UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT - INPUT

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an inevitable part of our interpersonal relationships and human social systems. We have different ways of seeing the world, believes, opinions, and thoughts which creates friction and can generate conflict. In addition, we can also talk about inner conflict and spiritual conflict. Constructively resolving conflicts involves first understanding what conflict is and what are our default responses to conflict situations. As we grow our awareness to our dispositions and default reactions and expand our capacity to approach conflict more constructively, we increase our chances of transforming a potentially harmful struggle into a growing opportunity both for ourselves and others.

MAIN IDEAS

Between dangers and opportunities

By our very nature as human beings we are not perfect, and consequently contradictions and tensions are inevitable parts of our development and interactions. While the experience of conflict may carry many challenges, it helps to distinguish between conflict itself and the negative consequences of poorly managing it.

- Left unsolved, conflict can give rise to feelings of dissatisfaction, demotivation and stress that eventually escalate into aggressive behaviours, emotional withdrawal or communications breakdown...

- However, conflict also often promises to carry positive fruits, especially when managed constructively (Kriesberg 2007a). It can be a creative force that:
    - fosters innovation
    - maximizes the chances of reaching mutually satisfying outcomes
    - minimizes reliance on power and violence
    - eventually ends up reinforcing relationships when managed effectively.

Examples that come to our mind when discussing this topic usually focus on competition over material/resources, social needs (power, responsibilities), mutually exclusive goals, the means to achieving goals, the nature of relationships and personalities, etc… However, conflicts can also be spiritual or cultural revolving around different or incompatible values and beliefs.

Many different ways of defining and classifying conflicts exist, and different aspects can be considered. These include among others: the parties involved (intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, intrasociety, international…), the context (cultural, political, economical,...), the consequences (destructive, constructive), the display (manifest/latent), the intensity, and the sources/motivations of conflict. Note that the focus of this section will be limited to interpersonal conflict.

Interpersonal conflict is an expressed struggle, between two or more parties, that are interdependent, involving strong emotion, and a perceived blockage concerning needs, values, goals or styles that are seen as different or incompatible. (Dr. Neil Katz, John Lawyer)

Constructively resolving conflicts involves investing time, energy and care in interpersonal processes such as problem-solving/negotiation, mediation, dialogue and active listening (Refer to the Practices and Exercises Section, specifically to: Interest-based Negotiation and Avoiding the Drama Triangle). It also involves building our capacity to recognize our own feelings and those of others in conflict situations and effectively managing the ensuing emotions and interactions (Emotional Intelligence, Goleman).

Styles of handling conflict - Thomas & Kilman's Model

The way we respond to interpersonal conflict and resolve it will determine its impact on our relationships and systems. When we grow our capacity to embrace it as a natural part of our social dynamics, we discover in conflict a source of learning and growth.

Different coping mechanisms help us manage conflict situations. These styles are often rooted in beliefs and values that push us in a given direction. In a simple way, our response can fall into the following options: Flight, Fight (Power, Rights), Freeze or Unite.

The Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument is a more formal model for handling conflict. It describes an individual's behavior in conflict situations along two dimensions:

1) **assertiveness**, the degree to which the person tries to meet his own concerns and needs

2) **cooperativeness**, the degree to which the person tries to satisfy the other person's concerns.

These two basic dimensions of behavior outline five different modes of responses to conflict situations highlighted in the above chart. It does not necessarily mean one behaviour is better than the rest. Each situation might call for a different way of proceeding.

More details on the characteristics of each mode and their use are summarized in the Handout 1.
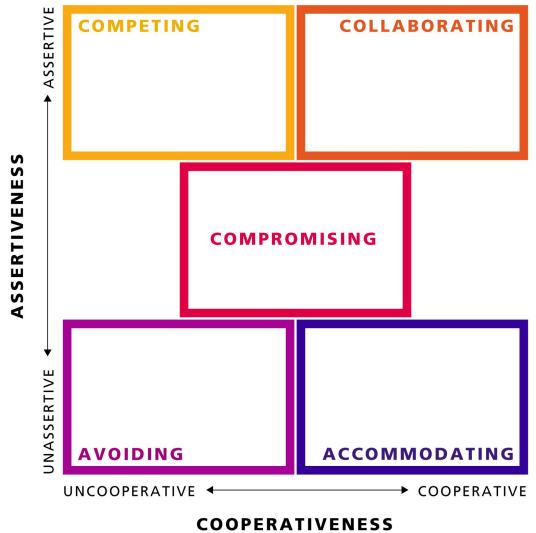
IGNATIAN NOTE

The resources section offers a series of reflections on the experience of Jesus, Ignatius and others with conflict. They intend to shed a new light on the topic and help us deepen more in understanding our own relationship to it.

"..if man's freedom is a gift of God and if' this freedom entails conflict, then it follows: **conflict is a human existential, willed by God**. We are forced then, to the inference that conflict is integral to the human condition: a conclusion which the average Christian would be most reluctant to admit." - Fr. Michale Stogre S.J. in "The Theology of Power and Conflict"

You might find it helpful to reflect as well on a letter that Ignatius wrote to another Jesuit, Father Nicolas Bobadilla, as a response to his companion's irritation and protest against Ignatius' regulations concerning letter writing. The Portal of Jesuit Studies wrote this introduction to the letter which is in itself insightful (the link to the complete letter is offered in the resources section):

> Ignatius offers this letter, combining firmness with humility, as a response to Nicolás Bobadilla's outspoken protests against Ignatius's regulations concerning letter writing. Ignatius confesses to a blunder (addressing a letter to Bobadilla in a king's palace rather than the court) and asks for correction in such circumstances. "For this is my desire in this life," he writes, "to be set straight and corrected in all my faults by being given loving fraternal correction for them all." He recounts to Bobadilla how, after Bobadilla's profession, Ignatius had "earnestly asked and implored the entire Society that whenever anyone detected anything amiss in me, after first praying to God our Lord and conferring about it with his Divine Majesty, he would let me know my faults so that I could be helped and amended in our Lord." Ignatius also states here that he would give his vote to Bobadilla for general if half of the Society voted for him as well.

As a leader, am I able to combine firmness and humility when there are interpersonal conflicts in my team? Am I able to recognise my own mistakes? Or do I hide my own faults and errors and blame others for them?

FINAL THOUGHT

Reconciliation is much more than a one-time event by which a conflict is resolved and peace established. A ministry of reconciliation goes far beyond problem solving, mediation, and peace agreements. There is not a moment in our lives without the need for reconciliation. When we dare to look at the myriad hostile feelings and thoughts in our hearts and minds, we will immediately recognize the many little and big wars in which we take part. Our enemy can be a parent, a child, a "friendly" neighbor, people with different lifestyles, people who do not think as we think, speak as we speak, or act as we act. They all can become "them." Right there is where reconciliation is needed. Reconciliation touches the most hidden parts of our souls. God gave reconciliation to us as a ministry that never ends.

Henri Nouwen

EXPECTED LEARNINGS AND OUTCOMES

1. Understanding the essential dynamics of interpersonal and inter-group conflict
2. Integrating the 5 common modes for handling conflict (Thomas-Killman Model)
3. Reflecting on one's own role in managing conflict

"Conflict is the primary engine of creativity and innovation. People don't learn by staring into a mirror; people learn by encountering difference"

Ronald A. Heifetz