

Referee or Team Builder?

The director's role in managing staff conflict

by Yvonne Jeffries

Nine blind men encountered an elephant. Each walked around the elephant, rubbing, studying, and talking to it before announcing, with confidence, his conclusion. Each offered one of the following descriptions: A big city, a giant snake, a flexible spear, a tree trunk, frayed rope, a big fan, a thick rug, a mighty pillar, a solid wall, a wide sail.
— A tale from the oral tradition

There are as many different definitions of conflict as there are reasons for conflict. For the purpose of this discussion, I offer the following definition:

“Conflict is the struggle for some-

thing that is scarce or thought to be scarce. In a group, it may be attention, power, status, influence, the right to fill a role, and so on” (Johnson, 1992).

Do these scenarios sound familiar?

- Barbara and Claire can't stand each other.
- Sarah has the children in her classroom bless the food before they eat.

- Management wants this today and that tomorrow.
- Before Donna can do something, she has to ask a million questions.
- Four months ago, you scheduled the conference room for 2 p.m. today. A red “Do Not Disturb” sign hangs from the doorknob.
- Jennifer makes you uncomfortable because you never know what she is thinking.
- George and Gloria disagree on how to implement the *Parent Literacy Program*.

These situations speak to potential sources of staff conflict: access to and control over resources, differences in individual perceptions, interpersonal relationships, personal versus organizational values, preferences, expectations, communication between and among management and staff, and behaviors and mannerisms that simply get on your nerves.

Given the range of things that can cause or contribute to staff conflict, and the likelihood of workplace conflict, I offer the following principles:

Principle:
Conflict is common if not inevitable.

The familiar tale of the nine blind men who, as shown above, came to nine

different conclusions about the same elephant is a good example of why conflict is so commonplace, indeed inevitable. We, like the nine men, *suffer* from degrees of blindness. This blindness is a result of our own personal experiences, ethnic, cultural, geographic, and religious influences, education and training, gender, age, personality, and other factors that contribute to our interpretation and response to individuals and situations. In addition, the very nature of the organization may make conflict both common and inevitable. An organization's survival, growth, and sustainability are due, in large part, to its ability and willingness to compete in the marketplace. To this end, it:

- Employs individuals for their interest in the work, their expertise, experience, drive, creativity, and willingness to get the job done.
- Expects each employee to work toward the achievement of the mission, promote the values, carry out the mission and to do so in conjunction with 10, 50, or 100 other people, each of whom has his or her own opinions, perspectives, and professional agendas.
- Develops and implements an internal system of distributing rewards and privileges that fosters some degree of competition.

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- Exercises its right to renegotiate and/or terminate its relationship with employees whose performance falls below what it designates as acceptable.

Principle:

Conflict is often an opportunity for constructive change

Conflict occurs when differences in perceptions and perspectives threaten staff's willingness and ability to continue to work towards common goals and desired outcomes. Because of the nature of the workplace and the individual differences mentioned above, one can expect professional disagreements, challenges, lobbying, and other behaviors that individuals may employ to gain acceptance for their point of view. While these interactions can be uncomfortable and disconcerting, they can also encourage discussion, broaden perspectives and lead to constructive change for individuals, groups, and organizations. For example, there is probably more than one way to implement the *Parent Literacy Program*. Therefore, George and Gloria's conflict is also an opportunity to exchange program development ideas, learn more about each other's style of work, and benefit the program and its participants.

Principle:

Conflict is neither good or bad, right or wrong.

There seems to be a general discomfort with conflict, an assumption (maybe even a belief) that people in conflict do not like each other or do not get along. Conflict and anger are often seen as synonymous. Too often, we find someone to blame for the conflict. Directors and staff too often take sides — or are perceived as taking sides. These dynamics reflect a belief that conflict is not good. In conflict, people often display emotions such as anger, frustration, defensiveness, and resistance. This can certainly lead to organizational and individual disequilibrium. But if conflict is understood as part of the learning/changing/growing

process, the disequilibrium is manageable.

George and Gloria's conflict, more than likely, stems from differences in philosophy rather than personal dislike. Both may experience any or all of the emotions mentioned above. Even so, in and of itself, their conflict is neither good or bad, right or wrong. Of greater concern than their emotional response to a difficult work-related situation should be the potential negative, far-reaching, long-term impact their conflict can have on individuals, teams, program participants, and the organization as a whole if their conflict is unresolved or poorly resolved.

The reasons for a conflict tend to be more important than the conflict itself. How many times have you heard, "He's just doing this because he doesn't like her." This kind of remark relegates someone's conflict to the status of a personal problem rather than professional differences. If the conflict is assumed to be personal, professional differences such as philosophical, ethics, historical influences, position in the organization, longevity, and style of work are not considered. For example, it is possible the only reason Donna asks all those questions is to get on your nerves, but that is not the perspective from which a resolution should be approached. Directors do not have the power, responsibility, or obligation to change personal relationships. Directors' responsibility is running the center. Therefore, directors need to concentrate on identifying reasons that might be at the root of the conflict.

Principle:

There are conflict-makers and conflict-avoiders

Conflict-makers and conflict-avoiders represent the extreme ends of a con-

tinuum. There are individuals whose primary purpose seems to be *creating confusion*. Conflict-makers are disruptive. Their interest in *keeping up the confusion* tends to negatively affect their job performance. There are also individuals who will go to almost any length to avoid conflict. Conflict-avoiders are also disruptive. Their interest in *keeping the peace* tends to negatively affect their job performance.

Most of us, however, would place ourselves in or near the middle of the continuum. Most people prefer to work without conflict and when it occurs, want to resolve it as quickly and amicably as possible. But the desire to do so is often complicated by personality characteristics, personal history among co-workers, personal investment in the outcome, and other variables. A director who manages conflict effectively understands how to help employees work through the conflict that occurs and at the same time avoid unnecessary conflict.

There is constructive resolution and destructive resolution. When the goal is constructive resolution, the individuals involved want to resolve the conflict and protect their working relationship. There is high regard for each other's point of view, and the expectation is that the outcome will be an improved working relationship from which program participants will benefit. When the goal is destructive resolution, each person wants to win, even at the expense of others. Consequently, they are not able to focus on life after the conflict. Their resolution behaviors consist primarily of blaming, shaming, and attempting to frame each other as incompetent. While there are probably very few conflicts that are 100 percent constructive or destructive, all conflictual situations have the potential to be destructive.

Principle: Conflict costs

Every person arrives at the workplace with a conflict resolution style that is influenced by how conflict was managed in their family of origin. Some strategies used in personal situations (e.g., not speaking, withholding, telling, walking out in the middle of the confrontation, emotional tantrums, threatening, and saying whatever you think) are not appropriate in the workplace. When we get involved in a conflict, our emotions are triggered. Dealing with the conflict and managing our emotions can be challenging. Efforts to help employees understand how to handle conflict professionally need to begin at orientation and to be reinforced over time.

The cost of conflict varies. Its cost is measured in time, money, productivity, customer and/or employee relations, opportunities, and image. Employees might ask themselves, "What am I willing to let this conflict cost the organization (program, department, team or me)?"

The director who recognizes conflict, does not judge it as good, bad, right, or wrong and deals with it from the perspective of job performance is generally able to keep the cost to a minimum.

Managing staff conflict

Managing staff conflict effectively begins with a clear understanding of how your organization views conflict and how it expects conflict to be managed. This becomes the framework for how directors, regardless of comfort level, manage conflicts.

Effective directors make expectations as clear as possible. They do not concentrate on feelings and the personal aspect of the relationship. They do not focus on changing attitudes. Instead, they help employees problem-solve so they can get at the root cause of the conflict while managing their

emotions. When conflict is managed in this way, employees can afford to view conflict as a natural part of the creative process.

One cannot talk about staff conflict meaningfully without talking about organizational culture. An organization that addresses conflict directly through planning meetings, individual and group supervision, written communication, and policies and procedures, is more likely to resolve its conflicts constructively. When staff at all levels of an organization have authority that is commensurate with their level of responsibility, the potential for conflict decreases and the potential for constructive resolution increases.

There needs to be consistency between an organization's identity and its willingness to deal with conflict. If, for instance, an organization identifies itself as innovative, creative, forward thinking, customer-centered, community-based, and/or relationship-based, it is potentially inviting conflict and must be prepared for the conflict a particular philosophy may generate. Organizational efforts that require staff to cross classroom boundaries, forge new communication networks, promote dialogue and collaboration, implement a new framework, and wrestle with issues around inclusion are taking risks. Change and conflict tend to go hand-in-hand.

There are a variety of conflict management styles. One model describes these styles as avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. The value of each style is determined by the situation to which it is applied. Directors who are responsible for modeling effective conflict resolution need to have the skills to use the style that is most appropriate for the situation, even if it is not the style with which she or he is most comfortable.

Conclusion

Staff conflict is one of the realities of organizational life. Conflict will arise in organizations that are striving to manage day-to-day operations efficiently and effectively and strategically plan for the future at the same time. The question and the challenge is: How does a director manage conflict constructively with the professional sensitivity needed to avoid alienating staff?

Because staff conflict can occur at any time and for a variety of reasons, it might be helpful to remember:

- A director is meant to be a team builder, not a referee.
- Conflict resolution is a process. It begins with hearing each person's point of view and ideally ends when the agreed-upon actions are implemented. People are different. The visible part of a conflict may be over before the emotional part. Keep the focus on the work.
- The level of the organization at which the conflict occurs very often determines how it is handled. However, job title and position should not be the sole criteria for determining how and when a conflict is handled.
- Interpersonal skills are a factor in how a conflict is handled.
- The moment people in conflict begin talking about their differences, they are engaging in conflict resolution and can, with support, resolve the conflict constructively.
- Third party intervention should be used only when necessary. The third party should be selected very carefully.
- Constructive conflict resolution is more difficult to achieve in a win-lose culture.
- Conflict episodes are not behavior problems. They are potential job performance issues and should be handled as such.

- Anticipate conflict and build conflict-resolution strategies into the organizational structure.
- People do not have to like each other to work together effectively. Personalities clash. Sometimes people just do not jell. This does not have to result in conflict. Organizations and individuals have to be careful not to engage in “who likes whom” conversations. Avoid giving the impression that liking each other is more important than working together.
- A key to effective conflict resolution is managing the conflict — not the emotions of those engaged in the conflict. It is not productive to say, “You’re being defensive,” “You don’t have to get mad,” or “You’re too emotional, I just can’t talk to you.”
- Not all conflict situations require the director’s attention. Identify those that do and provide timely intervention.

Reference

Johnson, C. (1992). *Social work practice: A generalist approach*. Boston, Allyn & Bacon.