

## **Workplace Conflict: Competing Narratives & the Symbolic Frame**

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Each workplace is a system. Change can cause unanticipated results, as with any system.

The drivers behind workplace conflict are usually over-determined. There is richness and complexity in the network of relationships, dreams and fears of managers, owners and employees that make up the workplace.

We struggle in organizations to arrive at an accurate way of seeing ourselves. We analogize. We compare the organization to a family, a sports team, a combat unit. Each of these comparators is well worn. Each reflects an imperfect understanding of the system.

The conflict management professional entering the system needs to be alive to the way the organization sees itself. In its own mind's eye what is it?

Obviously the organization is not a mind. It is made up of many minds, many eyes. These ways of seeing are best understood in the symbolic frame. There are dominant and subordinate narratives at play. Each image, each narrative brings with it a particular set of expectations.

Managers, employees, owners draw from each analogy (and others) as it suits them at any particular time and in any particular situation. The narratives, the symbols are fluid.

All are fictions. As conflict management professionals we understand that perceptions when held by many act like facts. Sometimes they are much more important than facts in understanding the behaviours of individuals and groups within the organization.

Those approaching workplace conflict need to recognize the symbolic power of each analog and each narrative and of the expectations birthed through them. We need to understand and draw from our experience with each of these ways of seeing. Meaningful, lasting impact on the workplace culture must occur in both the symbolic and substantive (at the end of our fingertips) frame.

This understanding is central to the development and design of excellent conflict management training and facilitation.

### **Approach & Attitude**

The place to start, because one's effectiveness flows from this.

A posture of curiosity with its openness to discovery (even the discovery that our assumptions about the other may be wrong) serves to make us effective.

The enemy of good conflict management practice is judging. Judgment (in the sense of placing oneself in judgment of and over the other and their actions) clouds our vision and prevents us from seeing and hearing clearly what is going on.

Curiosity is a form of self-discipline. It requires standing apart, thinking and being rigorous with ourselves and our thinking.

Judging is a form of giving over to self. It feels good. We can almost feel ourselves smile with that lovely sense of self-satisfaction and apartness that feels so safe, so contained.

The problem is that the workplace, the organization, is a system. In order to effectively interact with it we must engage with it and with its complexity. Judging gets in our way of what is real and true for the other. It feels great and it impairs our effectiveness.

Neither we nor the organization can afford the luxury of judging too often. As with many things in life, we are faced with a stark choice:

“Shall I be *right*, or shall I be *effective*?”

Conflict competence requires us to be brutally honest with ourselves when asking this question. In making the choice to be curious, most often we are making the choice to be effective with the other. Conversely, choosing to judge defers the opportunity to be effective in favour of the ecstasy, the satisfaction, the indulgence of being right in our safe, small little world.

A wise person understands and makes the choice strategically, fully aware of its impact and consequence.

Attitude and approach need to precede knowledge and skill. A sound attitude and approach can withstand imperfect understanding (knowledge) and poor technique (skill), still producing remarkable results.

Flawed attitude and approach seldom produces durable, authentic results that will stand the test of time. Faced with sincere curiosity most will work with us to make up for our technical weaknesses and imperfect knowledge. Arrogance and judging seldom produce the same outpouring of good faith from the other; it's just how we're made. Leonard Cohen said it best:

Forget your perfect offering. There's a crack, a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.<sup>1</sup>

## **Knowledge**

A fully competent conflict manager must struggle to be fully human, present.

A solid grounding in what empirical research about conflict tells us about conflict and the (mostly) predictable responses that humans have to it. It allows us to see and hear how we 'story', how we make sense of our experiences. This understanding is essential to guide us through the seemingly intuitive moves we make to engage the other in the 'dance' of problem solving.

Excellent conflict management training includes models and tools that help us to analogize, simplify and conceptualize complex human responses. These models and tools serve as way-finders. We are guided by them, as well as our curiosity, humility and respect for the other, through what can be a maelstrom of emotions, both ours and theirs.

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<sup>1</sup> *Anthem*, Leonard Cohen

## Skills

Because we are curious, because we suspend judgment and hold that space open, we incline toward questions. Excellent conflict management training teaches, demonstrates and makes opportunity for the practice of leading a conversation through the use of questions. To borrow a truism from the world of negotiation and sales training:

“When you’re telling, you’re *not* selling.”

Participants learn about the different kinds of questions, their purpose and use. Some questions are powerful in the way they gather information. Other questions are used powerfully, but to *convey* information. Still others are used to challenge, invite or even demand reflection. We have yet to find the human being who is more convinced by what we say than what *they learn* through the use of a well-considered question.

We all treat *our* experiences, *our* reasoning as the most reliable authority. Genuine curiosity, observation and reflection demonstrate this.

One learns how to properly frame ones questions and comments in mutual language. This frames the other *into* and not *out of* the conversation.

We discover that it is not enough to show we have understood the data component of a message. Empathy, sympathy and acknowledgement are the skills that carry the emotional freight of problem solving.

Excellent training in dealing with conflict will also provide one with analytical tools and the ability to break the molecules of positions into their constituent parts, the interests that you and they both have. These interests are workable, less awkward and more elemental than positions which are just one solution to a problem.

Excellent conflict management is artistry in motion. Like a fine piece of music, dance or poetry it has themes, movements, and finally a satisfying resolve.

Become an artist. Allow us the privilege to work with you to discover your genius for this important work.