
TAKING CHARGE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT

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1. INTRODUCTION

Just What Business Are You In?

Most people involved in organizational leadership have a pretty good grasp of the fact that the incidence of conflict is increasing or, at least, that conflict often gets in the way of getting things done.

Conflict includes everything from simple disagreements to outright violence. Moreover, it goes far beyond the interpersonal conflicts in which we and the people around us tend to become involved. It also includes those countless mental and emotional struggles that we deal with at a personal level.

If we want more peace, we must have less conflict — be in conflict less of the time, which is not to say eliminate conflict, but is to say manage and resolve it better.

Like interpersonal conflicts, internal, or intrapersonal, conflicts also vary in degree and mostly have to do with decisions and distress. Take a moment and consider the process of coming to a decision. At its simplest, it's merely choice-making. But choices range from easy ones, like what to

eat for lunch, to absorbing ones, like who in an organization is going to be reassigned or laid off when budgets are cut.

It seems reasonable to conclude that whenever a business spends a significant portion of its resources in a particular pursuit, that pursuit is part of what the organization is in business to do.

Together, internal and interpersonal conflicts consume so much time and attention that some organizations start to look as though conflict is their primary business.

Are you investing so much time and energy in conflict in your life or your organization that it's starting to look as though you are in the conflict business?

My experience in dealing with all kinds of organizations; big and small, public and private, and for profit and nonprofit, leads me to believe that, more and more, organizations are in the conflict business — not by choice, but certainly to the detriment of almost everything else they are trying to accomplish.

More good intentions, well-conceived programs, personal and organizational vitality, and potentially productive careers lie dead on the road because of poorly managed conflict and its potentially hideous consequences than due to any other ill facing organizations today.

This being the case, it appears that in the management of conflict a wonderful opportunity exists to enhance effectiveness and productivity while deepening commitment to the human side of the organization.

Examine your own organization and ask yourself if you don't agree that, based on what you see, you are more in the conflict business than you previously thought. If the answer is yes, this book is for you.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Taking Charge of Organizational Conflict is written to help you come to grips with all kinds of conflicts. A popular myth says that if your department or business is experiencing conflict, it's because management isn't doing its job. But, if you and the people around you are engaged in any activity at all, at some point you are going to become involved in conflict. It's normal and it's going to happen. The key to your success in these situations is to effectively and productively manage and take advantage of conflict. The overriding purpose of this book is to help you forge and use such a key.

Achieving an understanding of the conditions that tend to generate conflict as well as the effects or dynamics of conflict is vital. When these understandings are grounded in theory,

you are better prepared to comprehend what goes on in a conflict situation and better able to take charge. The book is organized to provide these insights and then to build a solid base for managing and taking command of situations ranging from simple confrontations to crises.

CIVILITY AND GETTING ALONG

What does it take for people to get along? What is required for individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds to willingly seek common ground while maintaining respect for the things they bring to the places they share?

Looking at the configurations of people in organizations, we find microcosms of our multicultural society — a society made up almost exclusively of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants or those who, for whatever other reasons, now find themselves part of this amazing diversity. For whatever reasons and by whatever circumstances we have come to a particular organization, we must develop a set of ethics and skills that enable us to appreciate and then take advantage of the wonderful kaleidoscope of colors and cultures we have inherited.

We can start by recognizing that any organization possesses dynamics of civility similar to those of the society as a whole. One difference is that maintaining civility and getting along are far more easily accomplished on this smaller scale. Getting along does not mean the absence of conflict, but rather implies our ability to manage conflict in ways that produce higher levels of harmony and productivity.

Merely admonishing people to be “good citizens” is not enough. Everyone is familiar with this label and can parrot all of its implied expectations. For individuals to get along in the spirit of true interdependence, they have to develop self-awareness; undertake responsibility for their actions; accept and appreciate differences in others; listen with empathy and understanding; communicate their thoughts and feelings

accurately and assertively; include others in their activities; be open to divergent styles and points of view; work together to solve problems and complete projects; and peacefully resolve the myriads of conflicts they encounter and experience along the way.

To do all this is no small undertaking, but neither is it as daunting a task as it may seem. It does require effort directed at creating necessary awarenesses and understandings, and then it demands focus by the organization and all its people.

What this book offers is an information base and a set of structures designed to equip you with the only additional resources you need to redirect a major portion of the time, energy, and other resources currently being squandered on knee-jerk reactions and other inappropriate and ineffective responses to conflict.

Taking Charge of Organizational Conflict is not the complete answer, but it is a great place to start. If you marry what you find here with almost any degree of appropriate effort, the payoffs will be enormous.

DEADLY ASSUMPTIONS

As we prepare people to be successful in the workplace, we tend to think primarily about the skills they must possess in order to accomplish a particular job. We get people ready by giving them tools they need to be successful and to contribute. However, we very often assume that people are better able and more willing to perform than they really are.

In selecting people, hardly ever do we assess or even consider a person's ability to manage conflict.

In today's organizations, it is not enough to have job-related skills. It has become vitally important for people to acquire the skills necessary to successfully interact with others and to positively influence organizational culture. Too often we assume employees already possess these skills when, in fact, they don't. As we screen people for positions, we have many ways

of objectively assessing job-specific skills. When we find that an individual is deficient in a certain area, we either provide training or we select a better qualified candidate. In assessing interpersonal skills, we rely almost exclusively on subjective judgement. Hardly ever do we assess or even consider a person's ability to manage conflict.

We assume that, along the way, people have adequately developed the skills necessary to resolve disputes and settle arguments. In the case of most people, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Given its importance to personal and organizational well being, the issue of conflict management should never be carelessly dismissed. Taking for granted that the average person can manage conflict, even passably, involves assumptions that individuals and organizations can no longer afford to make.

PEOPLE DRIVE EVERYTHING

We often speak of the successes or failures of organizations, but fail to remember that organizations are only structures into which we place people to produce outcomes. Any success or failure we assign to an organization is only the reflection of the success or failures of its people. People drive everything in an organization, including conflict. Understanding that it is both unwise and unsafe to assume that people are adequately prepared to deal with conflict, we must heed the counsel of Henry Ford, who said, "Before everything else, getting ready is the secret to success."

Taking Charge of Organizational Conflict is about getting ready. It is a guide to creating awareness concerning the skills that individuals and organizations must have in order to effectively manage confrontations and resolve conflicts.

MECHANICS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict is the natural process by which we mediate all of our differences. The mechanics involved in managing conflict are the tools that we use to turn a perfectly natural event (a conflict) into a positive and growth-producing outcome.

Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success.

Henry Ford

The difference between a well-managed and a poorly-managed conflict is a function of how we respond — of whether we act or react to the conflict, and of what skills and strategies we employ in the process.

The ultimate purpose of *Taking Charge of Organizational Conflict* is to help the reader see conflict situations for what they are and bring to bear appropriate responses. Achieving this outcome depends to a great extent on our willingness to master the mechanics of managing conflict as they are presented in the following sections.

A word of advice: Don't wait to practice the management of conflict until you find yourself or your organization in a challenging conflict situation. Consider the metaphor of a live theater production: A cast and a director work together to create an event that will please and entertain the audience and will cause everyone involved to feel proud. When you buy tickets to this play, you see the final product. You probably give little thought to the enormous effort that went into its creation — all the rehearsals, staging, costuming, etc. All the practice and preparation combine to produce an outstanding performance. Likewise, for conflict productions to have outstanding results requires enormous effort directed at practice and preparation. Don't wait until the curtain rises to begin your preparations — get ready now.

Don't wait until the day of the game to begin your practice — you'll lose every time.

THE POSSIBILITIES OF CONFLICT

When resources are scarce, most organizations attempt to generate new avenues for securing them. When this is not

possible, organizations look inward and try to conserve, as well as to increase levels of productivity from existing resources.

When we examine the negative results of poorly managed or unmanaged conflict, we see resources squandered on unproductive if not counterproductive activities. On the other hand, when conflict is well managed and dealt with effectively, we not only conserve resources, we produce them. Well-managed organizational conflict could prove to be your number one wellspring of resource generation and one of your most powerful management tools.

2. THE SOURCES OF CONFLICT

While the primary ingredients in any conflict are the individuals involved, conflicts tend to spring from the same litany of sources for all people, and virtually every conflict begins with someone or something violating an individual's "comfort zone."

Each of us defines our "comfort zone" by erecting limits on what we perceive to be acceptable, allowable, "safe" experiences and behaviors. Any event that intrudes, threatens or assaults our comfort zone, or requires us to move beyond the limits of our comfort zone, produces conflict. Our first awareness of conflict comes from the feelings that are produced when the comfort zone is violated.

Feelings of dissatisfaction comprise a related *internal* source of conflict. When we feel dissatisfied (disappointed) or unsatisfied (unfulfilled), we experience varying levels of discomfort, which in turn produce or augment conflict.

Homeostasis:
A state of physiological equilibrium produced by a balance of functions and chemical composition

Since all of us have a natural preference for feeling comfortable, we tend to respond to discomfort in ways that we believe will restore comfort. In biology, this phenomenon is referred to as *homeostasis* — the organism returning to a state of equilibrium.

Certain categories of conflict are common. By exploring some of these categories, we can start to recognize the seeds of conflict even before they sprout, and we can consciously choose appropriate responses early, while the conflict is still small. Here are some of the more common comfort-zone issues that lead to conflict:

Basic Emotional Needs

Collectively, these are our "hot buttons." Everyone has them. The three most significant in terms of conflict are the need to be valued or loved, the need to be in control,

and the need to like ourselves or enjoy a sense of self-worth.

The Need to be Valued or Loved has to do with how we imagine others perceive us. If for any reason we believe that our value in the eyes of others is being (or going to be) compromised, we immediately become uncomfortable, experiencing internal conflict related to restoring the perception we want others to have of us. For example, when an employee is corrected or reprimanded by a supervisor in front of a coworker, the employee is likely to experience extreme discomfort concerning the probability that his or her image has been diminished in the eyes of this peer. The relative importance of the other person's perception of the employee is the gauge that determines the degree of discomfort and conflict experienced. The greater our desire for a person's love and approval, the greater the discomfort and conflict when the flow of love and approval is reduced or interrupted.

The Need to be in Control means the need to feel like we are in control of ourselves and our destiny — that we have options, and that we are free and able to make choices. Whenever we sense that we are, or are about to be, out of control, we experience discomfort proportional to the extent of the loss. Severe discomfort and, consequently, intense conflict can result. When, for example, an entire department is suddenly required to align its production schedule with new quotas and procedures mandated by upper management, the members of the department may feel as though the reins of control have been snatched from their hands.

When loss of control is a source of conflict, it always draws in other people. Control in this context does not mean control of others, although one of the first things people often do to restore a sense of self-control is attempt to control others. This remedy may give the illusion of working, but usually doesn't.

The Need to Like Ourselves and Have a Sense of Self-Worth is related to the level of our self-esteem. Anything that causes us to feel inadequate, or incapable of achieving an expectation, threatens this important sense of well-being. Interestingly, having the ability to manage the conflicts and confrontations in our lives greatly contributes to our ability to like and think well of ourselves.

TRY THIS!

Here's a way for you to get to know more about yourself and what your "Hot Buttons" actually are —

For two weeks keep a journal, recording the times you feel angry. Each time you make an entry, note which of your "hot buttons" has been pushed. After two weeks, you will have a very good picture of your vulnerability to anger.

Personal Values and Beliefs

As we grow, each of us develops a set of values and beliefs that shape all of our behavior. Whenever we perceive an event or condition to be incongruous with one of these beliefs or values, we are pulled out of our comfort zone and experience conflict. When, for example, a manager is required by Human Resources (under pressure from top management) to take a severe no tolerance position with respect to jokes, remarks and casual conversation with sexual overtones, the manager may experience conflict between his or her own values and those imposed by a higher (but somewhat remote) authority. The stronger the belief or the more important the value, the greater the discomfort and attendant conflict. Because we are so diverse with respect to our beliefs and values, it is impossible for two people, let alone groups of people, to see eye to eye on everything.

Ideas, Opinions, and Issues

We all have ideas about things. As an idea develops, it can rather quickly turn into an opinion. Sometimes we express opinions by saying things like, “The way I see it . . .” or “I think . . .” Our opinions are formed from the raw materials of our belief systems. As an idea takes shape, it often becomes an opinion based on what we believe.

We don’t form our opinions by accident. Almost all opinions are formed in relation to an existing issue, an issue being any topic around which there are already at least two different opinions. An issue can be very simple or very complex. For example, when two people each want to watch a different television program, we have one issue and two opinions. But when politicians debate health care reform, we have one main issue, thousands of sub-issues, and tens of thousands of opinions.

Opinions and issues are a good place to look to find conflicts. We would do well to remember when expressing opinions that other people are likely to have different or *opposing* opinions. The existence of opposing opinions can and often does produce conflict, the seriousness of which is determined by the strength of and emotional attachment to those opinions.

Some issues don’t involve other people. For example, let’s say that you are facing a major deadline on a project, and you have to make a decision between working or going with friends to the theatre. Behind this simple decision lie two conflicting opinions, each based on entirely reasonable beliefs. On the one hand, you hold the opinion that refusing to go with friends may jeopardize friendships and deny you an enjoyable evening. Supporting this belief is the rationale that, even if you go to the theatre, you may still be able to devote a few late hours to your project. Finally, you believe that going out with friends is a healthy thing to do.

On the other hand, you think that your friends will probably understand and respect a decision to stay home and work. Furthermore, you know that taking care of the task will bolster your self-image. Finally, you believe that if you go to the theatre you'll put so much energy into dreading the work ahead and worrying about your deadline that you won't enjoy yourself anyway.

You have two conflicting opinions based on two sets of beliefs. As long as it continues unresolved, the conflict itself steals energy from both alternatives!

Facts and Information

How many times have you heard or seen facts and information that seem contradictory? Our perceptions have a lot to do with this. Since each of us sees and interprets things somewhat uniquely, our perception of "the facts" may be different from the perceptions of other people. Very often, "facts" are really opinions. Is it a fact that the new incentive program is discriminatory and overly expensive, or is it the opinion of a small but vocal minority? Sometimes, facts are not complete and information is left out. What does the hard data say and how and by whom is that data being interpreted? Whenever we deal with facts and information we need to be aware that what appears a certain way to us doesn't necessarily look that way to others.

Processes and Methods

Seldom is there just one way of doing something. Since processes and methods affect outcomes, people often become contentious defending them. Even something as simple as selecting the route to take in traveling from one place to another can produce conflict because the route (method) affects the time spent getting there, among other things. The more importance ascribed to the outcome, or the more commitment given a particular process or method, the greater the intensity of discomfort and conflict.

Similarities and Differences

Diversity can also breed conflict. People are different by virtue of their belief systems, human traits, and conditioned responses; in other words, by who they are. And they differ in many other ways, too. Most people acknowledge this fact but fail to take it into account when confrontations arise. Developing an awareness of the ways we differ is important if we are to move toward higher levels of inclusion and accommodation.

In truth, we are more alike than different.

TRY THIS!

1. Get a group of people together, and ask them to name all the ways they differ from one another. The answers come quickly, and include personality, preferences, skills, intelligence, traditions, culture, race, etc. In moments, you'll have a long list of differences.
2. Next, ask them to name all the ways they are *exactly* the same. This list will be slow in forming. Usually someone will say that everyone present is a human being. Someone else may suggest that everyone has the same basic needs or the same anatomy. This is where the second list generally stops.

At first glance, these two lists support the notion that people are different from one another, but pursue the question farther:

Now ask the group to think about the list of differences, and find a way to turn those differences into *exact* likenesses. Try it. Think about everyone having a *different* personality. Now put aside the "different" for a moment, and consider the fact that everyone *has* a personality, just as everyone has preferences, skills, intelligence, traditions, culture, race, etc. When you teach people to think about

differences this way, they start to see how truly alike they are.

By failing to see how much alike we are, we are planting seeds of conflict. Focusing only on the belief that we are different from one another actually produces conflict.

Turf

We begin to learn about possessions and territory from our earliest experiences. Collectively, possessions and territory comprise our “turf.” Many cultures place a high premium on “getting” as a measure of success. A T-shirt reads, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” A good question to ask is: “...wins what?”

Holding this belief, we move through life measuring our success by how much we obtain. We become acutely aware of intrusions upon and threats to our turf. When we lose something, we feel a discomfort akin to failure.

If we lose enough, we may come to see *ourselves* as failures — a serious and destructive conclusion. It is very difficult to change an individual’s identification with material possessions, but it is not so difficult to develop the skills necessary to constructively deal with conflicts involving turf.

People who work together benefit by recognizing that the ultimate value of their turf, like their diversity, lies in its ability to contribute to a larger system.

It is vital that as people work together, they recognize that the real value of their turf ultimately lies in its ability to contribute to a larger system.

Conflicts that arise from issues of turf can be small or global. When a neighbor’s dog finds a handy place in the middle of our front yard to discharge a bodily function, we experience a small intrusion onto our turf. The events of September 11th were intrusions onto our national turf that went on to engage global involvement. Similarly,

when we read of the rapid destruction of the rainforest, we are seeing a large intrusion onto our global turf. It has a much different look, but varies only in appearance. So it is with turf issues in organizations. In an organization, the turf issues are different, but no less important.

Taking Charge of Organizational Conflict proposes that each of us use all of our resources, including our turf, to contribute to the success of the organization and, in the process, the success of those around us.

Limited Resources

Organizations never seem to have enough of everything for everyone. Because they are limited, resources must be allocated, and the process of determining who gets what can put the wheels of conflict in high gear. As we compete for resources, we are automatically cast into win-lose situations that often hinge on politics rather than equity or fairness and always boil down to conflict.

Only when individuals see themselves in a picture of organizational success, can they subordinate personal concerns to organizational good.

Although conflicts arising from issues of limited resources may be expressed overtly, they are more often reflected in low morale, or reduced productivity justified as the inevitable result of insufficient resources.

All change produces conflict, and every conflict produces change.

The quality of change is determined by the skill with which conflict is managed and resolved.

Change

Change is a constant. Every organization undergoes continuous change, and every individual deals with change at both personal and professional levels. The introduction of any change requires that we expand our comfort zone to accommodate the change, or rail against it in a state of conflict until we either surrender to the change or it goes away.

Wherever we see a failed effort to bring about change, we always see a case of poorly managed

conflict. Therefore, each of us must be aware that all change produces conflict and the extent to which we are able to take charge of that conflict will determine the success we have with change. Examples of this are all around us. All we have to do is think of an instance when we tried to change a habit or loose weight. If it was a

struggle, it was conflict.

One Right Answer

This is the most potent source of conflict. Considering how much people differ, the potential for conflict between individuals is easy to see. Add to the differences just one ingredient and conflict is virtually *guaranteed*. This ingredient is simply the need to be right. The need to be right is an integral part of our survival mechanisms and is at the root of virtually every interpersonal con-

Buckminster Fuller estimated that by about 10,000 BC major inventions were occurring every couple of hundred years or so. By the beginning of the Christian era, they may have been happening every fifty years. By about 1700, the time period was reduced to thirty years. In our current period, major inventions are taking place virtually monthly.

The message I want to emphasize is that for the first time ever the period of doubling of all human activity has been reduced to less than a human generation. We humans just aren't accustomed to that rate of change. The engine is winding up, and up, and up, getting faster and faster. How long can we endure this rate of change?

We all know that this pace has become so fast and so furious that our institutions are breaking down. Nothing seems to be working. We're getting ahead of ourselves. And the question is, what in the world are we going to do about it?

*Comments by Edgar Mitchell,
Apollo Astronaut*

flict. If you and I are different, and we both believe that only one of us is right, that automatically makes one of us wrong, and we have created a conflict over which of us holds title to the truth.

Where did our need to be right come from? In a very real sense it is one of our basic human needs. Typically we have a need to be right rather than wrong. This is further reinforced as we grow up through our experiences in the home and in broader society. It happened in school as well. Classrooms and teachers bombarded us with the notion that there was only one right answer. Those who knew the answer were rewarded with attention, approval, and good grades, and those who didn't know the answer experienced criticism, rejection, and bad grades. Many years later, we still defend to the wall our right to be right! Learning to understand, respect, and appreciate similarities and differences is one key to resolving conflicts and is essential if we are to build on diversity and realize inclusion and interdependence. From the moment we accept the fallacious notion that there is only one right answer, we close our minds to the ideas of other people, and limit ourselves to only one point of view. By recognizing that other answers have validity and value, we can expand our comfort zone and open ourselves to new information and personal growth.

These are a few of the primary sources of conflict. Although many other sources undoubtedly exist, the most important thing to understand is that all conflicts grow from having someone or something violate our individual comfort zone.

Because conflict is a naturally occurring process and because of the enormous diversity that surrounds us, it is not possible to eliminate conflict, nor is it possible to avoid it. What is possible is to achieve a reduction in the numbers of conflicts and their debilitating consequences.

Resolving a conflict doesn't necessarily eliminate the source of the conflict. In all likelihood, people will continue to hold divergent positions and opinions. However, when a conflict is well managed, it is possible for individuals to maintain their beliefs and at the same time understand, accommodate, and accept the beliefs and behaviors of others.