

"The emerging approaches are less about resolving and managing conflicts than about constructing possibilities, reshaping the relationship, and encouraging differences that contribute to ongoing learning and resilience in organizations."

Organizational Conflicts: What We Choose to Call Relationships Where There are Differences

By John D. Vogelsang

MOST APPROACHES TO organizational and interpersonal conflict resolution and management are based upon the work of Robert Blake and Jane Mouton (1964). According to Blake and Mouton, managers are variously concerned with achieving a purpose, producing results, and efficiency of effort, or they are concerned with working relations, the people involved and their commitment, equitable situations, and respecting the personal worth of each person. How much managers are concerned with each of these leads to five distinct managerial and conflict resolution styles. The five conflict resolution styles have commonly become known as: compel, avoid, accommodate, compromise, and collaborate.

While many practitioners argue for the value and appropriateness of all five styles, they have tended to emphasize collaboration or a style that combines some of the mutually satisfying solutions gained from collaboration with the reality of negotiating when there is limited time and trust as in many organizational and professional/social relationships. As a first step toward resolution, the participants shift their orientation from competing to cooperating on solving a mutually shared problem. They establish some norms for their problem solving conversation, name their individual needs and/or identify the outcomes they want from the situation, and negotiate or collaborate on ways to get those needs met (Deutsch, 2000).

Roger Fisher and the Harvard Negotiation Project (1981) have developed effective methods to articulate and negotiate each party's underlying needs. Jay Haley (1973) and Paul Wat-

zlawick (1978) developed ways to reframe conflicts. The parties in a conflict gain new interpretations of one another's behavior or expressed needs through reframing or renaming their assumptions about the situation and each other's needs. A highly charged situation where each party thinks the other is highly critical is reframed as a mutual desire for quality work and mutually satisfactory levels of excellence.

Traditional approaches to conflict resolution have also given us ways to distinguish between types of conflicts. A conflict can be about what is going on in the group at the moment; it relates to the task at hand and is owned by the group as a difference to be resolved. A conflict can be about stylistic and personal differences that affect some members of the group and not the whole group. Or a conflict can result from change and trauma in the organization. Some of these changes and traumas include: the executive director has left, resigned, been removed; a major deficit is threatening the continued life of the organization; a new group with different values and beliefs has become an important influence in the organization; serious allegations are made against a key member of the board or staff; or many staff have been let go. People often deal with the tension and distress they experience during these changes by creating conflicts where none exist or by intensifying minor conflicts.

Some practitioners have also identified five levels of conflicts that range from problems to be solved, through disagreements and contests, to fights and intractable situations (Lee, 1985). Lee, in particular, uses the different levels to describe

what interventions are appropriate. At levels one and two there are possibilities for collaborative resolutions. As the conflicts become more intense, negotiation may give way to the need for an outside authority to mediate, compel a solution, or insist upon the separation of the parties involved.

Another approach to organizational and group conflicts considers conflicts to be what we choose to call a relationship with differences. This approach comes from current understanding of identity and social structures which can be summarized as: you are who you are and I am who I am as we are in reference to each other and our environment. Some of the theoretical frameworks behind this go by the titles of Actor Network Theory (see Law, 2002), Social Construction (see Gergen, 2000) and Complex Adaptive Systems (see Stacey, 2001). Instead of focusing on individual needs, the emerging approaches look at the relationship, how each person is using the relationship as a point of reference, and how they are influenced by and influencing the relationship. Instead of trying to identify the core problem or the core underlying needs that either foster the conflict or await expression to resolve the conflict, practitioners try to find entry points into the relationships where they can catch people's attention and shift how people relate to each other. Core problems and needs are seen as constructs that constantly take new shape as people articulate them. While building upon the many practices that have resulted from the traditional concepts of conflict, the emerging approaches offer ways to work with differences so to contribute to the ongoing learning and resilience of organizations.

WHAT WE CHOOSE TO CALL RELATIONSHIPS WHERE THERE ARE DIFFERENCES

Emerging approaches attempt to refocus the entry point into a conflict situation and foster relationships that function with differences. One example is John Winslade and Gerald Monk's Narrative Mediation (2000). They view conflicts as how people have constructed or storied their relationship. In other words conflict is a metaphor and a way to make meaning of situations where there are differences. There are other metaphors and other ways to make meaning of the relationship. Just as people have constructed the conflict they can construct another story. When working with individuals or small groups Winslade and Monk go through the following process:

1. Build trust
2. Develop externalizing conversations by giving the conflict a name and an image in order to externalize it from each individual
3. Map how the parties construct the conflict
 - a. What is the history of the conflict?
 - How long has the dispute been around?
 - When did the effects of the problem first become noticeable?
 - Was there a time when things were different?

- What did the conflict invite you to do in response?
- b. How are they influenced individually and in their relationship by the conflict?
 - How has the conflict influenced you?
 - How have you influenced the conflict?
- 4. Start alternative narratives
 - a. Each talks about times when the conflict was not part of the relationship
- 5. Deconstruct dominant story lines
 - a. Identify the assumptions and cultural attitudes influencing the relationship
- 6. Develop shared meanings about the conflict and its solution by finding unique outcomes and develop the new narrative
 - a. How is it that the conflict did not completely stop you from...?
 - b. What are some recent events where the conflict was not present?
- 7. Construct agreements—co-construct a different story that is open to alternatives and contradictions
- 8. Document the change—a written narrative of what has happened in the conversations about the conflict situation

During my more than twenty years of working with interpersonal and organizational conflicts in nonprofits and religious organizations, I have moved from the Blake and Mouton model, needs identification, and collaboration as the best form of resolution to my own version of the emerging processes as exemplified by Winslade and Monk. From the initial contracting to the exit interview I set out to build trust, assist the participants with externalizing the conflict and increasing their influence over the conflict relationship, help them to be mindful of possi-

AUTHOR



JOHN D. VOGELSANG, Ph.D.

has been working with nonprofit organizations for over twenty-five years and is currently the Associate Director of the Support Center for Nonprofit Management and a Fellow at the Michael Harrington

Center at Queens College (CUNY). He has had extensive experience conducting organization assessments, action research projects, management and board retreats, and support groups for executive directors. Dr. Vogelsang has consulted with nonprofit organizations in the areas of organization development, planning, and conflict management, and he has published many articles and monographs on organization development and leadership issues. He can be reached at: jv@supportctr.org.

bilities, and to make commitments to how they will reconstruct their relationship.

EXTERNALIZING THE CONFLICT AND RECONSTRUCTING RELATIONSHIPS

People can experience themselves as trapped in a conflict relationship and unable to recognize other possibilities often because they have identified the relationship with the conflict—whenever they encounter the other person or group they expect conflict. They can see the conflict as their own personal responsibility or the responsibility of someone else but feel powerless to effect change. Their definition of the conflict may be supporting its continued existence. Externalizing the conflict involves objectifying and personifying it.

Externalizing the conflict begins with the initial contracting meeting and the preliminary interviews of the people involved in and influencing the conflict relationship. During the initial meeting and the interviews, I usually introduce a variation of the following questions:

- What has contributed to your calling this relationship (or series of relationships) a conflict?
- What name would you give to the conflict relationship?
- What is its history? When was it not happening? When did it start? How and when does it manifest itself now?
- How is the conflict influencing you and the organization?
- If you were to imagine other ways to relate to the people involved, what would those be?
- How might you be contributing to this relationship staying the way it is?

For example, senior staff members in a mid-size nonprofit said that the first line managers were far too dependent upon them for every decision; the first line managers said that the senior staff did not respect them enough to listen and help them with problem solving. There was tension between the two groups that effected productivity in the organization and often flared up in arguments. After conducting the initial interviews, I facilitated a full day discussion between the two groups.

We first worked to externalize the conflict—what we could agree to name this relationship other than as a failing by one or the other. The three candidates were “a lack of communication,” “unchecked assumptions,” or “missed opportunities.” The group agreed on the third. Once there was a name, the two groups could begin to discuss how the conflict relationship influenced them—as a result of the conflict what did they expect of each other and how did it structure how they responded to each other. They identified how they influenced the conflict—what were they doing to sustain the conflict relationship.

The senior managers were able to articulate that they had come to believe that the line managers were inexperienced and did not know how to make decisions. They felt that the line managers’ requests were burdensome and took up too much of

their time. The line managers said that they viewed the senior managers as unwilling to do their job of supervising and coaching them. They also felt that the senior managers do not trust them to make decisions. They had begun to take many problems to the senior managers as a way to invite them to perform their role and to clarify who has authority for what.

Through this discussion they began to see how they were shaping the conflict relationship. They realized that just as they had adopted positions that maintained the relationship, they could choose to adopt other ways of interacting. They were able to talk about how to reconstruct their relationship so that line managers were getting supervision and senior managers could trust the line managers’ decision-making.

Another process I have used is Mapping the System. On a large black board or sheets of flip chart paper, I invite the group to call out names and images for the conflict relationship they find themselves in. As soon as there is agreement, I draw the image at the most central point on the board or flip chart paper. I then ask the group to identify the positions (rather than people), departments, stakeholders, aspects of the organizational culture, factors in the business environment, etc. that are influencing the conflict. As they identify each item I ask them to create an image or key word for it, tell me how near or far from the conflict to place it, and to draw a thick or dotted line indicating the intensity of the item’s influence on the conflict relationship. If there is an organizational event in the near or distant past that may be influencing the current conflict relationship, I may ask them to name it, give it an image, and add it to the other items on the flip chart paper. When we complete the picture, I ask the group—as a whole or in small groups at first depending on the size—to answer:

- Which items on the map are having the most influence on the conflict? How?
- How is the conflict relationship influencing the relationships with the other items on the map and how?
- How are you choosing to respond to how the items on the map influence the conflict relationship?
- How else could you choose to respond to the influences on the conflict relationship?
- What would that do to the conflict relationship?
- What would that do to the relationships with the other items on the map?
- What are you willing to do to reconstruct these relationships?

The staff in a small overseas development organization described the organizational culture as mission driven, inclusive, creative, collaborative, and committed to the welfare of both stakeholders and staff. Yet there were constant conflicts between the field staff and the finance department and anyone who wanted to develop planning and accountability systems. When the agency hired people who were excellent at fiscal management and organizational planning they had difficulty getting their ideas implemented, and they usually left within

one to two years.

When asked to name the conflict relationship, the staff entitled it, "the dance of inclusion and exclusion." We constructed an image for the key conflict relationship and used a shortened version of the mapping exercise (the map and the first three questions) to help the staff see how they were influencing and were influenced by the relationship. Even though many of the field staff said that they were unclear about the expected outcomes and measures of success for their work, they viewed any attempts to put accountability and planning processes in place as threats to their ability to respond to immediate participant needs and to deal with the different cultural practices in the host countries. They believed that the concern for financial accountability and specific plans was a way to discount their heroic efforts to resolve major crises. The fiscal and administrative staff believed that they were being ignored and the organization was only going to survive and maintain a good relationship with funders and the US government if they had accurate and timely information about what was happening in the field and if they could control what they saw as chaotic spending practices. They were sending many memos about reporting procedures, the need to respond to e-mail requests, and what are legitimate expenses. During staff meetings they pressed to have the fiscal and reporting concerns take precedence over detailed discussions of activities in the field.

Instead of the last four questions under the mapping exercise, we discussed:

- Are there structures, processes, and systems of communication that are missing that could reshape the conflict relationship and the other relationships on the map? What are they?
- How could we gain more influence over the conflict relationship?
- How could we structure the conflict relationship to support the agency's mission and tolerate differences? What will we call the relationship when we do?
- Of the other relationships we have or could gain some influence over, how could we structure them to support the agency's mission and tolerate differences?
- What will we commit to do?

The staff agreed to develop better processes and systems for keeping each other informed and reporting on their work in the field. They agreed to guidelines and parameters for how to respond to participant needs. They also constructed a cross-function peer learning/problem solving process, both electronic and face-to-face, for dealing with crises and learning from each other about successful practices.

The emerging approaches are less about resolving and managing conflicts than about constructing possibilities, reshaping the relationship, and encouraging differences that contribute to ongoing learning and resilience in organizations. ■

REFERENCES

- Blake, R. and Mouton, J. S. 1964. *The Managerial Grid: Key Orientation for Achieving Production Through People*. Houston: Gulf Publishing Company.
- Deutsch, M and Coleman, P.T.. 2000. *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Fisher, R and Ury, W. 1981. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Gergen, K.J. 2000. *An Invitation to Social Construction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Haley, J. 1973. *Uncommon Therapy: The Psychiatric Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.* New York: Norton.
- Law, J. 2002. "And if the Global Were Small and Non-Coherent? Method, Complexity and the Baroque." Centre for Science Studies, Cartmel College, Lancaster University, UK.
- Lee, S. 1985. *Moving Your Church Through Conflict*. Washington, D.C.: Alban Institute.
- Stacey, R. 2001. *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations: Learning and Knowledge Creation*. New York: Routledge.
- Watzlawick, P. 1978. *The Language of Change*. New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publisher.
- Winslade, J. and Monk, G. 2000. *Narrative Mediation: a New Approach to Conflict Resolution*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.