

PREVENTING CONFLICT, MANAGING CHANGE, INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY – THE FIFTH DIMENSION

Synopsis

1. *In this paper I will explain what conflict is, and explore what needs to be done to move through and past conflict.*
2. *In this exploration I will explain what I call the ‘fifth dimension’ of conflict management and the skills that underpin it:*
 - a. *The role and importance of empathy honesty and openness;*
 - b. *How the use of empathy, honesty and openness impact on societal motivations;*
 - c. *What are societal motivations and what is required to alter them from negative to positive;*
 - d. *How societal motivations relate to how dialogue is managed in conflict so that dialogue achieves generative change.*
3. *I will briefly explain how the skills that underpin the fifth dimension connect to the way society is moving toward a new values paradigm from one based exclusively on the value of economic growth to one that places a primacy on human engagement and meaning.*
4. *This paradigm shift highlights the importance for those working in dispute resolution and in management to mobilise ‘fifth dimension’ skills to help people engage empathically, positively, creatively and meaningfully in conflict, in dialogue and in their personal and working interactions.*

Preliminaries

I begin the paper by raising two preliminary questions

- What if any connection exists between managing conflict, preventing conflict, managing change and increasing productivity?
- What is the thread that connects managing past conflict with increased productivity?

I will describe the four responses to conflict resolution which are well known to us. I will then describe what I call the ‘fifth dimension’ of conflict management and how this relates to the growth of productive capacity for both individuals and organisations.

I will outline the key elements that underpin effective conflict management and enable people to engage meaningfully, enhancing commitment to shared objectives and also to improved workplaces and productivity.

1. *What conflict is; moving through and past conflict*

It is helpful to begin with an understanding what conflict is and its characteristics. Conflict is generated when our values or beliefs are challenged, when our fears and vulnerabilities are exposed.

Our response to the exposure of our fear and vulnerability is twofold. Both changes occur simultaneously and each exacerbates the impact of the other.

Firstly we experience a loss of self empowerment. This may manifest as heightened sense of uncertainty, confusion, frustration, anger, lack of control and feeling of powerlessness, a diminished capacity for clarity and decision making. Secondly, this experience is accompanied by an alienation from the other in the dispute; we see them as lacking clarity and understanding, vindictive and deliberately looking to thwart our reasonable expectations. In severe conflicts the other is dehumanised and seen as an object¹. These experiences lead to a level of self absorption which I describe as “there is only one story, one understanding and one outcome and it’s mine!”

These feelings of disempowerment and self absorption are referred to in modern psychiatry as reflections of disequilibrium in mind equanimity. Disempowerment and self absorption for most people are reflected in a short term interference with frontal cortex function. In severe conflict the “flip out”² as it has been described by Daniel Siegel interferes with our capacity to access left or right brain function as we move into a state of “chaos” or “rigidity” and move from frontal cortex responses to limbic, emotive responses or even to more primitive responses of the brain stem or hippocampus (flight or fight).

Kenneth Cloke³ has identified that several outcomes are possible in dealing with conflict - other than violence or escape (fight or flight) - depending on the focus of the response to conflict. Each successive response requires increasing levels of skill and sensitivity by either a third party or by the parties themselves, along with greater integrity and commitment. Each leaves less of the conflict remaining after it is completed. I have modified and extended his analysis:

1. The fighting can be stopped and the conflict de-escalated. Most mediators understand the importance of this outcome and have the basic skills and techniques needed. This is often done by separating the people in dispute and talking calmly to each.
2. The issues over which people are fighting can be finalised and their dispute ended by discussing their issues and negotiating a compromise. This would normally involve setting ground rules for behaviour, identifying issues, articulating reasons for settlement, meeting separately with each side and negotiating a compromise. Usually a successful compromise is identified as one where both parties are equally unhappy with the outcome.
3. The material issues causing a dispute can be identified by exploring the underlying interests and needs of the protagonists so that these issues can be settled. Ground rules are often set for the parties, material issues explored and strong feelings reframed by removing their heat or intensity. Here settlement often achieves a finality of the

¹ Robert Bush and Joseph Folger, “The Promise of Mediation 2nd Ed”

² Daniel Siegel, “Mindsight”

³ Kenneth Cloke, “Crossroads of Conflict” pp 46-7

overt areas of material disagreement and hostility but may not ensure that each party understands the other's fears and vulnerability.

4. The quality of the conflict interaction can be transformed by supporting the parties in their own decision making. This may include choices regarding whether or not to have ground rules and if so what they are, what and when to talk about, whether or not they wish to talk about their feelings of uncertainty and alienation from the other. Here settlement does not become the focus but one of the possible outcomes. Here the parties move from separate conversations into one conversation.
5. Acceptance and forgiveness of the other as well as acceptance and forgiveness of self are possible. This consists of identifying and releasing ourselves from our false expectations. This process has been described as "giving up all hopes of having a better past"⁴. Forgiveness extends the transformation of the conflict. This is an area rarely explored in conflict and requires skills often not understood by mediators, especially when it comes to a party forgiving themselves.
6. The opportunity to renew our relationships with our protagonists and to reconcile so that the conflict disappears and is transcended. This process is generally not understood as being available through mediation. It is an opportunity for learning and growth. This involves letting go, learning, transcending and evolving.
7. Conflict provides the opportunity for redesigning preventative systems, structures, cultures and environments that make it more difficult for future conflicts to occur or for conflict to be better understood and managed. Conflict can become a rich opportunity in understanding and dealing with other perspectives without feelings of fear and vulnerability.

2. *The traditional responses to conflict and the fifth dimension-*

As can be seen above Cloke identifies the traditional responses to conflict which are:

- Firstly, to stop the fighting;
- secondly, to compromise;
- thirdly, interest based settlement and
- fourthly the transformative and narrative responses to conflict interactions.

These four responses are now enriched and encompassed in what I am describing as the fifth dimension of conflict management. The fifth dimension allows for each of the four recognised responses and encompasses the possibilities of acceptance or forgiveness; reconciliation or transcendence; and conflict response redesign.

The fifth dimension is a journey away from a focus on outputs, settlement and growth to a world of meaning and connection. Here conflict is an opportunity

⁴ Annie Dillard, referred to by Cloke p 46

to take responsibility for the conflict and its consequences; an opportunity to learn and improve. In order to do this it is necessary for that person to experience a safe space and a way to find voice, by being heard and understood. By experiencing this people can move out of a framework where their response to conflict is caused by the other rather than conflict being in their own control.

a. The role and importance of empathy honesty and openness;

There is a large body of literature ranging across the disciplines of neuroscience, psychiatry, psychology, conflict resolution, dialogue theory and social science which suggests that the essential elements for moving beyond a transactional response to conflict to a response based on meaning and connection (the fifth dimension) are empathy, honesty, and openness. All three elements must coexist for this to be possible.

b. How the use of empathy, honesty and openness impact on societal motivations;

The use of empathy, openness and honesty enables people to be genuinely and unambiguously heard, understood and experienced. This appears to be the key to accessing the frontal lobe functions of logical thinking as well as to intuition, creativity and emotion, even when confronted with high levels of conflict.

c. What are societal motivations and what is required to alter them from negative to positive;

Historically values such as unbridled competitiveness, aggression, self centeredness, anger, craving, fear, suspicion, short term thinking and anxiety have been the predominant values in society. These values are often seen in conflict situations. They are also integral to a growth focused economy. In recent times we are starting to see the emergence of values such as curiosity, openness, cooperation, good listening, integrity, trustworthiness, looking at the big picture and the long term as core individual and societal values.⁵

In their book *Spiritual Capital*, Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall outline 12 principles which allow old motivations to dissolve and create new ones⁶:

- “Self awareness. To know what I believe in and value and what deeply motivates me. Awareness of my deepest life’s purposes.
- Spontaneity. To live in and be responsive to the moment and all that it contains.
- Being vision and value led. Acting from principles and deep beliefs, and living life accordingly.
- Holism (a sense of the system or of connectivity). Ability to see larger patterns, relationships, connections. A strong sense of belonging.
- Compassion. Quality of “feeling-with” and deep empathy. Ground work for universal sympathy.

⁵ Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, “Spiritual Capital” Ch 4

⁶ Zohar and Marshall pp118-9

- Celebration of diversity. Valuing other people and unfamiliar situations for their differences not despite them.
- Field independence. To be able to stand against the crowd and maintain my own convictions.
- Tendency to ask fundamental ‘why?’ questions. Need to understand things, to get to the bottom of them. Basis for criticising the given.
- Ability to reframe. Stand back from the problem and look for the bigger picture, the wider context.
- Positive use of adversity. Ability to own and learn from mistakes, to see problems as opportunities. Resilience.
- Humility. Sense of being a player in a larger drama, sense of my true place in the world. Basis for self criticism and critical judgment.
- Sense of vocation. Being “called” to serve something larger than myself. Gratitude towards those who have helped me, and a wish to give something back. “

d. How societal motivations relate to how dialogue is managed in conflict so that dialogue achieves generative change.

The notion of moving from old motivations to new is also reflected in the analysis of effective dialogue by people such as William Isaacs, David Bohm and Otto Scharmer. Effective dialogue has been described as “a process of movement through different fields or spaces of conversation”.⁷

Isaacs identifies 4 separate ‘fields’ of conversation each of which has distinctive characteristics. Each transforms into another field through significant change or crisis evoked by those involved in the conversation.

Field I: Politeness – shared monologues

People generally bring a set of norms as to how to behave and interact, each different, depending on the setting. Protocols of behaviour are different but understood in settings such as a staff meeting, a lecture, a Board meeting or a mediation. The language used initially is consistent with the social norms of the particular environment and participants are unlikely to immediately move into what they think and feel. In a mediation for instance introductions and opening statements tend to be polite, structured and insular.

Generally in this field people operate as best they can within the rules. There is little or no reflection. This is an area of civility in which the thoughts and feelings of each participant are repressed. People experience a frustration that there is no shared meaning. This becomes a crisis in the dialogue. The joint session in many mediations will cease at this point.

Field II: Oppositional – breakdown

In this field people are no longer polite, and say what they think. However there is still little or no reflection. Each participant attempts to convince the other that they are right and enters into a contest fact by fact. The

⁷ William Isaacs, “Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together” p253

conversation becomes oppositional and confronting. No quarter is given or sought.

Here the parties are likely to go into a crisis of suspension: how to suspend judgment so that they can go into a period of inquiry and reflection. “The great quest in this phase is for a set of new rules or new ways of operating that can enable people to think, talk, and work together differently. But instead breakdown comes. The dominant emotion in this field tends to be anger. This seems to arise as people discover that not only can they not make dialogue happen, they also cannot get anyone to even agree with them!”⁸

The crisis that develops arises from the inability of each party for self-reflection. Mediations often fail at this point as each party blames the other for the wrong position they are taking. The challenge is to separate people from their point of view. This is a trigger to people being willing to listen to other views.

Fields I and II are both blaming and non-reflective.

Field III: Inquiry – reflective dialogue

There is a shift in this field from third person data and stories to first person. People become reflective about what they are doing and about the impact they are having. People become genuinely curious. They begin to notice and are willing to explore their assumptions. People feel no obligation to require that others respond or agree with their perspective.

There is a crisis of fragmentation as people loosen their preconceptions and come to realise they themselves are not one and the same as their point of view. They begin to see a wider set of possibilities which involves moving from an isolated reality to a more connected one. “Two people who come together can learn, in other words, to transcend the limits of their identities and come to the point of knowing a larger sense of destiny together than they might have experienced on their own.”⁹

This is an opportunity for people to become much more creative than they have been.

Field IV: Creativity – generative dialogue

People generate new rules for interaction. Traditionally held positions are loosened and new possibilities come into existence. They move from reporting from our memory to speaking from our hearts. They shift so that it is legitimate, as they speak their thoughts, to notice, value and share their insights and not discount them because they are undeveloped or small. “People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting; rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change.”¹⁰

⁸ Isaacs pp266-7

⁹ Isaacs p279

¹⁰ Isaacs p285

3. The Role and Importance of Meaning

The gradual *change in the emphasis* of social motivation referred to above has been described as a shift from a community of wealth to a community of meaning.¹¹ It has also been discussed by Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall¹² in reviewing Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Zohar and Marshall conclude that the search for meaning is society's 'missing link'. They assert that the other elements of Maslow's hierarchy have been achieved in western society leaving the attainment of meaning.

"We know today that human beings are by definition primarily creatures of meaning and value (that is of 'self actualisation'). We need a sense of meaning and driving purpose in our lives. Without it we become ill or die."¹³

The move towards the recognition of the importance of "Communities of Meaning" represents a shift toward the personal, toward independence and toward self development in our work.

This movement from one system to another with long periods of stability that are suddenly and dramatically altered has been described as punctuated equilibrium. This is happening now in relation to the management of conflict and decision making. We observe, when looking at Cloke's measures of dealing with conflict (see above), the transition that has occurred over the past 40 years from stopping the fighting (courts and arbitral proceedings), to compromise (conciliation), to interest based bargaining (mediation framed on self determination) and more recently to transformative narrative and restorative practices.

4. The impact of conflict on organisations

The surge in the focus on personal transformation and growth is beginning to have an impact on corporate leadership and organisational structure. The cost of conflict is being felt very substantially in financial terms:

"27% of employees have seen conflict lead to personal attacks, and 25% have seen it result in sickness or absence. Indeed, nearly one in ten (9%) even saw it lead to a project failure. 41% of employees think older people handle conflict most effectively, so life experience evidently helps people become more effective. The skill of leaders in this regard is the key determinant, however. Seven out of ten employees see managing conflict as a 'very' or 'critically' important leadership skill, while 54% of employees think managers could handle disputes better by addressing underlying tensions before things go wrong."¹⁴

This study found that an overwhelming majority (85%) of employees at all levels experience conflict to some degree. It also found that U.S. employees spend 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict, equating to approximately \$US 359 billion in paid hours in 2008.

¹¹ Kenneth Hey and Peter Moore, "The Caterpillar Doesn't Know"

¹² Zohar and Marshall

¹³ Zohar and Marshall p26

¹⁴ CPP Global Human Capital Report, Workplace Conflict and How Businesses Can Harness it to Thrive July 2008 p4

Mobilising fifth dimension skills

These alarming statistics bear out the need for conflict managers, individuals and organisations to develop the higher order skills which I have discussed throughout this paper, not just as conflict management skills but as vehicles for enabling and enhancing 'meaning'. This is "about communication, deep and wide... communication is the foundation of our society, of our culture, of our humanity, of our own individual identity, of all our economic systems."¹⁵

The need to develop communication capabilities within ourselves, our organisations and in our networks enables us not only to deal with, resolve and manage conflict, it also enables us to create a new paradigm of personal accountability, responsibility, decision making and change. Management increasingly is required to become mindful and focused on the here and now rather than focused on the past. "A dialogic approach to change focuses on developing practices and capabilities on a large scale, where habitual and stuck patterns of interaction and thought are continually challenged and reflected on."¹⁶

Mobilising fifth dimension skills enables difficult conversations to be had more easily, change to be dealt with inclusively rather than imposed, organisations to refocus on the skills and attributes which support the development of 'meaning.' Reducing the focus on outputs and growth will enable conflict to be better managed and productivity to be increased. Things that were impossible will become possible.

¹⁵ Kevin Kelly, "New Rules for the New Economy" (NY Penguin) by p5

¹⁶ Isaacs, p339