

Conflict Resolution in Organizations of Goodwill

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Members of organizations devoted to conflict resolution, peace, justice, equality, and other good-hearted endeavors are often greatly distressed at the conflicts in which they become engaged among themselves. They are sometimes embarrassed, often puzzled, and frequently distracted at the occurrence of such conflicts, and their inability to resolve them with the understanding, mutual respect, and sensitivity they believe to be appropriate.

To foster dialogue on this issue, I will make some observations to help account for these distressing developments and make some suggestions about how they may be ameliorated.

Disputes inevitably erupt among persons cooperating in organizational work. There are some aspects of organizations whose members believe they are striving for especially virtuous goals, however, which enhance the likelihood of conflicts erupting and persisting in a damaging manner.

First, within such organizations conflicts are often not anticipated or accepted as inevitable. Members often feel that since they are all of such goodwill, they will not fight with each other. Therefore, a disagreement is seen as a disruption of the harmony which they expect.

Second, members of such organizations often feel especially safe, working with people they trust and with whom they share ideals. Feeling safe, they may be more open and honest and less guarded; so they do and say things which they expect to be accepted and are especially upset when they are not. Furthermore, feeling safe, they are especially upset when other people whom they believe share their ideals do or say things they regard as hurtful, insensitive, and oppressive. They respond with righteous indignation to these affronts.

Third, some members of such organizations, feeling that they are working so hard and are so devoted to a good cause, they have little patience for those who are not helping them in their efforts. They are demanding of others and at times even intolerant when those demands are not met.

Fourth, such organizations are typically relatively small. Consequently, ongoing intense interaction among a small group of people makes irritations likely and offer little opportunity to escape them. Furthermore, a dispute among even two or three people can quickly involve nearly everyone in the organization, disrupting the organization's functioning.

Finally, in traditional, hierarchical organizations, conflicts are often handled in an authoritarian manner and simply suppressed. Dissatisfied subordinates are often able to dismiss someone in order to resolve a conflict. In organizations of goodwill, such dismissals are readily viewed as acceptable solutions.

So what is to be done? On the basis of my organizational experience and reports about organizations of goodwill, I offer a few suggestions.

First, the inevitability of conflicts must be regularly acknowledged, even (or particularly) in organizations of goodwill. This should be explicitly noted, even in periods of relative calm. The personal growth and improved relations resulting from creatively dealing with conflicts should be celebrated.

Second, training about conflict resolution skills should be encouraged or even required of organization members; the training certainly should be readily available.

Third, at an early sign of tension and emerging conflict, one of the protagonists should discuss the value of meeting to discuss the dispute, most likely with an unofficial intermediary they both would accept. Another relatively informal procedure is for one of the antagonists to approach a possible intermediary and solicit help in interrupting the conflict. Even more preventively, a colleague's joining a meeting when tensions may get high can facilitate good listening and at least civil interaction.

Fourth, relatively formal mediating procedures may be utilized. If the organization is large enough, such procedures may be instituted by a unit within the organization. Otherwise, a mediating agency outside the organization or a person from such an agency should be requested to offer some assistance. Any stigma about using mediation should be countered.

Fifth, insofar as possible within the organizational structure, the people involved in carrying out actions should be involved in making decisions about those actions. While fostering participatory decision-making, the reality of power differences should not be denied.

Finally, a culture in which people validate each other and express thanks and appreciation for the tasks done well should be developed. The use of humor in the form of "put downs" should be discouraged. Anyone can foster such norms by modeling them. Expressing appreciation of others builds a reservoir of goodwill which can help positive relationships survive inevitable strains and tensions.

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