**Embracing and Resolving Differences**

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*Introduction*

Conflict is an inevitable and potentially valuable part of human existence. Yet most of us are ill-equipped to deal with differences in a constructive, efficient and relationship-preserving way, whether in the personal, political or organisational context. Statistics confirm this. For example, a 2009 UK survey of over 600 senior business people revealed that only 37 % regarded themselves as being adequately trained to cope with business conflict. Just how much of a problem organisational conflict is, is demonstrated by the following statements:

'Tension and stress reduce motivation and disturb concentration. A loss of simple productivity of 25% (doing things other than work related activities, such as discussing the dispute, playing computer games, finding reasons to get out of the area) reduces an average work week to fewer than 20 hours…)' Cram, J. A., MacWilliams, R. K. *The Cost of Conflict in the Workplace*, Cramby River Consultants.

'42% of a Manager's Time is spent addressing conflict in the workplace'. (Watson, C., Hoffman, R. *Managers as Negotiators*, Leadership Quarterly 7(1), 1996.

'I've had CEOs and senior vice presidents tell me they can spend up to 70% of their time on conflict…' Taylor, R. *Workplace tiffs boosting demand for mediators*. National Post March 2003.

'Fortune 500 Senior Executives spend 20% of their time in litigation related activities.' Levine, S. *The Many Costs of Conflict* available at http://www.mediate.com/articles/levine1.cfm

'Over 65% of performance problems result from strained relationships between employees, not from deficits in individual employee's skill or motivation.' Dana, D. *The Dana Measure of Financial Cost of Organizational Conflict*, 2001.

'Up to 30% of a typical managers time is spent dealing with conflict.' Schmidt, T.K. *A survey of managerial interests with respect to conflict*. Academy of Management Journal, June 1976.

The problem goes deeper that just a waste of productive time: recent research published in the European Financial Review on board processes found that the inability of corporate leaders to develop a cohesive board where different views are both encouraged and managed well - i.e., the inability to deal with differences - is a major risk factor in organisations. (http://www.europeanfinancialreview.com/?p=1489)

*Why is it so hard?*

Given a world that is full of conflict and a human race that lacks the natural ability to resolve differences quickly and collaboratively, it is no wonder that we seem to struggle along from one conflict situation to the next. Yet a general lack of conflict resolution skills is not the only cause of our inability to deal with differences in a constructive way.

A big contributor, in fact, is our general sense that conflict is bad, something negative that must be avoided. Because of this 'mindset', it is no wonder that when we see conflict we either fail to deal with the it (withdraw), or we go into fight mode, using whatever coercive power or legal remedies are available to us. Link this to a general unwillingness to listen to those who have different views to our own, and we have the makings of a situation that that can quickly escalate beyond our control. (Glasl's 9-step ladder of conflict escalation provides a stark reminder of this: http://www.mediate.com/articles/jordan.cfm). If and when the people at the other end of the conflict are listened to eventually after all else has failed, relationships are at such a low ebb that the search for constructive and cooperative solutions become difficult and sometimes even impossible.

Poor leadership or outdated leadership models also contribute to our inability to effectively deal with differences. Instead of inclusive leadership styles that would allow decision-makers the chance to hear others' concerns, viewpoints and suggestions before making a decision that affects them, our politicians and captains of industry promote the outdated idea of 'decisive' (i.e. exclusionary, power-based) leadership. Business schools are sometimes to blame as well because of the kind of profit-driven rather than a stakeholder relationship model of leadership they promote. As a recent article in the California Management Review notes: 'The emphasis on analysis has produced a generation of MBA's who are critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts and shrunken souls'.

Another obstacle is the manner in which we define the problem which needs to be resolved: we assume at the outset that our interests are in conflict with those of people we contend with and therefore fail to exploit the common ground and collaborative opportunities that most often do exist and instead take up opposing positions to engage in a tit-for-tat battle for supremacy. In reality, while our positions or demands might be and often are in conflict, our interests are often just different and therefore reconcilable.

There are no doubt many other contributing factors, some of which we have little or no control over. However, we do have control over things like our willingness to listen and not just hear; to move away from apathy to action; to stop being victims and instead become masters of our own destiny; and, most of all, over the attitudes that we bring into those difficult conversations.

*A different view of conflict*

One challenge therefore is to begin to see conflict not only as inevitable but also as a potential opportunity to resolve differences, find common ground and strengthen relationships. A potential resource, in other words. Within organisations this translates into becoming 'conflict wise', i.e. harnessing the power of conflict to promote understanding,

cooperation and growth. In Jim Collins' best-selling book, *Good to Great*, he recalls how the 11 'great' organisations all displayed a similar approach to dealing with conflict: 'All the good-to-great companies had a penchant for intense dialogue. Phrases like "loud debate", "heated discussions" and "healthy conflict" peppered the articles and interview transcripts from all the companies.' These organisations had each delivered cumulative returns at least 3 times greater than the market over a 15-year period!

Conversely, when a separate research team studied a group of business failures arising from highly unsuccessful strategic decisions, they found a remarkably consistent pattern of stifled debate, with negative opinions or adverse information discounted as unhelpful. (Finkelstein, S. (2003) *Why Smart Executives Fail* London: Penguin.)

A 2003 UK survey of top management teams also found that the more productive ones treated conflicts as opportunities for collaboration to achieve the best solution for the organisation as a whole.

### *Conflict wise organisations*

Organisations need to create a cultural shift so it becomes more natural to engage with differences in constructive ways, i.e., to dialogue and mediate rather than fight. Leaders need to be encouraged to look at conflict from a different perspective – an opportunity for a collaboration of ideas rather than a clash or disruption for the benefit of the organisations as a whole. This requires the following:

a. *Realise the potential value of conflict.* As one of the early pioneers of conflict resolution, Mary Parker Follett once said: 'It is possible to conceive conflict as not necessarily a wasteful outbreak of incompatibilities, but a normal process by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all concerned.'

b. *Address conflicts as soon as they register themselves,* e.g., in withdrawal of cooperation, verbal attacks, grievances, sudden increase in absence from work, etc. Employees will feel valued if their concerns are heard in a timely manner, and will be more willing to come to management first to discuss any future problems. Yet most managers are reluctant to intervene. A 2009 CEDR (UK) survey of over 600 business people revealed that only 37 per cent regarded themselves as being adequately trained to cope with business conflict. Managers also revealed themselves to be significantly conflict averse: over a third of managers (35%) would rather parachute jump for the first time than address a performance problem with their work colleagues, whilst just under a third (27%) would rather shave their head for charity – and some (8%) would rather live on bugs for a week!

c. *Learn how to have difficult conversations.* Being non-confrontational only creates more conflict. Employees may feel insulted and unimportant if managers are reluctant to address controversial issues. 'Generation Y' is permeating the workplace, and these employees demand mutual respect. Thus, collaboratively solving workplace issues shows employees across generations that their company has the desire and ability to maintain a harmonious relationship.

d. *Keep people engaged and informed.* Often, management fails to inform their employees of the practical impact of executive decisions. This can lead to conflict if employees are not aware of the reasoning behind the changes to which they are expected to adjust. *In Fair Process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy* (2003 HBR 123) Kim, W.C., Mauborgne, R. found that '[w]hen employees don't trust managers to make good decisions or to behave with integrity, their motivation is seriously compromised. Their distrust and its attendant lack of engagement is a huge, unrecognized problem in most organizations'. Their central finding is that employees will commit to a manager's decision - even one they disagree with - if they believe that the process the manager used to make the decision was fair.

e. *Develop a conflict management strategy.* This involves –

- Promoting conflict literacy: an organisation needs to have a clear understanding of what it means by 'conflict'. A lot of conflict occurs on an informal and sometimes covert level.

- Measuring conflict styles: a lot of conflict arises - or escalates - as a consequence of how people behave in difficult situations. Use diagnostic tools to understand the different styles of at least those in leadership roles.

- Building conflict management skills: train people to adopt appropriate styles, depending on each conflict situation. Add the following skills to the mix: communication; creative problem-solving skills; collaborative process skills.

- Developing team working approaches: ensure that established team cultures are not overwhelming and that an appropriate collective strategy is adopted. Emphasise the value of a collaborative approach to address task-based conflict.

- Creating options for conflict resolution: ensure that internal procedures, e.g., grievance procedures provide for 'loop-back' to collaborative processes for resolution (such as internal mediation).

- Embedding a conflict management culture: it's not enough simply to build protocols and provide training. Leadership needs to come from the top such that open communication and effective conflict management become embedded in the culture of the organisation.

See further: Runde, C.E., Flanagan, T.A. *Conflict Competent Leadership http://moravian.org/images/Conflict_Competent_Leadership_Summary.pdf* and Leathes, M. *Conflict Leadership https://imimediation.org/conflict-leadership*

It is perhaps apposite to end off with this powerful reminder from Parker-Follett, written shortly before her death as war clouds started gathering yet again over Europe: 'We have thought of peace as passive and war as the active way of living. The opposite is true. War is not the most strenuous life. It is a kind of rest cure compared to the task of reconciling our differences... From War to Peace is not from the strenuous to the easy existence; it is from the futile to the effective, from the stagnant to the active, from the destructive to the creative

way of life. The world will be regenerated by the people who rise above these passive ways and heroically seek, by whatever hardship, by whatever toil, the methods by which people can agree.'