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"Looking at the Earth from afar you realize it is too small for conflict and just big enough for cooperation."

YURI GAGARIN, COSMONAUT

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

After 20 years in the trenches mediating conflicts, especially in organization and team settings, I've learned a few things about relationships. You get to see it all-the good, the bad and the ugly.

STORY CONTINUED INSIDE...

by PATRICK O'NEILL

Conflict transformation goes beyond conflict resolution because its goal is quite different. It seeks to address the contextual issues and the content issues. The goal of conflict transformation is to create stronger relationship between the parties as a result of the conflict.

CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Story continued from front cover

PATRICK O'NEILL

Conflict costs organizations multi-billion dollars every year. And that figure doesn't include the hidden costs resulting from productivity failures, organizational dysfunction and increased health costs that accompany fear, aggression and stress in the workplace. That could easily carry the figure into the trillions. U.S. mediator Stewart Levine offers some startling statistics:

"In 1994, 18 million cases were filed in U.S. courts at a cost of $300 billion. 20 per cent of Fortune 500 executive time is spent in litigation related activities."

In an article, entitled The Cost of Conflict in the Workplace, James A. Cram and Richard K. McWilliams maintain, "…some experts believe that unresolved conflict represents the largest reducible cost in many businesses, yet it remains largely unrecognized."

And the Center for Creative Leadership identifies lost time, turnover, grievances, absenteeism, poor decision making, dysfunctional collaboration practices and a poisoned workplace as the fallout from unresolved conflict.

Not only is conflict rising; violence is reaching new and epidemic proportions. Every year, in the United States there are an average of 20 murders and 18,000 assaults at work! Bullying is also on the rise. A U.S. study estimates that "one in five American workers has experienced destructive bullying in the past year." Over 80 per cent of the bullies are identified as bosses and both men and women are equally likely to bully.

Compelling evidence indeed to suggest that leadership is urgently required to fix relationships at work if we hope to remain productive and competitive in the global marketplace.

Conflict resolution is the ability to resolve issues that separate the conflicted parties. However, resolution seldom goes far enough. While it may resolve the content, or conflicted issues, it often fails to address the context.

The context of every conflict is the state of the relationship. If relationships are strong and there is a solid foundation of trust, conflict can be resolved more easily. Where relationships are weak, the opposite is true. Mistrust and negative dynamics easily escalates into aggression.

Conflict transformation goes beyond conflict resolution because its goal is quite different. It seeks to address the contextual issues and the content issues. The goal of conflict transformation is to create stronger relationship between the parties as a result of the conflict.

There are five steps to conflict transformation:

1. Personal Responsibility

The first transformation that must take place requires a personal journey from blame, accusations and righteous indignation to recognizing that there are always different perceptions in a dispute. Each party is responsible for significant contributions to the dynamic. Rather than focusing on what the other person has done or said, taking personal responsibility requires that one recognizes and focuses on their own contributions and the impact that their words or deeds have had on the other party. This is maturity work.

2. Creating the Right Conditions

Most conflicts remain unresolved or escalate because the conditions that supported the conflict remain the same and sabotage the attempts at solution making. When people are angry, frustrated or afraid, they require a high degree of clarity about the dispute resolution process so that they can trust that the conditions for conversation will be supportive and safe. Agreements about the agenda, the roles and responsibilities of participants, and especially behavioral guidelines are vitally important in the conflict transformation process. The recovery of mutual respect and the restoration of trust require the right conditions for success.

3. Finding the Third Story

Each of us experiences organ failure in conflict. The eyes and the ears fail first. When listening fails and rigid viewpoints take hold, conflict escalates. What

makes us blind and deaf is the need to be right. We think our version of events is the only correct version. As a result, we see the evidence that supports our position and ignore or dismiss that which does not validate our point of view. Little can be gained from fixed perspectives.

Conflict transformation requires a focus on what the Harvard Negotiation Project terms the "invisible third story." The third story requires that we look at the dispute like an impartial mediator, as objectively as possible. Instead of searching for blame, the goal is to identify how each person has contributed to the dynamic, recognizing it is co-created. The third story is the hidden information. Within assumptions, reactive conclusions and misunderstandings are the differences between intentions and the actual impact of words and actions. The French jurist, Francois Garagnon lays it out with droll accuracy:

Between what I think, what I want to say, what I believe I am saying, what I say, what you want to hear, what you hear, what you believe you understand, what you want to understand and what you understood, there are at least nine possibilities for misunderstanding.

> **"We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living."**
>
> GENERAL OMAR BRADLEY

4. Managing Creative Tension and Compression

Conflict generates a mood or atmosphere that creates high degrees of instability and volatility in the dispute resolution process. This mood is caused by two conditions–creative tension and compression.

Creative tension is the suspense that comes from opposing viewpoints without the guarantee of a resolution. It tests the parties' commitment to remain engaged in the resolution process until creative solutions can be identified. If that commitment fails, "snapping" occurs. When someone snaps, the force of creative tension has overcome his or her ability to handle the situation. The resulting behaviours include yelling, accusations, defensiveness, aggression and displays of over-the-top emotion.

Compression is the force that "condenses, squeezes, and restricts." Compression creates the illusion that there is insufficient time to work through difficult issues and injured relationships. When a party to the conflict cannot manage compression, he or she becomes expedient and usually attempts to preempt or hijack the process. This leads to "buckling." Buckling is what happens when the force of compression shortens the time required for true resolution and leads to failure of the process. When this happens, people usually settle for less than what they wanted or needed. This is a compromise that feeds conflict and resentment. Or, they move into denial, band-aid over the problems and hope they go away. They never do.

> **"Uniting is a greater and more deserving art. An artist in uniting would be welcome in any profession, the world over."**
>
> GOETHE

Creative tension and compression are always present in a conflicted dynamic. They can both be managed through practice and skilled facilitation.

5. Search for Mutual Gain

Mutual gain is the ability to address both the content and context issues in a dispute to the mutual satisfaction of the parties involved. This requires a clear commitment to searching for creative ways to satisfy hurt feelings, recover mutual respect and address the needs of those involved in the conflict. Win/win thinking places the well being of the relationship at the center of the process.

Win/lose solutions always result in bad feelings… and bad feelings result in retaliation. Retaliation comes in two forms: aggression and passive-aggression. Aggression is easier to recognize. It features open hostility, attack, threats, anger, belligerence, violence and antagonism. Passive-aggressive behaviour includes avoidance, stubbornness, indirect aggression, resentment, sarcasm, blame, sullenness, procrastination and obstructionism, to name a few. Both are on the rise at work.

Without mutual gain, conflict rarely comes to closure. It persists as a series of skirmishes, often subterranean but always felt. Eventually, conflict erupts again through acts of aggression.

Smart leaders recognize that if conflict is faced in a timely manner and a disciplined process is followed, time, money and goodwill are protected.

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

For many of us, conflict presents a difficult dilemma. We struggle with what to do…or not do. One thing is for certain. What we avoid persists. Over the years, many of my clients have asked for coaching, advice and intervention to interrupt unhealthy patterns of conflict.

Here are some of the thoughts that I have shared with them that you may find useful.

1. Conflict is natural. It is part of every relationship and is healthy when managed with maturity and personal responsibility.

2. Author and consultant, Angeles Arrien points out that every conflict is co-created. We are quick to assess blame and resist looking at what our contribution might be to the conflict. Blame needs to be replaced by personal responsibility to move towards resolution.

3. Fixed perspectives, where we are unable to see another person's point of view or hear what they have to say, are ego based. The need to win, to be right, or have our way are announcements that we are not looking for resolution. We want victory.

4. Power struggles are waged through both aggressive and passive aggressive means. Bullying and conflict avoidance are two predominant styles that announce that a power struggle is present.

5. People have behavioural patterns in conflict, as do teams and organizations. Most of these patterns – like "villain," "victim" and "rescuer" – come from our family conditioning. Understanding your own pattern is the beginning of interrupting behaviours that lead to conflict.

6. People want respect in relationships. Conflict will emerge when people feel disrespected, marginalized, taken for granted, or feel their choices have been restricted or restrained.

7. Everyone wants to be responsible for having a positive impact on others. Few take responsibility for their negative impact. As a result, conflict escalates.

8. If you label someone an "enemy," you can rationalize your own aggression. Sometimes, we demonize other people and assign them labels as a clever rationale for our own bad behavior.

9. Patience and compassion are wisdom skills. No conflict can be resolved without them.

10. Different assumptions are at the heart of every disagreement. Yet we spend little time talking about them, exploring where we are on different pages, and more importantly why. We spend a majority of our time in advocacy but very little in inquiry.

> **"Believing ourselves to be possessors of absolute truth degrades us; we regard every person whose way of thinking is different from ours as a monster and a threat and by so doing turn ourselves into monsters and threats to our fellows."**
>
> OCTAVIO PAZ
> NOBEL LAUREATE

CORPORATE PROFILE

Extraordinary Conversations helps leaders generate breakthroughs in organizational, team and individual performance.

Since 1988, we have supported large, medium and small organizations to build environments where people can do their best work. Clear vision, commitment and responsibility, open communication, courage and the passion to accomplish meaningful goals lead to extraordinary results.

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