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Principles of Conflict Resolution

Edgar A. Kelley

CONFLICT AND DIFFERENCES of opinion contribute to the health of an organization, for it is from the crucible of such differences that new and better methods emerge. Unresolved differences, however, are dysfunctional and block human growth and action.

The goal of an effective organization or leader, especially in a pluralistic culture, is not the reduction or elimination of conflict. Instead, the goal is to increase organizational or individual capacities for handling conflict. Likert (1961) suggested three characteristics necessary for creative and effective handling of conflict:

1. Procedures exist for dealing with conflict. These procedures are designed to foster communication and interaction between individuals and groups in the setting.
2. Individuals, especially those in leadership positions, are skilled in interaction processes; e. g., group formation, group leadership, and group maintenance functions.
3. A climate of trust exists, or is developed, between and among individuals.

Conditions for creative and effective handling of conflict are not always present. Often, especially in relatively static settings or structures, there is a low tolerance of

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What causes conflict? What role does conflict play in the principalship? What factors should the administrator consider in planning for effective conflict resolution? These questions and others are considered on the following pages.

stress. In such settings, the response to controversy or conflict is likely to be authoritarian: *i. e.*, leadership behaviors will be role-defined and role-protective.

Conflict, or the potential for conflict, increases with a number of factors: increased interdependence, increased pressure by external forces which requires compromises on outcome preferences, and increased variety in the groups involved within an organization (Thompson, 1967). For schools, these factors have some definite implications. The nature of the educational process implies interdependence which, in turn, increases the probability of stress and conflict.

In recent years, educators and citizens have spoken in favor of increased participation by a wider variety of groups. This is a source of stress acceleration, making the presence of conflict in schools more probable than at earlier periods of time. The pressures and successes of movements for teacher and student rights are examples of increased conflict.

Conflict occurs because of efforts aimed at changes in the status quo which are countered by efforts aimed at maintenance of the status quo. Any particular conflict, accordingly, can be analyzed or explained only in the context in which it occurs (Dahrendorf, 1959). The most common reaction to conflict is the attempt by those with power to suppress the actions of those seeking to gain, or share, the power.

In reviewing the elements and effects of conflict, Kelley (1970) has suggested the following assumptions:

1. Conflict is inevitable.
2. Permanent suppression of conflict is impossible (unless one has omnipotent power in a setting).
3. Conflict can be destructive or productive. A conflict-free setting is likely to stagnate while a setting which is overloaded with conflict will be dysfunctional. A degree of conflict is necessary as a stimulus to creativity and vitality for individuals or organizations.
4. People initiate conflict to effect a structural change; people respond to conflict initiated by others to maintain the status quo.
5. A conflict can only be explained or analyzed in relation to the context, or setting, in which it occurs.
6. The potential for conflict increases when there are increases in other factors; *e. g.*, increased interdependence between individuals or agencies, increased interest in the behaviors and actions of an individual or organization by individuals and agencies external to the setting, and increased variety in the number or type of individuals and agencies impacted upon by the actions of an individual or organization.

The past quarter-century was a time when conflict in the schools—and conflict about schools and their purposes—ranged from “high” to “the boiling point.” A consideration of the factors which lead to conflict makes this phenomenon understandable.

That same period of time was characterized by:

1. Increased interdependence in schools, including the interdependence of schools with other agencies and interdependence fostered within school settings and procedures; *e. g.*, a shift from the teacher as “master of the classroom” to member of a “teaching team” and the development of a greater degree of specialization among personnel.
2. Increased pluralism in the society and a corresponding increase in pluralistic values and expectations in the school. Examples are many. A few of the most obvious include the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, the teacher rights movement, the student rights movement, and increased interest in schools by parent and citizen groups.
3. Multiple efforts, arising within the school and within the broader culture, to change schools. In understanding the effects of conflict, it is relatively unimportant to debate the merit of changes made; instead, it is important to recognize that change is accompanied by conflict. As Griffiths (1964) noted, “change is synonymous with conflict.”

While the purpose of this article is limited, and the major focus is the identification of principles and strategies to be followed in conflict resolution, identification of the potential for conflict inherent in the principalship seems appropriate. Lipham and Hoeh (1974) have summarized the importance of role conflict in the principalship:

All institutional roles, particularly those in public institutions, are subject to numerous sources and types of disagreement or conflict. But few seem so fraught with conflict potential as that of the public school principal. The major types of role conflict in the principalship are as follows: (1) inter-role conflict or disagreement between two or more roles simultaneously fulfilled by the principal—from the principal “wearing many hats”; (2) inter-reference-group conflict or disagreement in two or more reference groups in their expectations for the role of the principal—“the man in the middle”; (3) intra-reference-group conflict or disagreement within a reference group in their expectations for the role of the principal—“caught in group crossfire”; and (4) role-personality conflict or disagreement between the expectations for the role of the principal and his personality need-dispositions—“the man vs. the job.”¹

1. James M. Lipham and James A. Hoeh, Jr., *The Principalship: Foundations and Functions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 132-33.

Gross (1968) has succinctly described the relationship of conflict to the life of an individual or an organization: "One cannot rise above conflict. One can merely respond to it in varying ways." He describes three reactions to conflict, suggesting that these occur in a predictable and sequential fashion: The initial step, *delay*, usually leads to an increase of conflict and increasing tension or stress. The second stage, *tension or stress*, carries a certain amount of "pain" but, unless the pain is too acute, this stage often leads to a stimulation of higher levels of mental and physical energy. The third stage is *conflict resolution*. Conflict resolution is a multifaceted concept with at least five possible outcomes: avoidance, deadlock, victory or defeat, compromise, and integration.

Responses to Conflict

Consideration of the points raised in this article will suggest a number of principles of conflict resolution which can be helpful to the building administrator. Before listing these, however, it is important to note that no one method or outcome should be considered to be automatically "best" for every situation. The resolution of conflict is always unique to the setting in which conflict occurs. Another caution is also appropriate: the "rules" for conflict resolution which are listed do not appear in any automatic sequence. Further, they are not rules so much as they are items to be considered in planning for improved effectiveness in conflict resolution.

1. *Be optimistic.* To be most effective, a leader must believe that most conflicts can be settled in ways which are not harmful and, indeed, often are helpful to the organization and setting.
2. *Be realistic.* Remember that anything can happen, any time, any place. No educational leader can afford the self-defeating luxury—when informed of a conflict that has occurred elsewhere—of assuming that "it can't happen here."
3. *Identify the potential for conflict.* Consider the temporary or relatively permanent changes occurring in society, in the community, in the school. Each of these changes, regardless of intentions which may underlie planned changes, is a source of potential conflict.
4. *Identify the value bases represented in the opposing points of a potential or actual conflict.* Most conflicts are a result of conflicts in the value bases of the opposing sides. If conflicts over value bases are related to either goals or outcomes, one of three outcomes is most probable: avoidance, deadlock, or a "struggle to the death" in a win-lose confrontation. If the conflict concerns operational strategies, but goals and desired outcomes are held in com-

mon, compromise or integration is possible. Often, however, conflicts over strategies deteriorate into personality debates that are settled in the same manner as conflicts about goals and outcomes.

5. *Be certain to identify your own span of tolerance.* When confronted with a proposed change, or with a challenge to what exists, a common reaction is to defend the status quo. This reaction is congruent with dissonance theory which predicts that an individual becomes more convinced that his original position is correct if he is confronted with discrepant information or choices. On the other hand, Lewinian theory would suggest that awareness of discrepant information results in movement in the direction of the new information.

Both of these theories explain the behavior of some people. Which is most explanatory of your own reactions to new information or to conflicts? Identifying your own span of tolerance involves awareness of your value base, awareness of your typical response to discrepant information, and awareness of the range of alternatives which you, as an individual, can tolerate in yourself or in others as well as in the organization in which you work.

6. *Identify the role source of the conflict.* Is this conflict present because of a conflict in expectations for two roles you must fill? Or, is this conflict present because two or more referent groups hold differing expectations for you or for the school; *e. g.*, parents vs. teachers, teachers vs. board of education, students vs. teachers? A third possibility is that the conflict is between members of the same referent group; *e. g.*, one clique of teachers is in opposition to another group regarding how a particular issue should be handled.

One of the most chronic—and most difficult—areas of conflict resolution for the principal is the internal conflict felt when the demands of the job do not fit perceptions of how “it’s supposed to be.” The principal who feels that the role of supervisor should be limited to helping teachers grow and develop may experience sharp personal and professional discomfort when dealing with an obviously incompetent teacher. A more common example of this type of role conflict is the personal discomfort caused by conflicting feelings about the role as parent and spouse as contrasted to the time demands of the principalship.

7. *Identify the possible and probable outcomes.* For the particular conflict, what is the possibility or probability that resolution can be best approximated by avoidance of the issue? By compromise? By seeking to integrate and interrelate two or more points of con-

flict? Is deadlock appropriate, with both points of view (or sets of action) existing simultaneously? Is this an issue which you will engage on a win-lose basis? If so, are you prepared to accept the consequences of both "winning" and "losing?"

8. *Analyze your role vis-a-vis the points of view involved in the conflict.* Are you one of the protagonists? Are you a mediator? Do you have the power of arbitration?
9. *Identify the positions of those involved in the conflict.* For each point of view involved try to express in a single sentence the source of the conflict. Follow this by identifying for each the desired decision. Examine these written statements. Is compromise possible? Can these points be integrated into a shared position? What is a feasible solution? What are the alternatives? What is most practical for the short-range and long-range benefit of the individuals involved in the conflict and the school as an organization?
10. *Listen to, and communicate with, all points of view.* Each of us, as human beings, can get trapped into considering only part of the available information. When mediating or arbitrating a conflict, a few simple strategies are helpful as means of organizing:
 - Have the conflicting sides express, in writing, their positions.
 - If the conflict involves groups, have the group designate its major spokesperson. (Never try to negotiate, resolve conflict, or write a report in a committee.)
 - When expressing your recommendation or decision, express it in writing and explain your reasons in short, factual, sentences. Do not engage in verbal debate over the decision; instead, inform people of further recourse, if any, which can be sought.

Conclusion

While additional rules could be listed, and variations on these might be appropriate, these rules incorporate major suggestions about how to deal with conflict. Two additional suggestions are appropriate: keep a sense of perspective, and do not expect to be infallible. Many conflicts will be unimportant a decade from the time they occur. Conflict resolution—like other administrative behaviors—is the art of the possible.

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Booklet on Alcoholism

How can a person tell if he—or she—has a drinking problem?

Help in answering that question is offered by a new booklet, *Facing Up to Alcoholism*, produced by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

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