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## **Coping With Conflict in the Workplace**

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[Editor's note: Following are remarks by Charles L. Burnside, executive director of the Texas Junior College Teachers Association, at the TJCTA Conference for Faculty Leaders, held in Austin, September 30, 1995.]

Conflict is not a phenomenon. We should not be surprised - and we're not surprised - to find that conflict is inevitable when more than one person is involved in any enterprise or endeavor. Conflict. It's a real part of our personal lives and a part of our working lives.

The potential for conflict is always present. Conflict occurs in every normal human relationship. Although it may not occur on a daily basis, it certainly occurs often enough-for some of us, much too often. But because it is a recurring part of our lives, we need to focus on how best to deal with conflict rather than pretend it will go away.

In our office, we regularly receive telephone calls from distressed members who are trying to cope with conflict in their workplaces. Most often the calls are from individuals in subordinate positions in the college organization who find themselves in conflict with persons in supervisory positions. Frequently the calls for help involve conflicts with students. Occasionally conflicts have arisen with trustees or regents. Sometimes conflicts occur between peers-two faculty members in a department in disagreement over some issue. There have also been a few, rare instances when deans and presidents and trustees have called our office to discuss conflicts which have arisen between and among various individuals or constituencies within their colleges. Often, a chairperson or president of a faculty organizations calls to discuss a troubling situation that has developed within the faculty or between the faculty and the administration. On many occasions over the years, our Association has been instrumental in helping to resolve conflicts, relieve tensions, reestablish communications, and restore a climate of collegiality at various colleges around the state.

My assignment for this session is to talk about the concept of conflict. Some of you might know that my degree is in sociology. In our introductory sociology course we discuss conflict as a condition of disagreement and disharmony, an attempt to oppose, resist, or coerce the will of others.

### **Three Levels of Conflict**

We have all experienced periods of internal conflict. We are torn between two competing choices, or sides. We feel conflicting emotions in viewing an issue or, perhaps, an individual or a group. We can see valid arguments in support of both points of view. Often, we see conflicting values. Forces of good are embattled against the forces of darkness. Someone has said, "The Lord votes for you, the devil votes against you, and you break the tie." Sometimes we experience "mixed emotions." Under proper conditions, internal conflict can be dealt with in a healthy, positive, constructive way. We decide finally to take a position, for better or worse; or we decide that we don't have a dog in the fight and we don't have to take a position, so we concentrate on other interests and endeavors. Otherwise, like an insidious malignancy, internal conflict ultimately takes a mighty toll.

Interpersonal conflict results when disagreement, ill-will, or distrust develops between two or more individuals. At best, interpersonal conflict leads to "coolness" and tensions in the relationships between the persons involved. If unresolved, interpersonal conflict almost inevitably spreads among other members of the group. Parties otherwise disinterested will be drawn-unhappily and reluctantly-into the conflict out of a sense of loyalty to one or the other individuals in the original conflict. Hopefully, cooler heads will prevail, tensions can be relieved, and a major crisis can be averted.

Institutional conflict involves conflict between groups. These groups may be formal or informal. Sometimes groups are organized for the specific purpose of engaging in conflict, and other groups are organized to counter those efforts. Usually, we find that the competing groups are well-intentioned, firmly convinced of the rightness of their respective positions. For example, in our colleges institutional conflict might find the faculty association and the college administration on opposing sides of an issue or of several issues. Other times the faculty and administration might be together in conflict with the board of trustees. Occasionally, I've observed instances when the entire college family-students, faculty, administration, and trustees-have engaged in an all-out struggle with anti-tax forces over a tax increase or the passage of a bond issue or even the very creation of the college district.

### Conflict May Present Itself in Two Forms

Sometimes...many times...conflict cannot be observed, but it exists nevertheless. We call that latent conflict. Tension and dissatisfaction exist, but there are no visible evidences of that conflict. In the past 22 years, I have visited colleges where latent conflict was virtually crippling to the productive endeavors of the institutions. Faculty members came to the campuses, taught their classes, logged in their office hours, attended required meetings, and then went home and tried to forget the oppressive, repressive, unpleasant, and almost intolerable circumstances that took the pleasure out of teaching. When I have visited campuses like that, I have often said that members of the faculty appear to have undergone radical frontal lobotomies. It's true, to be sure, that a college can run along quite awhile even years in a state of latent conflict. But there's a very real danger in such a situation. Like pressure building in an unvented tank, there is a real limit to the tank's capacity. The results of latent conflict are well known to us all: anxiety, stress, frustration, discontent, disharmony, suspicion, mistrust, low morale, sometimes even physical as well as emotional illness.

If not relieved or resolved, latent conflict leads inexorably to overt conflict. Action takes place; frustration and anxiety are expressed audibly; discontent and disharmony give way to hostility; mistrust becomes distrust; those who have borne their unhappiness privately now find company in their misery. If appropriate and decisive action is not taken to remove, or at least relieve, the causes of conflict, the conflict will almost certainly be played out in ways which, while perhaps providing a temporary easing of tension, pose very grave risks indeed.

By the way, the distinctions between the various levels of conflict (internal, interpersonal, and institutional) and between the forms of conflict (latent and overt) usually are not clearly distinguishable. Rather, they might be seen as stages on a continuum, as circumstances change and intensify, conflict may move from one level or one form to the next.

### Five Myths About Conflict

I should say that in preparing this section of my remarks I have drawn from a booklet by Jerry Wisinski, *Resolving Conflicts on the Job* (AMACOM, a division of American Management Association, 1993).

Conflict is dysfunctional in the workplace. It can be, but it doesn't have to be. If handled effectively, conflict can actually contribute toward the successful accomplishment of goals and objectives within the department, perhaps with other departments, and even throughout the entire college.

Conflict represents communication breakdown. Quite the contrary. People of intelligence and good will frequently interpret the same issues and view the same sets of circumstances in different ways. While conflict might well represent an initial communication breakdown, it can also provide the opportunity to clarify issues or reach more creative results.

If avoided, conflict will eventually go away. Usually not. This is a serious misconception. Minor issues can sometimes resolve themselves, but more often than not, conflicting situations require attention and constructive action in order for them to be managed. All over this state I can point to colleges where presidents or boards or faculties have failed or refused to deal with conflicts, or have attempted to deal with them too late, with disastrous-sometimes almost cataclysmic-results.

All conflicts can be resolved. That would be nice, wouldn't it? However, because the different participants have different values and different priorities, because they view issues from different-albeit honest-perspectives, and because they view their respective obligations and responsibilities differently, there will be times when they simply cannot agree on certain issues. The question then becomes: how do we deal with our disagreements?

Conflict always results in a winner and a loser. Not true. In most cases, there are many possible outcomes to conflicts. As a matter of fact, if the participants are properly motivated by good will and are proceeding with mutual respect, there are very real chances for a "win/win" result.

## Sources of Conflict

I'm considering primarily institutional conflict, though some of these factors certainly might cause internal and interpersonal conflict, as well.

1. Change. By all means and beyond any doubt, the overwhelming majority of calls to our office describing conflicts at colleges around the state reveals that the factor most often leading to conflict is change. It has been said that nobody likes change but a wet baby. Again and again, I have seen a new president roundly and warmly and enthusiastically and sincerely welcomed to a college, and within five years-and sometimes fewer than five years-become the object of harsh, hostile, unrelenting, and crippling criticism. I'm not often asked for advice by new college presidents, but whenever I have the chance, I tell them not to use the word change in any conversation about the college for the first six months.

Change is unsettling, sometimes threatening. Our aversion to change might be irrational. Sometimes change is truly needed long, long overdue. But you can mark this down as gospel: change - practically any change will be met, almost reflexively and frequently unfairly, with dark suspicion if not outright hostility.

Of course, change is inevitable and often highly desirable and, as I said, long overdue. But a new college president who proceeds to revise the policies and procedures manual, or redo the faculty contract form, or revamp the salary schedule, or reorganize the college academic departments, or implement a different system of faculty evaluation is setting herself or himself up for real trouble. Quite likely, assuming the board of trustees was really unanimous in hiring the president, the president can get some - maybe all - of those changes accomplished. But often only at a terrible price. Believe it or not, new college presidents actually have told me that they intend to hit the campus like a whirlwind, initiate in their first weeks changes in fundamental college policies and traditions, and make certain that everyone knows there's a new person in command.

2. A second factor which might cause institutional conflict is conflicting goals and objectives and opposing values and priorities. The goals and objectives of the board might differ from those of the

administration; the goals of the administration might differ from those of the faculty; the priorities of the faculty might conflict with the wishes of the board.

Often, if the interested parties earnestly desire to resolve these kinds of conflict, improved, honest, and good-faith communication can be very helpful.

And let me add here (because this seems to be a convenient place to add it) that all I have said to this point and all I shall say during the remainder of my remarks is premised on an absolute belief that throughout the institution and throughout the educational enterprise from the chair of the board, to the president, through the faculty and staff, to the groundskeeper the foremost concern, the top priority, and the highest objective must be What Is Best For the Students, who in the very truest sense of the term are - or ought always to be - the reason we're here.

3. A third source of conflict is limited resources. Limited resources can mean practically anything: not enough faculty, lack of space, outdated equipment, and, most often, lack of money. These and similar problems can cause institutional conflict by limiting the performance of individuals, departments, and perhaps the institution as a whole. It has been my sad observation that reduced funding or staff cuts or obsolete equipment rarely result in lowered expectations. It is not realistic to expect a full-time faculty of six in a department to accomplish well what formerly required a faculty of ten, or nine, or even eight or seven. Nor is it realistic to expect a faculty to accept a substantial increase in course loads and class sizes and a reduction in real income without murmurs of discontent.

When hard times come to a college as - almost certainly they will at some time or another - the very least the board and administration can do is control the pain, see that the discomfort is spread equitably, and make every effort to enlist the faculty as real, active partners in efforts to cope with the crisis.

## Dealing With Conflict

Now, recognizing that conflict is inevitable, the real issue is how we deal with it. We can't always avoid conflict, nor can we always resolve it, but we can usually manage conflict in a constructive way to some acceptable conclusion. Wisinski (ibid.) suggests five methods of coping with conflict:

1. Competition. The competition approach to conflict resolution is an attempt at complete victory. It is a win/lose approach, a "winner takes all" position. Usually, the focus is on winning the conflict at all costs, rather than seeking the most appropriate solution for everyone concerned.

The ability to argue, a position of superiority or dominance, and the use of coercion and threats are common strategies used in competition.

One might think that competition has no useful place in an academic community. However, there might be times when the win/lose approach is appropriate: For example, in bona fide emergencies (like a major natural disaster, a hostage situation, or a real and sudden financial debacle) when time might not permit the luxury of participatory decision-making. Sometimes the responsible individuals simply don't have the luxury of sufficient time to involve all the appropriate parties in the decision-making process. Such an occasion might be presented when the accrediting association forcefully submits recommendations with strict time limits on their implementation. Or when the Texas Legislature sticks on a weird rider to the appropriations bill requiring some action before the first disbursement of state funds.

Except in the rarest of instances, though, competition is not likely to provide a positive approach to conflict resolution.

2. Accommodation. Accommodation is the opposite of competition. It's the lose/win approach. With this method, you are willing to yield your position to the other person or to the other "side." Again, while this approach is usually not successful in dealing with conflict, there are some occasions when it might be appropriate: For example, when it is more important to preserve a collegial relationship than argue the specific issue in conflict; or when the issue is more important to the other person than it is to you; or, perhaps, when you want the other person to learn from his or her choices or actions. Sometimes accommodation is the only intelligent approach. An honest acknowledgement of the facts of the matter might lead to the frank and inescapable conclusion that the clear advantage rests with the other side, and the better part of valor is a unilateral withdrawal.

3. Avoidance. Here both sides in the conflict withdraw. It is referred to as the lose/lose outcome in managing conflict, because neither side is able even to deal with the issue, much less manage or resolve it. Nevertheless, there are occasions when avoidance might be the approach of choice: For example, when both parties agree the issue is a minor one; or when the negative impact of the situation might be too damaging to both sides; or when additional time is needed to study the issues or to give the parties a chance to cool off.

4. Compromise. The compromise approach to conflict resolution involves negotiation, trade-offs, swapping, and a high degree of flexibility. It is referred to as the win/lose-win/lose position, because both parties in the conflict will get some of what they want, while also giving up something in the process. It is important to decide in advance how much you are willing to give away before the negotiations begin. Certainly, there are some issues on which compromise simply shouldn't even be an option. But these are occasions when compromise offers a positive and healthy method of resolving conflict: For example, in order to reach agreement when both sides have equal power; to find common ground when the parties have competing goals; to attain a temporary settlement of a complex issue; or to reach a solution under difficult circumstances or time constraints.

5. Collaboration. Collaboration is usually considered the best method of coping with conflict. It is called the win/win approach. But be aware that collaboration is the most difficult approach. Collaboration differs from compromise in that collaboration does not require either side to give up a valued position. Rather, both sides honestly seek new and common and, ideally, higher ground. This kind of problem-solving requires an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, the surfacing of hidden agendas, and a genuine willingness on the part of both sides to resolve the conflict. Any hidden agendas or failure to trust or to be honest and open will not lead to the win/win result. In the collaborative approach to problem-solving, or conflict resolution, the parties must be willing to go to the root of the problem. They must be willing and able to empathize, to understand each other's feelings and point of view even though they might not agree with each other. In collaboration, agreement isn't the issue. The goal is to resolve the conflict on mutually acceptable terms.

Now, as was the case with forms and levels of conflict discussed earlier, the methods of coping with conflict really don't lend themselves to tight behavioral compartments. In practice, most likely conflict resolution will require a blending of coping mechanisms perhaps a little compromise and a little collaboration; or maybe a little competition and a little avoidance. When we're dealing with the complexities of human behavior and social interaction, isn't it reasonable to assume that the unique circumstances of each separate situation will require a unique response?

Then, we all know that some people are just-evidently by nature-unpleasant maybe impossible to deal with. That reminds me of a statement by Mark Twain: "Often it does seem such a pity that Noah and his party did not miss the boat."

And sometimes we find that we're dealing with irrational persons. Let me tell you, it is impossible to deal rationally with irrational persons.

I trust that I have presented a minimally acceptable textbook presentation on "Coping with Conflict." The truth of the matter, however, is that hardly ever if ever do the realities of a situation fit neatly and properly within the textbook's outline. No two of your colleges are exactly alike. And within your own college, no two sets of conflicting circumstances are identical. So let me tell you to set the textbook aside and "wing it."

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