select the intervention technique that allows maximum process control.
2. When time pressure is low and commitment probability is high, select the intervention technique that allows maximum outcome control.
3. When time pressure is high, select the intervention technique that requires the least amount of time without endangering the commitment probability.
4. When dispute importance is low, select the intervention technique that requires the least amount of resources (skills, time, money, etc.)

The manager should start the decision tree at the bottom left and work their way through the six questions, eliminating intervention strategies as they climb the tree (keeping in mind the priority rule). After the intervention, the final part of the decision tree should be

addressed - checking to see if the intervention and conflict resolution met the criteria for success. The decision tree is shown below:



Third Parties and Conflict Resolution

It is often the case that a third party, often called a facilitator, is brought in to help resolve conflicts. When this is the case there are two questions for the facilitator to ask and to answer when it comes to moving the parties involved past conflict. First is “how far apart are the people involved in conflict?” In other words, is the conflict keeping them an infinite distance apart so much so that they cannot communicate, or is the conflict making them inseparable? The second question is “where is the conflict located?” Conflict can be located between two people or groups or within an individual or group so that it causes conflict with others. (Goldsmith 1999). Once the facilitator has the answers to these questions, they can proceed into helping to resolve the conflict(s).

When all relevant information has been gathered the facilitator will often apply three basic facilitation skills to help achieve constructive conflict resolution. 1) Getting the parties together. 2) Empathy, seeking to first understand and then be understood. 3) Synergy, arriving at a creative third alternative that presents a win-win solutions as opposed to one party winning and the other losing (a win-lose solution). The idea of a win-win solution is predicated on the behavior of those involved parties involved and in their not playing hardball during conflict resolution. “Playing hardball will at best lead to a compromise.” (Covey 1999).

While using the above mentioned facilitation skills, the third party brought in to assist in conflict resolution should guide the parties through specific steps. According to Tamir (1999), those steps for mediation of conflict include:

1. Discuss the different perspectives that contributed to the conflict. Hold a meeting with the intention of introducing and understanding different perspectives, not finding a solution to the conflict.
2. Address personal resentment. Allow each party involved the chance to describe how the other parties’ actions affected them and how that behavior led to the conflict. Have the parties provide examples that are behaviorally anchored.
3. Problem solve. Now that the reasons for conflict have been addresses, the parties need to identify solutions to the conflict.
4. Check in. Ask how things are going – how things have changed and what still needs to change. This helps keep both parties accountable to the solution and communicating with one another.

By following the steps of mediation and leading the parties through conflict resolution, a successful resolution is often developed. It often takes a third party to facilitate conflict resolution, especially when it is a long standing conflict, high levels of emotions are involved, or the parties involved do not have the skills to resolve the conflict themselves.

Simmons (1999) has proposed a unique method of third party facilitated conflict resolution. Her method is based on the idea that art can create a safe place for “dangerous truths and open the door to seeing.” She states that often groups loop through the same routines with no resolution to the conflict. Traditional methods rely heavily on verbal communication, which is a skill few people poses to the extent need to get past the emotions of conflict. Art, according to Simmons can help participants see what they are missing by seeing another person’s point of view, and sometimes seeing how one’s own point of view is limited. As a tool for self-expression and communication, “art moves beyond the limits of language; as a group process, it is a paradigm buster.”

Simmons’ method of conflict resolution involves all participants being given paper and colored markers. The participants are then asked to use metaphors to draw maps of the terrain in their company, illustrating such things as breaks in communication. The metaphor represented in the picture describe the individual’s point of view and their concerns better than a week’s worth of words could ever explain it. Participants are then asked to share their drawings with the group. The “power of the visual representations breaks down barriers and opens the eyes of people” who may normally refuse, or be unable, to see the problem head-on. Where words may have failed in the past, pictures

often succeed. When the individuals understand the perspectives of others in the group, then conflict resolution is soon to follow. The art opens up the gates for honest discussions and understandings – the basis for constructive conflict resolution.

While the art method has been shown to be a successful method of conflict resolution, it takes a little extra work to get participants involved. This method is dramatically different from traditional methods of conflict resolution and as such may be resisted by participants. Simmons suggests spending time overcoming participant's resistance before starting the drawing exercise. Below are some steps she suggests for use in overcoming that resistance:

1. Create trust. Spend time establishing rapport with participants. Reassure them that this self-disclosure process will not be abused - that it will be used as a mutually beneficial discovery, not as manipulation.
2. Stimulate hope. Talk about what can be accomplished by working together.
3. Preempt blame and defensiveness. Explain that territorial and negative feelings are natural reactions to stress and uncertainty – make it OK to have negative feelings.
4. Make it safe. Contract with the group, including confidentiality and non-judgement, to make the exercise safe for all participants.
5. Instill confidence. Give clear directions; focus on the drawing as a metaphor.

Explain that their drawing is a piece of a puzzle, and their piece is necessary to understand the whole picture. Give lots of examples and ideas and then let them draw whatever they want without judgement.

Conclusion

Conflict is as much a part of being human as sleeping. Conflict is also as much a part of organizations as money. Conflict is a necessary part of individual growth and development, group growth and development, and organizational growth and development. There is little doubt that conflict has implications for the organization. Those implications can be either positive or negative. The determining factor as to whether conflict hurts or helps and organization is how that organization deals with that conflict. Constructive conflict resolution is the key to the future of organizations. Individuals no longer have relationships solely with a section of a conveyor belt or a machine. In today's organizations people must work together in one form or another. In order for these new working relationships to work, constructive conflict resolution must be taught and practiced at all level throughout the organization.

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