Tools for LEARNING SCHOOLS

EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

Winter 2012
Vol. 15, No. 2

Experts agree: Conflict creates better teams

By Valerie von Frank

The board members had worked together for several years and were comfortable that they all shared similar viewpoints, especially when it came to key decisions — with the exception of one person the majority viewed as just cranky because he sometimes raised questions or disagreed. Over the next two years, a few board members changed, and soon that one person was joined by a quorum of members who questioned the way things had always been done.

The former majority found themselves in the minority and began to rally public opinion that the board was "broken." They instigated a successful recall of the member they viewed as the culprit; those on the board who shared his perspective resigned, and the board contentedly went back to the status quo, appointing new members who agreed with them.

Most groups, as did some members of this one, see conflict as negative and destructive. Experts, however, agree that opposing views in a group can be a positive force, and without such differences, growth cannot occur (Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Hoy, & Mackley, 2000).

Conflict is essential to learning, according to David W. Johnson, University of Minnesota educational psychology emeritus professor. "Controversies are an inherent part of reaching a reasoned judgment, making decisions, and being a citizen in a democracy," he stated (1997, p. 1).

Betty Achinstein, a social sciences researcher at the University of California Santa Cruz, said conflict "can no longer only be relegated to the domain of unprofessional or dysfunctional." She noted: "To engage in conflict and question one's beliefs with the possibility of deep change is fundamentally a positive and hopeful act rather than a problematic one within community" (2002, p. 450).

CONFLICT IS POSITIVE

In an interview, Johnson pointed out that conflict is an inherent part of daily life. From the games we play

Continued on p. 2

Continued from p. 1

— sports, cards — to teasing one another, opposition is embedded in what we do. In those cases, however, we call it fun, he noted.

Conflict, he said, is necessary because conflicts help surface and solve problems, as well as create better solutions. "Conflict improves the quality of the work," he said. "It sparks creativity. You just cannot get a creative breakthrough without conflict or get a good team without conflict."

Without conflict, experts agree, groups become subject to groupthink — in which members of a cohesive group emphasize harmony over critical evaluation of alternative ideas or viewpoints, resulting in poorer decisions (Janis, 1972, pp. 8-9). Groups that succumb to groupthink, Johnson said, ignore facts that don't support the favored view (1997, p. 2). Any major decision made without some controversy should be examined for the effect of groupthink.

Learning Forward BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

"All change worth its salt involves anxiety and conflict," Michael Fullan said (2011, p. 101), "and resisting the urge to paper over it is critical."

The goal of controversy, Johnson said, "is for the individuals involved to reach the best reasoned judgment possible by giving all points of view a fair and complete hearing and viewing the issue from all perspectives" (1997, p. 1).

"Conflict is positive," Johnson said in an interview. "You want a lot of it. Most teams suffer from too little rather than too much."

COOPERATION OVER COMPETITION

Johnson said in addition to recognizing conflict as positive, a second essential understanding is that conflict is most productive within a cooperative, rather than a competitive, context.

A cooperative context, he said, requires five elements:

- A strong sense of **positive interdependence,** a belief that group members are working for mutual benefit, not one against another.
- **Individual accountability,** in which each person is responsible for a fair share of the work.
- **Promotive interaction,** characterized as "I promote your success; you promote my success."
- **Interpersonal skills,** including leadership, decision making, conflict management, and trust building skills.
- **Group processing,** in which the group periodically assesses how members are performing as a team and how to improve.

Such workplace values, however, are influenced by culture, and the U.S. is a fundamentally individualistic culture, according to Geert Hofstede. Hofstede's study (2001) showed the United States is among only a handful of nations from the more than 70 in the study with individualism as the highest dimension — and is the country with the highest score on this dimension. A high individualism rating indicates a society in which people have relatively loose bonds with others and put their own interests first.

Overcoming self-interest for the common good is a challenge for some, according to W. Keith Campbell, professor of behavioral and brain sciences at the University of Georgia. Campbell conducted an experiment in which volunteers played the role of timber companies harvesting different amounts of timber each year and were given information about how quickly the forest would regrow. If all the volunteers independently took less than they were allowed, the forest would perpetually renew. Groups with some individuals who thought about the common good preserved their forests longer, but ultimately all the forests succumbed to members' short-term thinking and self-interest (Vedantam, 2008).

"If you live in a competitive world," Johnson noted, "people keep score on who's winning and who's losing. … One of the basic rules for people in the same organization is you never want to win. A consultant in the '40s said, 'If you win, you have to watch your back every time you pass a dark doorway.' "

PROCEDURES FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

Johnson, who has spent his career researching and teaching approaches to conflict and peacemaking, said a third understanding is that conflict needs to be managed constructively. Adults need procedures to follow when conflict occurs.

According to Johnson, adults can engage in two types of negotiation: integrative, often called problem solving, and distributive, often termed win-lose. In integrative negotiations, the agreement satisfies both parties' needs and each side achieves that party's goals. In distributive negotiations, the process is competitive, one side wins, and the results are destructive for the organization, he said.

One process to effectively work with conflict is what Johnson termed creative controversy. Group members form advocacy teams, each team presents the best case possible in favor of a point of view, the other team critiques that approach, "and then they come to their best reasoned judgment, holding both views in mind at the same time," Johnson said. See p. 4 for a tool based on a similar process.

"Teachers need to be trained in integrative negotiations and the creative controversy procedure," Johnson said. "It needs to be in their repertoire and to be encouraged. If they follow the procedure, usually conflict will go quite well. If

Continued on p. 3

Continued from p. 2

they get bogged down in destructive conflict, a mediator comes in and reestablishes the procedure."

The goal is full consensus, he said, with every group member agreeing on the decision and committing to implement it. A less than 100% consensus should be used only when a deadline is imminent that might require a compromise or majority vote, or in cases in which the decision is not one many care about, Johnson said. Having less than full consensus, he said, alienates members and "the team pays for it if somebody wins and the other members lose."

AN ORIENTATION TOWARD PROBLEM SOLVING

Creative problem solving requires learning, practice, and an orientation toward data-based evidence and the scientific method, according to Johnson.

"We need to move away from our assumptions and beliefs to focus on data," he said. "What often happens is people get locked in where they treat an issue as if changing their mind would be like denying the existence of God. Instead, we should say, 'What's the data? What's worked elsewhere?'"

He said a fourth point in conflict is to approach any problem with the understanding that it can be solved with rational thought and examination of relevant data.

RESPONDING TO CONFLICT

Achinstein noted that educators working in groups often find themselves in conflict because collaborative work "demand(s) substantial change in school norms and practices, challenging existing norms of privacy, independence, and professional autonomy, and may question existing boundaries between cultures and power groups" (2002, p. 425).

Responses to conflict range from unassertive to aggressive, from individual detachment to intense emotion, from concealing what one is thinking to revealing all, from minimizing a problem to escalating a situation (Uline, Tschannen-Moran, & Perez, 2003), but the most common response in schools — among both children and adults — is avoidance. Peterson and Peterson (1990) found that both children and adults in schools avoided conflict twice as often as confronting an issue.

Johnson said examples of how people cannot manage conflict are plentiful, from local boards to Congress. "The answer is not to try to suppress conflict," he noted, "but rather to train people" in procedures to manage conflict.

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.co-operation.org

David W. Johnson's nonprofit institute established to advance the understanding and practice of cooperation and constructive conflict resolution.

www.cpp-db.com/en/tkiproducts.aspx?pc=62

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, a widely used test to determine individuals' preferences in responding to conflict. This fee-based instrument reports suggestions with results.

www.cios.org/encyclopedia/conflict/index.htm

Research-based information and self-test of knowledge about conflict management.

www.teamworkandteamplay.com

Explore the five stages of group formation using adventure-based and active-learning techniques.

REFERENCES

Achinstein, B. (2002). *Community, diversity, and conflict among schoolteachers: The ties that blind.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Fullan, M. (2011). *Change leader: Learning to do what matters most.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Janis, I. (1972). *Victims of groupthink.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Johnson, D.W. (1997). Academic controversy. *The National Teaching and Learning Forum, 6*(6), 1-4.

Peterson, C. & Peterson, J. (1990). Fight or flight: Factors influencing children's and adults decisions to avoid or confront conflict. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 151*(4), 461-471.

Tschannen-Moran, M., Uline, C., Hoy, A.W., & Mackley, T. (2000, July). Creating smarter schools through collaboration. *The Journal of Educational Administration, 38*(3), 247-271.

Uline, C.L., Tschannen-Moran, M., & Perez, L. (2003, June). Constructive conflict: How controversy can contribute to school improvement. *Teachers College Record, 105*(5), 782-816.

Vedantam, S. (2008, April 28). Clinton, Obama and the narcissist's tale. *The Washington Post.* Available online at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/04/27/ST2008042701712.html.

•

Valerie von Frank (valerievonfrank@aol.com) is an education writer and editor of Learning Forward's books.

Value of conflict

Purpose: To help members understand the value of conflict and hearing opposing points of view.

Materials: Paper and pens or pencils for note taking.

Time: Dependent on group size.

1. Identify an issue for which there are differing points of view.
2. Have group members research the issue outside of the meeting time and prepare a persuasive case for their position.
3. Ask each member to present the argument in a compelling, interesting way and to try to avoid redundancy with others.
4. Allow each member to refute the opposing viewpoint and to rebut criticism of his or her position.
5. Have members reverse roles and present the opposing viewpoint as persuasively as possible.
6. Have the group work to integrate members' positions from the discussion.

Source: **Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Tjosvold, D. (2000).** Constructive controversy: The value of intellectual opposition. In M. Deutsch & P.T. Coleman (Eds.), *The handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice* (pp. 65-85). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Conflicting viewpoints: Map the positive and negative interpretations of conflict

Purpose: To help team members understand conflict and how it may be *either* productive or destructive.

Materials: Copies of the article, "Experts agree: Conflict creates better teams," paper, chart paper, pens or pencils, markers, highlighters.

Time: 15 to 30 minutes depending on group size.

1. Prepare copies of the article, "Experts agree: Conflict creates better teams," and provide the article to each member of the group. Have the group read the article prior to meeting to allow members time to think more deeply about the ideas or to investigate the resources.

2. Ask each member to write the word "conflict" in the center of a piece of paper and circle it. Members then should write all the words and phrases they associate with "conflict" around the circle.

3. Have members highlight the associated words in different colors, categorizing them as neutral, positive, or negative. They should then calculate the percentages of positive, negative, and neutral items.

4. Ask members to reflect on the percentages. How many had more than 90% positive? How many had more than 90% negative?

5. Ask members to share their insights and discuss.

6. Chart the negative associations with conflict, and ask team members to brainstorm ways to eliminate or minimize these negatives.

7. Chart all of the positive associations with conflict and have team members create statements of positive ways to view conflict.

8. Debrief. Ask:
   - What do our associations with the word "conflict" indicate about our approach as a team to conflict?
   - What experiences have led us to our understanding?
   - What results have we had when we were in conflict in the past?
   - How has our response to conflict contributed to the outcome?
   - How might our response to conflict affect the outcome?
   - What positive outcomes might occur as a result of conflict?
   - What approaches to conflict might yield a positive outcome?

Source: Adapted from the Foundation Coalition, www.foundationcoalition.org.

TOOL

Team attitude toward conflict survey

Purpose: To determine how your group approaches conflict.

Materials: Copies of survey for each participant.

Time: 30 minutes, including time for tabulating and discussing results.

1. Have each group member take the survey on the next page.

2. Group members consider scores individually and collectively.
   - **Higher scores on questions 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11** indicate stronger tendencies of the group to be conflict avoidant.
   - **Higher scores on questions 1, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13** indicate that group members may be more willing to embrace conflict.

3. Post this statement: Betty Achinstein says that teachers who embrace conflict create more substantive change. Ask:
   - Do you agree or not? Why?
   - What do the results of the survey show about our team?
   - What do we need to know about conflict that we do not?
   - How do we want to approach our understanding of conflict and where we are as a team in dealing with conflict?

Source: **Achinstein, B. (2002, April).** Conflict amid community: The micropolitics of teacher collaboration. *Teachers College Record, 104*(3), 421-455.

Team attitude toward conflict survey

For each statement, indicate how strongly you agree or disagree. 1= strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.

1. Our team acknowledges differences and solicits statements of different beliefs and practices.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Our team has few tools to deal with public disagreement.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Our members' social ties are strongest with one another.	1	2	3	4	5
4. This group does not openly welcome outsiders.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Group members have ties to many school groups beyond this team.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Team members believe schools should foster critical thinking and transform society rather than maintain the status quo.	1	2	3	4	5
7. The group supports individual and subgroup identities.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Members look for and adhere to solutions that maintain existing relationships, norms, and practices.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Group members' behavior encourages members to maintain current practices and behaviors.	1	2	3	4	5
10. The group does not acknowledge individual and subgroup differences.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Group members effectively stop or quickly change the discussion when disagreements arise, or disagree only privately.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Members use multiple mechanisms for public debate.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Members seek and use solutions that question core norms and lead to changed practices.	1	2	3	4	5