

Working With Conflict

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Summary

This paper looks at conflict from a developmental perspective. It presents multiple levels, or paradigms, for understanding conflict and underlying concerns at each level. It presents a flexible model for making interventions, based upon matching the method with the level at which the conflict is understood by the parties involved.

Introduction

As a facilitator and consultant working in conflict situations, I am often asked, 'what is the best method for dealing with conflict'? The answer (of course) is, 'it depends.' What I mean by this is it depends on the situation, the people involved and how they understand or define the conflict.

Conflict is one of those every day words that we imagine is understood by everyone. Or is it? What exactly do we understand conflict to mean and how does that differ from other people's understanding?

For example, psychotherapists may see conflict as primarily an internal struggle based on our personal history - which is then played out in relationships, organisations and even global politics. Sociologists may see conflict as a symptom of the social and structural inequities in our world. Other professions, such as law, management, police, etc, each have their own way of understanding conflict and have well developed methods for making interventions.

So when you think of conflict in your environment, what do you think of?

Do you see it as threatening?

Is it struggle between right and wrong, good and evil?

Or is it the struggle for intimacy?

Is it a natural consequence of differences and opportunity to deepen relationships?

Is it evidence that our social and power structures are distorted and not in harmony?

Does it prove that our group is healthy enough to engage with differences?

Perhaps it is a synchronous and meaningful signal that something in the wider system needs attention?

How does the experience of conflict feel to you? Is it painful, frightening, or perhaps a little exciting?

How we answer these questions says something about how we understand or 'make sense' of a conflict, and says as much about our own ways of thinking as about the conflict itself.

So when I am considering how best to be helpful as a facilitator, I try to find an appropriate intervention - one which matches the mindset in which the conflict occurs. I can only be effective if what I'm doing makes sense to people. So I use different types of interventions, which have different underlying assumptions, depending on how people are making sense of the situation.

Some conflict theorists assert that their model is universally applicable. I have found that this not the most useful way to approach working with conflict. The 'one technique fits all' approach has limitations. No one approach is optimal in all settings. To quote Maslow, 'People who are only skilled with a hammer tend to see every problem as a nail.'

A Developmental Model

People's ways of perceiving and making sense of their world changes and develops over time and with experience. How you describe your conflicts today is likely to be different than how you would have 10 years ago, and will likely be different again in the future. If we are learning from our experiences in life, then our perceptions are not going to be static.

In the field of developmental psychology, there are a number of models and maps of how adults think and develop in their consciousness and ability to make sense of world around them. For further reading on this topic I recommend the works of Robert Kegan¹ and Bill Torbert².

¹ Kegan, R. In *Over Our Heads, The Mental Demands of Modern Life*

² Torbert, B. *Action Inquiry*

For example, imagine you stand outside the cinema and ask people who just saw the film Star Wars to tell you what it is about. A child might describe each scene, re-telling you the story they have just seen, but without offering a unifying theme. A teenager might say that it is an adventure film about the good guys versus the bad guys. An adult might say that it is about an archetypal struggle between good and evil that the young hero must wrestle with as part of coming of age. Each report of the story would be accurate, yet reflects very different understandings of the story.

The same is true for the stories we construct about our conflicts. How we tell the story of our conflict gives clues as to the state and stage of consciousness from which we view it.

Conflict and the Stages

The model outlined here identifies 3 stages of an individual's thinking, as applied to conflict. Each stage builds upon the previous one, increasing its complexity. The basic idea is that as we move through each stage of development we include and transcend that way of viewing the world.

At any given time in our lives, we will be primarily (although not exclusively) operating from one of these stages. We may also temporarily regress from more complex thinking to earlier stages of development, especially in stressful situations. The challenge is that conflict is often stressful, which means that our ability to use our most developed thinking may be affected by it.

The Pre-conventional Stage: Conflict Management

Our evolution has honed our instincts for survival and our ability to sense danger. Where we perceive threat or danger, we react instinctively. The main issues of this stage of consciousness are survival and safety. While this response makes perfect sense when faced with actual physical danger, conflicts in our modern world are often more subtle and complex than this. However, at this level we are attuned to any signal of threat – whether actual or imagined. The perception of threat can trigger a whole set of reactions.

Sometimes, conflict brings with it increased energy, emotional agitation and raised voices, which can trigger our sense of danger. Conflict may be experienced as extremely stressful or frightening. It is no wonder that people seem to 'overreact' to conflict situations. Their reactions appear to be out of proportion to the events because what is operating mentally is a whole set of assumptions (often unconscious) about the nature of conflict. Feelings of being unsafe can trigger habitual responses to conflict such as aggression, passivity or freezing, people pleasing, blaming, projecting, manipulating, etc.

For people who usually think at more complex stages of development, the experience of conflict (and the personal history that it can trigger) can cause these same reactions, temporarily preventing them from having access to the more creative and complex thinking that is otherwise available to them.

Individuals who are thinking at this level tend to see conflicts as being caused by forces outside themselves. They will identify only with their own side of the issue (the right side). Others are easily labelled and stereotyped. They are to blame for the problem.

In the context of societies and nations, this way of thinking extends to national, ethnic and religious conflicts. Variations on the 'they are bad, we are good' theme can be found in the stories (histories) and sense making mechanisms of both sides of the conflict.

From this perspective, conflict is usually viewed as a negative force, which must be controlled, managed and prevented.

The most basic intervention with conflict at this level of is to establish safety. Facilitation may focus on de-escalation – or turning down the heat. The emphasis is on safety, and holding appropriate boundaries. The style of the interventions tends to be directive and educative.

Understanding how to intervene at this stage is important for frontline staff in public services (e.g. a hospital) However, facilitators may also find that they have to manage the pre-conventional responses in their groups during conflicted situations.

The Conventional Stage: Conflict Resolution

The issues that are stimulated by conflict at the conventional stage are more complex than at the pre-conventional stage. The primary issues at the conventional stage have to do with personal identity and sense of self. The underlying issues evoked in conflict are likely to be about personal values and beliefs, self-esteem / self –image, rank and power and belonging.

At the conventional stage, the volatile emotions of the pre-conventional stage tend to recede and a more rational (at least on the surface) approach is adopted. While the emotions are still felt, they are more likely to be contained than in the pre-conventional stage.

Conflict may be experienced as a threat to one's values, position or status, rather than a threat to survival. Conventional thinkers understands that there are other points of view besides their own, yet tend to think in terms of who is right, and the degree to which they are right or wrong. People may become fixed in their positions, having difficulty understanding other points of view.

Conventional approaches to facilitation are often referred to as 'conflict resolution.' They may include interpersonal and group negotiation and mediation, stressing the inclusion and understanding of multiple needs and points of view.

Conflict resolution methods promote peoples' ability to recognise that other perspectives not only exist, but also have some validity. They also ask people to differentiate their internal states of feeling as distinct from external stimuli. So, for example, the pre-conventional statement 'he makes me angry,' becomes 'when he is late for a meeting, I feel angry.' The second statement separates internal from external and focuses on specifics rather than generalisations.

Intervention models such as Harvard Negotiation, Mediation, Dialogue, Non-Violent Communication and others, view conflicts in terms of the interaction between different subjective identities, each with its own sense of truths and needs. They assume multiple contributions to creating the 'problem', including one's own personal psychology. The goal of these types of intervention is to deepen understanding of the underlying issues in the conflict, and to find win/win solutions.

These methods rely on peoples' ability to self-reflect, something which may not be possible at the pre-conventional stage of thinking. The techniques can be highly effective when people have the internal capacity to apply them. However, these techniques may not work in pre-conventional settings. "You can't talk to a man with a shotgun in his hand" - Carole King, *Smackwater Jack*

The move from pre-conventional to conventional understanding of conflict requires a paradigm shift – from being a victim of an objective external reality to being a responsible, self-reflective co-creator of multiple subjective realities.

While the style of intervention in the pre-conventional stage is that of positive authority, the style of interventions at this stage is more of a mediator, guide, facilitator or coach. The approach is partly instructive and directive, and partly facilitative. Contracting is a collaborative activity, with all parties sharing responsibility for setting the agenda, agreeing the terms for working on specific issues and the goals. It is important that any solutions are 'owned' by the parties involved in the conflict. This may be independent of (and sometimes parallel to) any formal, policy driven conflict procedures (which tend to be pre-conventional style interventions).

Regular application of these methods can increase the level of a group's emotional intelligence, and understanding of the diverse perspectives it has. This tends to improve communication, reduce tensions and increase cooperation. Over time, the self-reflection required to engage creatively in conflict resolution increases the quality of peoples' self-awareness.

The Post-Conventional Stage: Conflict Transformation

Moving to the post-conventional stage requires another paradigm shift – from seeing the world from our personal perspective to seeing the world

systemically. At this level, an individual not only sees their own view and that of the other, but also recognises that in their complex inner world, part of themselves holds the same view as the other (and vice versa). While the roles may temporarily polarise in conflict, it is with the understanding that these roles are integral parts of a whole and do not belong exclusively to any individual. This creates more fluid movement between positions when exploring an issue because people tend to be less identified with only one position.

At this level, the issues shift from identity on a personal level to shared meaning, on a systemic level. This level of thinking becomes less literal than at the conventional stage and more metaphoric. The search is for making meaning in the larger sense. Often it is stories that articulate essential, paradoxical truths of whole systems.

In a post-conventional environment, conflict is not seen as either a threat or a problem to be solved. Conflict is a natural and expected occurrence. It is part of a natural cycle of change, which can point to what needs attention in the system. Conflict is seen as an opportunity for a constantly changing environment to reflect on itself, learn and unlearn.

From this point of view, the polarities of right and wrong, winning and losing become less relevant. So people tend not to take it personally when they disagree. The quest for the greater meaning of things is seen as more important than holding a position or being right. Post-conventional groups recognise the dilemmas of multiple realities and have a high tolerance for uncertainty and paradox. They recognise that identity is neither static nor singular.

When conflicts are viewed systemically, rather than personally, interventions tend to also be at a systemic level. This may involve exploring contradictions between different parts of the system in terms of meaning (archetypes and metaphors), values, strategy, roles, etc. Interventions at this level tend to be non-directive as the distinction between roles of helper and helped becomes less obvious.

The approach is process oriented. New perspectives are emergent, unknown and unknowable in advance. They are derived from a process of retrospective sense making, based on reframing what we know and by creating conditions for accessing different information. Conflict transformation comes from gaining new understanding of the context in which the conflict occurs. This change in meaning we attach to the different part in the conflict, transforms our understanding of what is actually conflicted. This allows conflicts to be integrated, rather than solved.

Making Sense at Different Levels

At a pre-conventional stage, the thinking creates distortions in one's perception of reality, based on how a person believes the world to be. Without the ability to self-reflect, it is difficult to assess the sources and quality of the information that is used to make sense of the world. Therefore, one can easily become convinced of the truth of one's self-created stories.

At the conventional stage, the self becomes more differentiated and one is able to see that there is a process of creating meaning, based on both external and internal sources of information. The meaning of something is therefore subject to question, as is the process for arriving at the meaning. This ability to think rationally about a problem, and one's own part in it, implies self-reflection and the awareness that one's own point of view is not the only legitimate one.

As people move towards the post-conventional stage, one of the challenges is the limitation of linear thinking. Post-conventional thinking recognises that there are non-rational and non-linear ways of making sense. For example, active imagination, synchronicity, intuition, dreams, myths and legends, etc, can all be legitimate sources of information. In fact, breakthrough innovations and inventions often happen by these means.

From the conventional point of view, the non-rational, non-linear ways of thinking may be viewed with suspicion. Post-conventional thinking may be dismissed as 'fluffy' and unscientific because it is not really understood. The dominant paradigm in our society, and especially in professional environments, is conventional. Post-conventional people may experience intellectual isolation and difficulty communicating their ideas so that others understand them. Yet, the post-conventional person is able to assess complex information, and make choices about what is useful. Post-conventional thinking is therefore both rational and non-rational.

Where a large and complex organisation is trying to make fundamental changes, it is the post-conventional people who are most likely to think from outside the existing culture and therefore be able to create fundamental cultural change. Training and development at this stage is trans-disciplinary, drawing perspectives from sources such as social complexity, integral theory and depth psychology. Paradigm shifts cannot be taught by conventional means. However, it is possible to create conditions where more people get the 'aha' experience.

People are Multi-level

As with any model of psychological development, the fact that an individual moves from one stage to another stage does not necessarily mean that they are no longer influenced by earlier stages.

People may temporarily regress to earlier stages of their own development from time to time. This is especially true under pressure. As the saying goes, 'under stress, we regress.' Children sometimes play at being younger (earlier stage of development) than they are. Adults also do this, consciously or unconsciously. This 'regression' can be triggered by situations that stimulate familiar roles from the past, for example when adults visit their parents. It is also more likely to happen when people are feeling threatened or attacked.

For example, we sometimes replay in our minds an argument or confrontation after the event. In our imagined reply, we become much more articulate and skilled in making our case. We then think, 'I wishing I had said '. This is the momentary freezing that commonly happens in conflict. It is a temporary regression.

Conflict can be stressful. It can threaten our sense of security, whether that is the security of personal safety, our position in an organisation, or the security of our own sense of identity and value. It can evoke feelings of traumatic past situations. So our habitual responses to conflict may be at a less developed level than when we are not feeling threatened. Our level of thinking is unlikely to be a fixed state from which we engage with all situations.

For example, an individual may be post-conventional in her thinking and behaviour in a meeting with trusted friends or colleagues. Then, in another meeting where she is feeling under attack, this post-conventional awareness may not be available to her. Instead, she may be caught in responses and thinking that is characteristic of an earlier stage of development. The temporary change in her consciousness may be triggered by the perceived threats (explicit and implicit) within the meeting.

Just driving in a large city, with other drivers pulling in front of us, stealing our parking places, causing us to miss green lights, etc., is enough for me to change my consciousness!

Conclusion

The developmental stages model provides a framework from which to view different kinds of conflict interventions. These stages, or paradigm frames are useful as a starting place to find a more flexible and effective approach to conflict work. I believe good facilitation is the ability to both work with people where they are, and help them to accelerate their development.

Ben Fuchs

Ben has more than 20 years experience working internationally as a psychologist, consultant and conflict management specialist with private and public sector organisations. His pragmatic approach to the complex realities of organisational culture and politics have helped him to be effective in a wide range of environments. He has designed and led programmes in Central America and Northern Ireland, bringing together former combatants and community leaders, in a process of dialogue and reconciliation, to build social cohesion in the wake of violent conflict.

As a co-founder of CATeams, Ben's passion is in going beyond business and politics as usual, helping organisations to become more successful through maximizing the potential of their leadership and teams. A continuous learner, he draws inspiration for his work from sources in social complexity science, social psychology, behavioural economics, neuroscience, linguistics and ethics.

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FRAMEWORK FOR WORKING WITH DIFFERENCES AND CONFLICTS	Core Issues	Metaphors / Beliefs	Models / Methods	Approach / Style Of Training & Interventions
Post- Conventional	Meaning / shared meaning Sense making Multiple realities / truths Uncertainty	Conflict as opportunity Problems are systemic Beyond win / win Emergence Values orientation	Conflict transformation Social Complexity Systems thinking Depth Psychology	Facilitator Interpretive non-rational Process oriented Paradoxical Multi-disciplinary
Conventional	Identity Self-esteem Use of power /status Competence / credibility Image / reputation	Conflict as threat to identity Problems are internally and externally created Win / Win outcomes	Conflict resolution Mediation Negotiation Dialogue	Mediator/Guide Semi-directive Empathic Rational
Pre-conventional		Physical / emotional safety Violence (or threat) Abuse of power Post-traumatic stress	Conflict management De-escalation trauma counselling Rule of law Policy creation and enforcement	Positive Authority Directive and instructive Visible control Holds boundaries