Managing Conflict in the Academic Setting

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INTRODUCTION
Conflict in the organization is inevitable given the diversity of people’s values, attitudes, beliefs, motives, and goals. Every participant in a conflict situation must decide how he/she is going to manage the situation. Yet, because of the tension associated with conflict and the uncertainty and instability of conflict situations, this is often not done in an effective manner.

For the manager, “managing conflict” may refer to self-regulation of conflicts in which he/she is personally engaged or to intervention in the conflicts of others. Successful management of conflict draws upon three skills which have been identified as fundamental to managerial excellence: (i) ability to innovate, (ii) problem-solve; and (iii) communicate. Innovation or change often fosters some form of conflict and is required in the resolution of conflict; problem-solving skills enable one to deal effectively with conflict; and communications skills assist in the prevention, as well as resolution, of conflict. One could, therefore, argue that the level of success in managing conflict is an indicator of the overall capability of a manager.

The intent of this paper is to assist academic administrators in managing conflict—their own and those of others in their academic unit. Basic premises are that an understanding of conflict, and an awareness of our own responses to conflict, are prerequisites to effectively managing conflict.

THE NATURE OF CONFLICT
Conflict means incompatibility. Conflict may be intrapersonal (incompatibility of beliefs, values, or intentions within an individual), interpersonal (incompatible actions between two or more persons) or intergroup (incompatible actions between groups). Of these different levels of conflict, interpersonal conflict is the most important in the workplace and will be the level at which much of the discussion in this chapter is aimed.

Interpersonal conflict has been defined as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving these goals” (1). Three words are key to this definition: “interaction”, “interdependent”, and “perceive.” Interaction is the most important of these. It means that conflict is never wholly under the control of one individual and that conflict has a tendency to be perpetuated because of the moves and countermoves of participants.

Interdependence is necessary in order for the behavior of one party to have negative consequences for the other, thus producing conflict; but it also is an incentive for cooperation in order that mutual benefits are achieved. Interdependence is, therefore, important to both the formation and resolution of conflicts.

Perceptions of incompatibility and interference, not their existence in reality, are what define conflict. Factors which shape our perceptions of reality, such as interpretations, beliefs, and communications will, therefore, be key determinants of conflict.

The following case study of a conflict situation(2) in a college of pharmacy serves to illustrate the importance of the elements of interaction, interdependence, and perception to the development of conflict.

Department chair, James Brown, is faced with the unanimous vote of the department’s tenured faculty members against Joe Murphy. The decision to deny tenure is one with which he disagrees and is causing him much distress. Joe Murphy has made exemplary contributions to the department in both teaching and research. He has devoted significant time to students and to curriculum revision. He has also been demanding of his classes, a fact for which students have criticized him. At times, in the pursuit of an argument, he has come across as a bit abrasive. But overall, in James’ mind, Joe is the kind of professor which the college needs.

James has been chair for less than a year. At his job interview, both the college dean and president had indicated that the department was particularly weak and that the new chairperson would be expected to provide the necessary leadership to build up the department. He was also informed that tenure could not be awarded to any professor without at least one year’s experience at the university but that, following this period, no problems were anticipated in his case.

James feels that his academic credentials are adequate, although not outstanding. His view is that teachers have a lifelong obligation to participate in scientific inquiry and to stay current in their field but that publication is not the only way in which to do this.

Four of the other six department members are tenured. The other probationary member, much like Joe, shows promise as a researcher and is enthusiastic about his role as both a teacher and researcher. The tenured members are over age 50, carryovers from the time when the tenure process was much less rigorous. Their published research has been sparse. In prior conversations with these faculty members, James got the impression that they resented Joe’s accomplishments. Their expressed criticisms of Joe were that he was overly

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ambitious and aggressive. A couple of them said that the primary mission of the institution was to education and that anyone who devoted so much time to scholarship must be neglecting teaching. Knowing that James was supportive of the kind of work being done by Joe, they seemed to state their criticisms with a defiant tone.

James knows that to recommend tenure for Joe would probably be perceived by the tenured faculty as a rejection of them; however, to support tenure would result in a violation of his academic conscience, a violation of the tenure process, and a disservice to Joe Murphy.

James and the tenured members of the department are engaged in an interaction over the tenure of a fellow faculty member. The action of the senior faculty in denying tenure to Joe Murphy has been perceived by the department head as being incompatible with his goal (and that of the dean) of stimulating academic inquiry in the department. As a result, James is experiencing conflict. Because James does not want his counteraction (his recommendation for or against tenure) to perpetuate the conflict between himself and the tenured faculty, he is very carefully considering what he should do next. It is interesting to note that the action of denying tenure may itself have been a countermove by the senior faculty in response to the threat which they perceived Joe imposed to their academic integrity.

The interdependence of the parties to the conflict is readily apparent. Both Joe and James are dependent on senior faculty for the granting of tenure. The senior faculty are dependent on James' authority in his capacity as department head. Finally, both the dean and the department head are dependent on the cooperation of faculty members if the academic reputation of the department is to be improved.

**DESTRUCTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE ASPECTS OF CONFLICT**

Conflict is destructive if its participants are dissatisfied with the outcomes and feel they have lost as a result of the conflict (3). Destructive conflict has a tendency to expand and escalate. Its negative aspects are numerous. Participants in unresolved conflict are subject to stress which may result in decreased output, increased use of sick leave, unexcused absences, or job resignation. Alcohol or drugs may be used to escape from the stress.

Considerable time, thought, and material (organizational resources) may be devoted to the business of doing battle. Strategies may include rumor propagation, theft, or sabotage. Sabotage, the most serious of these consequences, tends to be used in situations where there is a large imbalance of power(4); it is seen by the powerless party as the only way to “get back” at the powerful party. If a conflict festers for a long period of time, suspicion and distrust will characterize all relations between the parties(5).

Too little conflict can also be classified as destructive because it leads to denial of important differences, suppression of relevant but controversial information, and avoidance or suppression of disagreement. Janis(6) has attributed a number of political fiascoes such as the Bay of Pigs invasion to poor decisions resulting from the repression of conflict in decision-making groups, a phenomenon which he calls “groupthink”.

Constructive conflict results when participants are satisfied with the outcome (3). Even when this is not absolutely achieved, conflict can be constructive by stimulating motivation to solve a problem that otherwise might go unattended, clarifying goals, illuminating alternatives, promoting rigorous analysis, and encouraging creative solutions to complex problems(7). Other constructive aspects of conflict are that it prevents stagnation, stimulates change, and helps establish personal and group identities. External conflict fosters group cohesiveness.

In the case describing a faculty tenure decision, destructive conflict will result if the department head overrides the decision of senior faculty or if he feels that he must accede to their wish to exclude a faculty member such as Joe. Both of these outcomes represent a win-lose situation where only one party is satisfied. If, however, the department head is able to use the situation to change senior faculty’s perception of what constitutes a valuable contribution to the department (without demeaning the value of what they currently are contributing), constructive conflict (i.e., the satisfaction of both parties) may result.

**TYPES OF CONFLICT**

Deutsch has categorized types of conflict according to the correspondence between the situation as perceived by the conflicting parties and the situation in reality (3). This categorization is helpful because it focuses attention on the various ways that conflicts are defined by the parties involved and on the extent to which the nature of the conflict is ill-defined(8).

Vertical conflict exists objectively and is perceived accurately. It might arise, for example, when a single valued reward (such as time off to attend a scientific meeting) goes to one faculty member but not to another. Similarly, the allocation of a fixed resource to one of two individuals with competing claims for the resource can create vertical conflict; for example, when a single valued laboratory space within the college of pharmacy must be allocated to one of two professors who have had long-standing requests for increased laboratory space. Resolution of vertical conflict requires cooperation to establish outcome priorities or to select an impartial mechanism of deciding the outcome (e.g., binding arbitration or flipping a coin).

Contingent conflict exists because the conflicting parties do not recognize that there are readily available alternatives for satisfying “conflicting” needs. In the example used above, if it is recognized that laboratory space, and not laboratory space within the college of pharmacy, is the issue, then available space in the adjacent college of medicine may present an alternative which resolves the conflict between the two professors. Therefore, how a conflict issue is defined affects the probability of mutually satisfactory outcomes.

In displaced conflict, the manifest conflict (the conflict expressed) is not the real conflict. This indirect way of expressing the real conflict may be selected as a “safer” way of talking about conflicts which involve uncomfortable subjects. A senior level professor who criticizes a junior faculty member for maintaining a sloppy laboratory may be indirectly expressing conflict arising from the threat which the
brilliant assistant professor represents to the full professor’s status as a researcher. Displaced conflict may also occur because of general tension arising from an unresolved, underlying conflict between the same two parties or between a third party and one of the parties. The latter case is known as the “kick-the-dog” phenomenon. For example, a department head may yell at a secretary for not typing a letter quickly enough when, actually, the department head is angry because of having been reprimanded by the dean. Filley advises that displaced conflict is handled most effectively by discovering and dealing with the latent issues involved(8). This will require good communication skills, in particular, the use of empathy.

Misattributed conflict occurs when the conflict is between the wrong parties; that is, when a particular behavior has been incorrectly attributed to a party. A student who blames a teaching assistant for an overly lengthy exam is in conflict with the wrong individual if the professor was the sole individual responsible for writing the exam. Misattributed conflict is handled by determining the validity of the attribution and then dealing with the redefined conflict(8).

SOURCES OF CONFLICT

Issues
Deutsch has also categorized the fundamental issues which are at the source of conflict (3). They include: control over resources, such as who should have the laboratory space which becomes available; preferences which create a nuisance or disturbance for another party, such as a professor’s practice of providing vague guidelines for course assignments which graduate teaching assistants are then expected to grade in an objective manner; claims that one party’s value should dominate or be applied generally, even by those who hold different values (for example, a professor who insists that departmental policy should be to use multiple choice questions only on exams); and differences in beliefs about reality when the parties must act jointly in an area relevant to their beliefs or when one party decides that his/her belief should dominate and be accepted by the other (for example, when a professor does not believe that graduate assistants have the expertise to give lectures to undergraduate students and deprives them of the opportunity to do so in his classes).

The authors of one book on conflict management are most emphatic in stating that there is never only one source of conflict(4). This has implications for the search for solutions to conflict.

Conflict-Producing Situations

Many types of organizational situations can create, contribute to, or exacerbate interpersonal conflict. Managers must be able to recognize these situations as they arise. The following discussion outlines many of the organizational situations that may produce conflict(9).

Personality Clashes. Personality clashes are blamed for many organizational conflicts, but questions should be asked about “problem people” which may correct our impressions. For instance, why isn’t the assistant dean who is difficult to get along with at work also difficult to get along with at college parties? Why is there suddenly a disagreement between two faculty members who have worked together for years? The point is that conflict situations blamed on personality in reality may be fueled by something in the work situation or other events in a person’s life.

Work Overload. Another cause of interpersonal conflict is too much work and too little time. Work overload certainly permeates every level of the organization from time to time. A dean may have three administrative meetings to attend, a budget to prepare, a personnel problem to handle, a lunch meeting with an administrator, and a visit from a research agency—all in the same day. Work overload can result in “several different kinds of conflict behavior among individual workers and supervisors, from blow-ups or flashes of anger to a slowing down of the work process”(9).

There are several answers to work overload. For instance, the dean of the college can postpone nonessential meetings and delegate some of his/her responsibilities to subordinates, such as assistant deans, to create a more manageable workload. Sometimes, more clearly defining an employee’s duties can alleviate the seemingly insurmountable volume of work for which he/she feels responsible. Planning adequate staffing for known seasonal variations in workload can also help.

Work Underload. An opposite situation producing similar results is work underload. How can this be? Many individuals welcome an occasional lull in the action in the workplace. For example, workload for secretaries may be low during the holiday season. When these lulls become too frequent, however, employees may begin to harbor feelings of unimportance, resulting in conflict-producing behavior. Conflict may arise if more than one individual is in the area with the underload and one individual has a self-perception of contributing more than others. In an effort to “equalize” workload, employees may devote more attention to creative work avoidance or “dumping” mechanisms than to doing the actual job itself.

Dealing with situations of work underload may require creative solutions by the department head. An example would be to have the secretaries assist in special projects during the holiday season. The department head should remember that subordinates want work assignments that will truly help the department rather than busywork. Explaining the relevance of a task to the department at the time the work is assigned may help create in the employee a sense of contribution rather than of apprehension.

Conflicting Demands or Expectations. Conflicting demands are a frequent cause of interpersonal difficulties. A professor who is in the middle of collecting data for a research project may be asked on short notice to give several lectures for another faculty member who has a speaking engagement. The impossibility of performing both tasks adequately is likely to frustrate the professor.

Situations arising from demand conflict may be resolved using time management techniques. Careful analysis of workload and time commitment is a responsibility of both the manager and employee. Another solution is to have the employee involved in the demand conflict work overtime for a specific reward. This alternative may carry certain negative sanctions such as the cost of overtime payment or (for the employee) resentment if overtime is required too frequently. Regardless of what technique is selected for dealing with work left unfinished as a result of demand conflict, it should be stressed to employees involved that they must continue to exercise judgment in determining
which task is of the greatest immediate importance by consulting with the responsible manager.

Demand conflict also can occur at an interdepartmental level. A course that is team-taught by two departments may stimulate conflict if each department has different expectations about the course objectives.

Responsibility Without Authority. Another common cause of interdepartmental conflict occurs when a manager is given responsibility for a job being done but has little or no control over the task itself. A faculty member may be responsible for seeing that a course is staffed adequately with teaching assistants, however, the financial resources allocated by the dean’s office may not support adequate staffing.

Turner and Weed point out that a situation of responsibility without authority is fairly easy to rectify(9). Either a manager’s responsibility should be reduced and the responsibility given to the person in actual control of the situation, or the manager should be provided the authority necessary to carry out the responsibilities of the job.

Role Ambiguity. When interdependent parties have unclear role boundaries the potential for conflict between them increases. Research technicians conducting assays in a lab may be encroaching on an area which a graduate student perceives as his/her responsibility.

Unresolved Prior Conflicts. Management of conflict without its resolution (through methods such as the use of power or compromise to which parties are uncommitted) may create conditions which lead to future conflict. Feelings of frustration and tension persist even though the overt signs of conflict are repressed.

Line and Staff Conflicts. The terms “line” and “staff” are used to describe two different groups of employees in business organizations. In the college of pharmacy, “line” positions may include department heads who are directly responsible for the day-to-day direction of the faculty and staff. “Staff” positions may include the college’s assistant dean for finances, student affairs, admissions, etc. In other words, staff are individuals whose duties support the activities of the dean but who do not directly supervise department heads.

Supporting staff members who concentrate in their special areas of expertise should complement persons responsible for coordinating the day-to-day activities of the department. Frequently, this is not the case. An operational problem may be brought to the attention of the assistant dean for student affairs that results in this executive’s issuing a new college procedure for handling the task. This new procedure may be incompatible with the realities of the current work situation. When the line supervisors (e.g., department heads) mention this, the assistant dean may insist that the edict be carried out—therefore, conflict results.

Resolving line-staff conflict generally involves bringing both groups together and seeking line supervisor input into decisions made by the staff people. This may require that the dean discuss with each group the scope of authority and duties of those involved. Another alternative is to assign staff personnel periodically to work as line supervisors so they become, and remain, familiar with the realities of the work areas affected by their decisions.

Dead-End Jobs. “Dead-end jobs create some conflict problems, brought about by the worker’s feelings of unimportance, frustration, and boredom”(9). Such positions may lead to low satisfaction with the job and a low level of motivation. Employees tend to develop poor work attitudes, expending as little effort as necessary to complete a task and still avoid the wrath of their supervisor. These individuals also may manifest their conflict by sloppy work, frequent mistakes, frequent absences from the workplace, or repeated use of “I forgot.” They also may seek self-importance by requiring special attention from supervisors or co-workers in order to execute a task. These people derive their job satisfaction from the attention they receive.

This may not be as much of a problem with academic staff as it is with administrative staff. In academia, the career track of assistant, associate, and full professor provides challenge and the potential for growth. However, job burnout and the need for faculty development are becoming increasingly important.

Several solutions exist to deal with the problem of the dead-end job, none of which is particularly easy to implement. Job enlargement can be used, assigning a greater variety of tasks to an individual (being careful, of course, not to create work overload). Job enrichment techniques which increase the complexity, autonomy, or significance of tasks may also be undertaken.

THE CONFLICT PROCESS

Conflict can be described as having two broad phases: a differentiation phase in which latent conflicts emerge and differences between individuals become apparent, followed by an integration phase in which the individuals move toward some solution to the conflict(1). Differentiation consists of a series of stages(2). In the first, latent conflict, conditions exist which are conducive to conflict; for example, competition for scarce resources or lack of control over events affecting a person’s job. The next stage is perceived conflict; it occurs when the involved parties are aware of a disagreement but do not yet feel tense or anxious. Sometimes new information can correct perceptions and terminate conflict at this stage. If not, felt conflict (feelings of anxiety and tension) emerges. This is followed by manifest conflict, open aggression between the conflicting parties.

Understanding conflict as a process that encompasses several stages can assist the department head in diagnosing and dealing with conflict. Early diagnosis of conflict (that is, before it becomes overt) makes dealing with conflict easier. Tucker(2) has suggested that department morale be monitored as an indicator that latent conflicts are emerging. He has identified several factors which commonly contribute to low department morale. They include: salary, teaching load, availability of travel funds, increasing bureaucratization, and feelings of powerlessness over crucial department decisions affecting faculty members’ future. Although a department head may not be able to change the conditions which contributed to low morale, he or she may be successful in changing perceptions of the situation. Other actions which a department head may take to prevent conflict from becoming destructive are discussed later in the chapter.

Differentiation should not be construed as a process that should be arrested at all costs. Adequate differentiation in the sense of a clear statement of each party’s position is
critical to finding a solution with which all parties will be satisfied, that is, to constructive management of conflict. The negative face of differentiation is that it creates tension and, in an effort to dispel this tension, the parties may fall back on habitual decision-making processes (working habits) which are limited in their capacity to arrive at creative solutions(1). Avoidance of conflict or escalation of conflict, that is, destructive conflict, may be the result.

Working habits which are dysfunctional to conflict resolution include entering a discussion with some solution to the conflict in mind, redefining a conflict so that winning the argument or beating the opponent is the major objective, prematurely evaluating tentative solutions to a conflict, using an objective standard to choose the correct solution when choice may be a matter of preferences, and using standardized procedures, such as majority rule, for making decisions when they may polarize participants(1). These habits limit the generation of alternative solutions to a conflict and influence how effectively solutions are evaluated.

The climate of the working group, the use of power, and the concern for saving face are additional factors governing whether conflict will be handled in a constructive or destructive manner(1). Managers must learn to recognize destructive handling of conflict so that they can intervene, either as a participant or as a third-party, to alter behaviors that drive the conflict toward avoidance or escalation.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES
Several classification systems have been devised for conflict management styles. The most prominent of these(10) is based on two dimensions of conflict behavior: (i) assertiveness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy his/her own concerns; and (ii) cooperativeness, the extent to which the individual attempts to satisfy the other individual’s concerns.

The following discussion, based on a paper by Ross(11), presents five conflict handling styles which are described in terms of their position on these dimensions. These styles have also been described by Filley(12) in game theory terms.

1. Competitive. High in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness. Efforts are directed toward defeating the other party. To achieve this end, the competitor uses whatever power is available and acceptable, e.g., information, expertise, persuasion, or coercion. This style has also been called forcing or win-lose.
   Use of a competitive style usually results in destructive conflict because it forces the other party into a losing position. A competitive style may be inappropriate in life-threatening situations or to protect oneself from those who tend to take advantage of noncompetitive behavior.

2. Collaborative. High in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. Each party has a high need to satisfy both his/her own goals and the goals of the other party. A person with a collaborative orientation sees conflict as natural and helpful. He/she seeks to resolve conflict through the use of problem-solving strategies. This style is also referred to as confrontational or integrative. Research indicates that collaborative strategies are associated with better judgments, more favorable organization experience, and more favorable bargains(12). Creative solutions to complex problems are more likely to result from collaboration than from other methods. However, collaboration requires power equalization between parties, a substantial commitment of time and energy, and openness and trust on the part of both parties. Therefore, it may not be feasible or justified in all conflict situations.

3. Accommodating. Unassertive and cooperative. This person gives in to the other at the cost of his/her own goals. This is a yield-lose style, also called smoothing.
   Accommodation may be appropriate if one party is not as concerned as the other, if there is a need to build good will, if avoiding disruption is especially important, or if there is a considerable power imbalance. Use of accommodation to excess, however, may result in feelings of resentment that one’s goals are not being met. In addition, a person who is labeled as an accommodator may find his/her influence, respect, and recognition in the organization eroding.

4. Avoiding. Unassertive and uncooperative. Also called withdrawal or a lose-lose style, it entails removing oneself either physically or mentally from the conflict, i.e., refusing to deal with it. Generally speaking, avoidance is a dysfunctional strategy. Avoidance results in unilateral decision-making which may impair the quality of the decision made and the commitment to the decision.
   Temporarily avoiding a conflict situation may be an effective strategy while the conflict is emotionally charged, if there is not enough time available to come to a resolution, or if the conflict is attributable to a more extensive problem that must be dealt with later. Total avoidance is called for if others, for instance a third-party mediator, can resolve the conflict more easily or if it is highly improbable that one’s needs will be satisfied.

5. Compromising. Intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. Each side gives up something in order to reach an agreement which involves some gain for each. Filley(12) has called this a lose-lose method because neither side really accomplishes what it wants. To explain the use of this terminology, he used an excellent example in which two parties are fighting over an orange. As a result of compromise methods, each party gets half of the orange, yet one party really wanted the orange for juice and the other wanted the peel to make candy.
   Compromise is second to collaboration in degree of total satisfaction produced. It therefore is an appropriate style when collaboration is not practical or fails. It is also appropriate when the parties are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals and neither party has the power to dominate the other. In describing these conflict management styles, we have indicated situations in which each might be used effectively. The selection of the best management style is contingent upon the nature of the conflict, the participants, and the context.

Although this typology of styles is a useful tool for understanding conflict, its limitations should be recognized(1). First, people may be limited in their ability to adopt the style which is recommended for a particular situation. This barrier may be overcome by skill development. Second, these styles refer to the orientation of the individual in conflict; however, conflict is an interactive process. Therefore, the reactions of the other party
to one’s initial approach to conflict resolution may alter one’s intended style. For instance, an intention to collaborate by one party may be met with refusal to talk by another, necessitating avoidance until a third-party mediator can be enlisted.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION THROUGH PROBLEM-SOLVING

Collaboration is the most highly valued and the most complex of the conflict management response styles. We will, therefore, devote some attention to the problem-solving process which is fundamental to this response style. The process is a generic one which the reader has undoubtedly encountered in other discussions of management skills. Its importance to conflict management is that it prevents over-focusing on solutions before the problem is thoroughly understood and the premature evaluation of tentative solutions(1). The method does not ask “Can we accomplish this goal?” It asks “How can we accomplish this goal?”(12)

The following sequence of steps details the problem-solving process as applied to conflict management(12, 13). It is best used in cooperation with your adversaries; however, if this is not possible, it can still be used unilaterally.

Step 1. Define the problem.

? What is the situation?
? What is the desired goal of each party?
? At what level is the conflict rooted (interpersonal, intergroup)?
? Who owns the problem (i.e., who is experiencing the most discomfort)?
? Is the problem significant enough to take action on?

Step 2. State the objective of intervention.

? What is the desired state of relations among parties?

Step 3. Analyze the problem.

? What is the basic issue, i.e., what is the desired goal of each party?
? What obstacles must be overcome in terms of the work group climate, power differences, need to save face, etc.?

Step 4. Identify solutions and resources.

? What means will be used to generate solutions? While the participants are best suited to define the problem anyone may offer a relevant solution. Outsiders may bring a fresh viewpoint, new information, or greater creativity to the search for alternatives. Solution generating techniques which maybe used include nominal groups, brainstorming, surveys, and discussion groups.
? Have as many solutions as possible been generated?
? Has solution generation been conducted without concurrent evaluation of solutions? Initial commentary on a proposal may lead to failure to include it on the list of prospective solutions even though further examination at a later point might have shown it to be feasible. Early judgment may also bias the consideration of solutions in Step 5.

Step 5. Evaluate potential solutions and select the best solution.

? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each solution?
? Is each solution realistically possible to accomplish?
? How acceptable is each solution to those affected by it?
? What is the contingency plan if the selected solution does not work?

Step 6. Implement the solution.

Step 7. Monitor and evaluate the outcome.

THIRD PARTY INTERVENTION

On occasion, a department head will be asked to settle a dispute between two faculty members or two groups within his/her department. Alternatively, he/she may decide that a conflict which has come to his/her attention merits intervention. The manager should adopt the role of third-party mediator only if he/she is perceived as neutral by the other parties. A third-party who is perceived as being involved in the conflict will not be effective(4).

As a third party, the manager must first decide how much control he/she wishes to exert over the conflict resolution process(1). He/she may choose to adopt the role of arbitrator, that is, one who hears all the information, discusses it with each party, and then decides how the dispute will be settled. Another option is to adopt the role of mediator, that is, a third party who is used for his/her special knowledge about the contentious issue but who leaves the final decision regarding how the conflict should be resolved to the parties themselves. A third role is that of facilitator, that is, one whose function is only to manage the negotiation process.

Which of the roles is chosen depends on the attitudes and expectations of the parties involved. For this reason, Folger and Poole(1) recommend that the parties in a conflict and the third party explicitly negotiate a mandate for the intervention which specifies the role of the third party.

The objective of the third-party mediator is to promote an ideal conflict management process. Broadly stated, the third party has two tasks: to sharpen the conflict (i.e., to promote differentiation) and to induce integration. Specific ways in which these tasks are accomplished include (1, 3):

1. Helping the conflicting parties identify and confront the issues in conflict and accept ownership of the problem. The third party should assist the conflicting parties in stating the problem in terms of their needs rather than the solution desired.

2. Helping provide favorable circumstances and conditions for confronting the issues; e.g., a neutral meeting place, an appropriate time (when emotions have cooled), steering discussion away from ‘hot’ issues, encouraging constructive discussion, etc.

3. Helping remove the blocks and distortions in the communication process so that mutual understanding may develop, e.g., seeing that both parties have the opportunity to express their views and translating so that communications are understood the same way by both sides.

4. Helping establish such norms for rational interaction as mutual respect, open communication, elimination of power tactics such as coercion, and the desirability of reaching a mutually satisfying agreement; in other words, establishing the fair rules of procedure.

5. Focusing attention on points of agreement. Any positive connection between the two parties is important in beginning the process of integration. Often conflicting
parties share a common goal but differ over the means to achieve it. When the conflict becomes escalated diversion of attention to the common goal will assist in diffusing tension and redirecting energies along more constructive paths.

6. Helping determine what kinds of solutions are possible (some proposed solutions will be unrealistic) and making suggestions about possible solutions.

7. Helping in the selection of a solution by checking each proposal out with both parties and obtaining counter proposals if necessary.

8. Helping make a workable agreement acceptable to the parties in conflict, e.g., presenting the working agreement in such a way that each side can think it has won a victory, or applying pressure to achieve agreement.

In order to perform these functions the third party must gain an understanding of the problems and needs of the conflict participants. In addition, the third party must be aware of his/her own biases. Robert(13) has suggested that the third party talk privately with each party prior to any session with all parties present. One-on-one discussions begin the process in a less threatening manner and may provide more information than could be gained in a joint session.

MANAGING CONFLICT AMONG GROUPS

“One of the most common ways that managers misunderstand organizational conflict is to attribute difficulties to personality factors, when they are, in fact, rooted in group membership and organizational structure” (14). Intergroup conflict differs from interpersonal conflict in that a group member is not free to act on the basis of his/her personal desires alone. The behavior of group members is regulated by group norms—unwritten rules and standards of behavior. Approaching intergroup conflict in the same manner as a dispute between two individuals is unlikely to be successful because it disregards intragroup dynamics and may actually create new tensions or problems (15).

Conflict can occur among groups defined by function (e.g., professors and graduate teaching assistants), by power differences (e.g., department head and professor), or by societal history (e.g., black-white relations, male-female relations) (14). Functional differences between groups result in different work orientations which may lead to negative stereotypes (e.g., “Clinical faculty do not have adequate research skills.”) which encourage conflict. Power differences between groups suppress communication because the low-power group is afraid of retaliation from the high-power group. Conflict thus is repressed and escalates. Differences due to societal history are by definition institutionalized in society. Because the roots of this conflict lie outside the organization, it is difficult to control.

One approach to the management of conflict between groups prescribes intervention which is matched to the attitudinal, behavioral, or structural aspects of the conflict(14). Accurate identification of symptoms of too much or too little conflict is therefore critical to successful intervention. In a situation of too much conflict, for instance, an attitudinal symptom may be blindness to group interdependencies whereas in a situation of too little conflict the attitudinal symptom may be blindness to conflicts of interest. The managerial intervention in the first case is to emphasize group interdependencies and in the second, to emphasize conflicts of interest.

In a college of pharmacy which is embroiled in arguments over curriculum revision, basic pharmaceutical science departments and pharmacy practice departments may forget how interdependent their courses are in producing a pharmacy graduate who is able to integrate and apply information in practice. The prescribed intervention for the dean in this case would be to emphasize the superordinate goal of producing a competent practitioner and to illustrate how each type of course is useful only as part of an integrated overall body of pharmacy knowledge. An example of too little conflict might occur in a research laboratory where graduate students and laboratory technicians share all aspects of the workload. In this case, a recommended approach would be for the laboratory director to emphasize to each group their different purposes in the workplace and the need for a different allocation of job duties.

Space limitations prevent further elaboration on this scheme. The reader is referred to Brown’s paper(14) which provides matrices of symptoms and symptom-specific strategies for managing intergroup conflict.

Special approaches must be taken to the management of intergroup conflict when there are power differences or societal differences. Power differences require that the manager begin with “evening the psychological odds”(14). For the low-power groups, this means providing trustworthy protection so that complaints can be expressed and for the high-power groups, informing them of the problems that their behavior is creating.

When there are societal differences, covert conflict must be turned into a form of overt conflict in which differences are understood but not exacerbated (14). For instance, the feeling of female professors that they would not be considered for a department head position could be dealt with by adopting a formal policy that both male and female professors will be given equal consideration for management positions.

An alternative approach to the management of intergroup conflict, The Interface Conflict-Solving Model, has been developed by Blake and Mouton.(15). This approach is based upon the principle that “trust in another group’s good intentions is vital for needed cooperation”. The model assists group members in determining the conditions necessary for developing a sound intergroup relationship based on trust and cooperation.

Preconditions to use of the process are the commitment of the level of management which can authorize the implementation of solutions to the conflict and the willingness of both groups to participate. The stepwise process is outlined below:

Step 1. Each group, working separately, develops a model of optimal interactions between groups which is specific to their problems and needs.

Step 2. Jointly, the groups develop a consolidated model of the optimal relationship.

Step 3. Each group, working separately, describes the actual relationship.

Step 4. Jointly, the groups develop a consolidated picture of the actual relationship.

Step 5. Detailed plans for change are jointly formulated.

Step 6. The groups reconvene in three to six months to review progress and plan additional steps if necessary.
Group members participating in this process should include those who have knowledge of the history of the conflict, understanding of its present adverse consequences, and the authority to implement agreed-upon solutions. Neutral outsiders should be present to administer the process. Group members are responsible for the content of the process; ultimately this means the solutions selected. In their book (15), Blake and Mouton provide several case histories which detail the implementation of this model in real-life organizations.

PREVENTING DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

Ground Rules

James Cribbin(5), a noted consultant and professor of management, has suggested that a first step in preventing destructive conflict is for the manager to set ground rules for employees. A summary of Cribbin's rules follows:

1. Members of the organization have a right to criticize departmental policies or operations; however, they also have a responsibility to offer practical solutions.
2. Staff members may disagree on a particular issue or problem, but they are to do so in such a manner that both parties benefit from the agreed-upon solution to the problem.
3. Personal attacks and back-stabbing will not be tolerated.
4. Staff members may like or dislike any co-workers as they desire but such attitudes are not to interfere with the job.
5. Cliques that are antagonistic to one another will not be tolerated nor will efforts to undermine the work of another person or group.
6. Disputes are to be resolved by the parties involved. In the event they cannot reach an agreement, the manager will act as mediator or arbitrator and will act to resolve disputes as fairly as possible.
7. Staff members will be rewarded for helping others with their jobs but nobody will be permitted to get ahead at the expense of others.
8. A conflict, once ended, is history; grudges will not be tolerated.

THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

Organizational change is a significant source of conflict. Managers need to take preventive steps to minimize the level of conflict within the change environment.

"Managers must remember that a change in policy or procedure is not just a paper change, but a change in human behavior which . . . cannot be altered without some resistance" (16). Many reasons exist for resistance to change in an organization. Most of them can be traced back to a basic question asked by all employees, "How is this change going to affect me?" Will the change threaten an employee's role security? Will it result in increased workload for the employee? Will the employee have to change the way tasks were performed in the past? These are questions the manager must ask when planning changes.

Other reasons could contribute to change resistance. Is there a lack of trust between the staff and management? Do staff members and managers/supervisors have the same information about any planned changes? Has input been sought from the employees whose work will be affected by the planned change?

Somani et al. (16) present several suggestions for reducing resistance to change that must be made in an organization or one of its subunits, such as a college of pharmacy. For instance, when planning a change in curriculum, the department head must identify which areas could cause specific problems and must allow enough time for faculty to work through such problems.

The timing for implementation of a program change in a department can be critical in determining success. Change should be implemented during periods of lighter workload and when key people are not on vacation.

Pacing the implementation of the change also will play a large role in determining its success. Somani and his colleagues point out that, "The temptation is to move too fast, but a change that hurries along is perceived as being forced. People who are being asked to change are evaluating that change as it occurs. There should be time allotted for reflection and evaluation" (16). Concurrent evaluation also allows the manager to identify and deal with problems as they arise, lessening their long-term impact on new problems.

Involving employees from different areas of the organization in the planning process enables the manager to hear all perspectives. For instance, faculty and students should be included in planning to alter the curriculum. Individuals tend to support a decision to a greater extent when they have been given an opportunity to provide input.

However, it is not enough simply to seek constituents' input; their suggestions must be used to the extent practicable if their support is to be won. Constituents who realize that their input has been nothing more than an illusion may resist decisions more than if their comments had not been sought.

COMMUNICATIONS MANAGEMENT

Another preventive strategy is the management of communications. Poor communication has been identified as the most important potential cause of conflict in an organization (17). Not only does poor communication lead to increased conflict but, equally as important, it is associated with decreased staff productivity, efficiency, and motivation. Overall, it is associated with increased stress and low morale in the organization (18). A successful manager desiring less stress and conflict along with improved image and marketing of the department or unit will attempt to develop a formal communications program. The purpose of this section is to acquaint the reader with a formal communications program as a strategy to prevent conflict. It is meant to be descriptive, and not prescriptive. Each individual manager must develop and tailor such a program to his/her own needs and environment.

A few general points should be highlighted. As stated earlier, communications is a critical skill for successful management and leadership. It should be considered an "active partnership responsibility" by all those in the organization. In other words, all members of the organization have the responsibility of actively communicating. This communication should include individual goals and objectives, feelings, plans for growth, factors that stimulate motivation, etc.

It is also important that, as a manager develops a communications program, it should be shared with staff and other appropriate individuals in the organization. It is important that all members of the organization understand their role and responsibility in the formal communications
Table I. Sample communications program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Bi-Monthly</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>Bi-Annually</th>
<th>Yearly</th>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
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<td>Small Group (usually leaders)</td>
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<td>Student Body</td>
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<td>Classroom Appearance</td>
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<td>Secretarial/Support Staff</td>
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<td>Small Group</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Large Group (possibly entire staff)</td>
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<td>Faculty</td>
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<td>Faculty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
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<td>Small Group (four-five)</td>
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<td>Large Group Faculty (usually department/college meeting)</td>
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<td>Retreats</td>
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<td>(all faculty, possibly student leaders and staff)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vice-Presidents and/or</td>
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<td>Other College Deans</td>
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<td>Administrative Colleagues</td>
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<tr>
<td>(deans and/or department heads)</td>
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<td>Executive Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>(administrators (administrators reporting to the dean))</td>
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</table>

plan. Such a plan will benefit them individually as well as the organization as a whole. The active development of such a plan communicates in itself the message that the manager regards communication as a priority function for the organization. The above suggestions are a part of a set of general points related to the development of a communication plan. Additionally, the manager should be sensitive to some basic rules for communication. The manager should:

1. demonstrate administrative concern and interest in the employee or individual, including his/her personal welfare and security;
2. develop the concept in employees of the importance of their contributions;
3. give the employee an understanding of objectives, departmental and organizational, including financial objectives, current status, and operation;
4. develop an understanding of expectations and standards;
5. keep employees informed and involved as to new developments;
6. involve employees in decision making; and
7. develop the attitude that communication is a shared responsibility.

Before proceeding with an example of a formal communication program, it is necessary to discuss the informal organizational structure and its resultant impact upon information flow within an organization. Some refer to this as the “network of unofficial relationships.” As a manager, one needs to be aware of the existence of the informal structure within an organization. It is important to not only acknowledge its existence but to understand how it works. The informal organization has its own system for communicating. There are many advantages to this informal channel of communication. It allows members to by-pass bureaucratic policy; it can be creative; it satisfies social needs and allows for the venting of frustrations; it is efficient; and it generally fulfills deficiencies in the formal structure. Awareness of these advantages is important and will enable one to design a complementary formal communications program.

As with any situation, there are disadvantages to the informal network which include a lack of perceived control by the manager; precipitation of conflicting goals; prevention of change/innovation; and communication of false information. The latter can be very troublesome in that false communication and information (“the rumor mill”) can precipitate conflict. To minimize some of the above problems, the manager should take appropriate steps to prevent conflict that arises from the informal network. Recommendations are stated below:

1. Make sure employees know that management recognizes and accepts the informal organization; use it to spread information.
2. Consider the effects of planned action on the informal structure.
3. Try to synchronize formal and informal goals. Arrange work groups to make use of social needs and use informal meetings (e.g., lunches) to accomplish both formal and informal goals.
4. Manage the formal structure so it will not conflict with informal relationships.
5. Do not throw away the formal structure for the informal.
6. Maintain an objective atmosphere where correct information can be obtained easily.
7. Tap the grapevine for information and to give information.
8. “Listen to your staff and appropriate constituents.”

As one begins to develop a formal communications program, one first needs to identify constituents with whom interaction and communication is important for success. For the dean of a pharmacy college, this would include groups within the college, such as professors, graduate teaching assistants, clerical and secretarial staff, department heads,
and assistant deans; groups outside the college, such as other college deans, vice-presidents, other department heads, professors, etc.; and possibly those outside the university who are critical to the college’s success, such as alumni, practitioners, faculty at other colleges of pharmacy, etc.

It is not a difficult task to formalize a communications plan at this point. One simply identifies the topics which should be communicated with the various parties identified above and the frequency of communication with each party. One also needs to think about the form of communication, whether it is to be verbal or written. For some, written communications may be most appropriate, such as a college newsletter for alumni. Again, one should not spend too much time with these details. The fact that the manager is making a special effort to communicate will greatly benefit the organization.

The attempt, in this example, is not to illustrate a complete program for all situations but to highlight areas not often given sufficient attention. Also, an underlying prerequisite of a successful communications program is that it should be consistent. In other words, the manager committed to a communications plan should not deviate significantly from the scheduled activities once established.

Also, the manager needs to be sensitive to the different levels of communication which will influence the type of information conveyed. For example, individual one-on-one discussions with staff result in different messages and information being communicated as compared to small group discussions (four or five individuals). Likewise, small group communication results in different topics and, in general, information exchange as compared to large group meetings. It is recommended that the manager develop a program for each level of communication desired. Table I illustrates such a formal plan as an example.

As one can see from Table I, the communications program requires the academic administrator to plan various meetings with several parties. One quickly may point out the increase in the number of meetings associated with such a plan. However, it cannot be overemphasized that during these meetings the manager will be exercising the three most important functions/skills for successful management of an organization. These meetings are the means by which the manager communicates change and innovation. Additionally, many of the planned sessions/meetings will be devoted to problem solving not only for the individual but the organization as well. Equally important, these meetings will serve as the means to minimize and prevent conflict which is highly time consuming and potentially the source of the underlying demise of an organization. Again, it is suggested that one modify and develop a personal communications program dependent upon the size, needs, and environmental constraints of the organization. However, remember that the needs should not be solely based upon the manager’s perception but the employee’s needs as well.

CONCLUSION

To summarize the major points in this paper, it is helpful to remember the following quotation by Turner and Weed (9): “In a conflict situation, don’t ask ‘who’, ask ‘what’ and ‘why’.” Managers should avoid blaming interpersonal conflicts on “personality clashes”. Such a tactic is an excuse to avoid addressing the real causes of conflict, and the department’s performance will suffer as a result. Managers must be able to recognize the signs of conflict—conflict behaviors—and deal with the conflict in a forthright fashion. Approaching conflicts as opportunities to improve departmental policies and operations rather as ailments to be eradicated or ignored will result in a more productive work force and greater departmental efficiency.”

References


APPENDIX A. EXERCISE IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Identify the types of conflict that you are currently dealing with, or have dealt with, in your department. For each conflict situation, address the following questions:

1. What is your perception as to the problem and source of conflict?
2. What is the perception of the individual/parties involved as to the problem and source of conflict?
3. What have been the behavioral or organizational consequences, if any?
4. What steps have been tried to resolve the conflict? What specific resolution steps have failed and/or succeeded?
5. If the conflict is yet unresolved, what is your next strategy?
6. What steps might you take to prevent similar situations from occurring?

2 The following reading material is strongly suggested as an adjunct to this manuscript: Tucker, A., “Dealing with conflict and maintaining faculty morale,” in Chairing the Academic Department, Collier, Macmillan Publishers, New York NY (1984).
APPENDIX B. COMMUNICATIONS EXERCISE

Outline a suitable communications program for your department. To assist you, answer the following questions.

1. What information do you obtain from your boss?
   a. Is it sufficient and clear?
   b. Is it timely?
   c. Is it difficult to come by?

2. What information do you obtain from your colleagues (other administrators)?
   a. Are you included in the informal network?
   b. From whom do you usually receive information informally?
   c. Do you check your sources?

3. What information do you provide your faculty/staff/department heads?
   a. Do they feel free to ask for information from you?
   b. Are they satisfied with the information they receive?

4. What information do you obtain from your faculty/staff/department heads?
   a. Is it from observation?
   b. Is it from their telling you?
   c. Are you open and available for feedback?

5. What information do you report to your boss?
   a. Is your boss interested, open, and available?
   b. Do you feel he or she understands your difficulties?
   c. Do you report only on major issues or do you have the possibility of ongoing discussions?

6. What information do you share with your colleagues (other administrators)?
   a. Do you offer support to them that may help with their jobs?
   b. What kinds of information do you feel are appropriate to share?

7. What steps can you take to improve your overall communications program?
   a. Have you covered all levels?
   b. Are you in touch with the informal organization?
   c. Have you formally communicated your “communications plan” to your staff?

APPENDIX C. FURTHER READINGS


