



Managing Conflict

Book review by Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, PhD

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Notes:

Chapter One – Introduction:

Through case studies R Walton presents a framework for diagnosing recurrent conflict. He defines two types of conflict:

- a. Intra-organizational or Interpersonal Conflict: There are three kinds: (A) between members of a family (B) between two individuals in an organization and, (C) between organizational units, such as: manufacturing and marketing.
- b. Intersystem or Intergroup Conflict: There are three kinds: (A) between institutions such as union and management. (B) between ethnic groups or communities and (C) between nations.

Walton proposes ways to control or resolve conflict – primarily through the use of what he calls a “well managed **dialogue**” between the parties (usually involving a third party

- a. or facilitator). Dialogue is defined as “the parties directly engage each other and focus on the conflict between them, including aspects of their relationship itself.”
- b.

Chapters Two-Four: Three interpersonal (intra-organizational) Case Studies

Chapter Two

With the help of a consultant (third party) two program directors within an organization were able to de-escalate mounting tension. The value of the third party was to: clarify and sharpen the issues between conflicting parties, regulate the interaction and diagnose the relationship between the conflicting individuals. It helped that the conflicting parties had undergone human relations training within their organization and that this training was with the firm represented by the consultant. It was also noted that the mere presence – even if passive – of a third party – with no agenda other than resolution – helped resolve the conflict.

Chapter Three

The interpersonal conflict in Chapter 3 is between two managers of a large manufacturing firm. The two individuals possess very different personal styles – one is aggressive, intuitive and has an “all or nothing” kind of personality (he either goes full-throttle on a project or withdraws completely) This individual also has a difficult time working with peers – though he works well with superiors &

subordinates. The second individual was more “methodical” and “middle of the road”. The bottom line: their personalities clashed. Interestingly, resolution was, in part, achieved by the first individual having to bear the burden of behavioral changes – some of his aggressiveness had to be throttled. The third party consultant, through active engagement, was able to help the two parties identify their negative feelings about each other and eventually replace those negative feelings with positive ones – even though the two men remained disinterested in working together. The presence of a third party (in addition to being actively engaged in the identification of feelings) also provided the impetus and reassurance necessary for the two parties to continue working on their differences.

Chapter Four:

Again two managers of a division of a large firm have different personal styles: one is a union savvy and abrupt, the other is more indirect and less union-connected. One really good question the third party consultant asked at one impasse was: “What would each of you be inclined to do with this difference” There answer to this coaching question graphically illustrated one of their differences – and personal stumbling blocks. Some of the techniques used by the consultant (coach) I found effective were: a) departing from the specific gripes and shifting the parties attention to a more general form of the issues – a kind of summarizing or re-framing – which when done by an independent observer allows each of the parties to feel understood, and avoids the question of which of them is going to get the last word. B.) Interventions during an ongoing interaction are to the point and immediate. C) Pointing out similarities between the parties (the both lectured, scolded and condescended to each other) D.) Pointing out common goals between the parties.

Chapter Five

A Diagnostic model of interpersonal conflict

Interpersonal conflict is cyclical (escalating or de-escalating) and dynamic (from one cycle to the next the issues or the form of the conflict undergo change).

A conflict cycle involves four basic elements which, as a coach, one must understand.

1.) The issues: Issues may be either, **SUBSTANTIVE**: (disagreements over policies, roles, resources etc.) Substantive issues are cognitive and require bargaining and problem solving. Or **EMOTIONAL**: (anger, distrust, scorn, fear etc.) Emotional issues require the restructuring of a person’s perceptions and a working through of feelings.

2.) The circumstances that precipitate manifest conflict or “Triggering Events” Triggering events are such things as: a vigorous disagreement, a candid confrontation, a hostile interaction, an off hand remarks or criticism on sensitive points. Diagnosis of an interpersonal conflict involves discovering what types of barriers to conflict exist (such as anxieties, time restraints, habitual patterns of accommodating, fear, public image etc.) and what triggers the manifest conflict. Knowing these two things helps choose the right issue, time and place for joining the conflict. For example: If, as a coach, you want to prevent manifest conflict, at least temporarily, you can reinforce the barriers and attempt to head off triggering events. Conversely, if constructive dialogue is possible – you know what barriers must be overcome first.

3.) The conflict-relevant acts of the parties involved: Conflict becomes manifest in obvious ways such as: anger, attack and rejection. It also becomes manifest through competitive strategies such as: blocking, interrupting, forming alliances and one-upsmanship. Conflict also involves displays of regret, sympathy and compassion. The costs of these behaviors can be enormous – to the emotional well-being of the parties and to the productivity of the company. As a coach, understanding the nature of

conflict tactics or conflict behaviors is important because these behaviors determine the consequences of the conflict.

4) The consequences – whatever they may be.

When managing conflict the most general objective is to interrupt an escalating or stagnating cycle and initiate a de-escalating cycle – this applies whether the ultimate goal is to control (minimize the costs of the conflict without changing the basic issues) or to resolve the conflict (eliminating negative feelings and disagreements).

How does one do this? Walton proposes four types of control to conflict:

- a. By strengthening the inhibitors to conflict and avoiding triggering events – recognizing early warning signals, one allows for a cooling off period(if necessary).
- b. Conflict can of course be constructive and one does not want, always, to avoid it. Another objective attempts to set limits on the tactics employed – for instance – if you attack or criticize you must likewise expose yourself by offering an alternative.
- c. Another objective when managing conflict: coping techniques - such as: ventilating one’s feelings to a friend, developing additional sources of emotional support or decreasing one’s future dependence upon the relationship.
- d. Lastly, eliminating the conflict issues – resolving them by reaching agreement where disagreement persists, trust where there is mistrust.

Chapter Six:

Dialogue as a tool for resolving and controlling interpersonal conflict

Up to this point Walton has provided us with three case studies, discussed the nature of conflict and given us diagnostic tools for managing conflict. Now he gets into the meat of “Dialogue” (as opposed to avoidance, constraint and improved coping methods) as a way of managing conflict. In dialogue the parties directly engage each other – they explore the issues in conflict, the underlying needs involved and the feelings generated by the conflict.

There are seven strategic ingredients to productive dialogue:

- a. Ensuring mutual motivation: Prior to confrontation, a coach needs to learn and insure each party’s motivation. Without adequate incentive on both sides there will be no give and take.
- b. Achieving balance in situational power : Power inequality inhibits dialogue. The coach can attempt to avoid an imbalance of power by: establishing ground rules, by active interventions (that ensure equal time to less assertive parties), by helping a person (who feels one-down) make a point, or by including other individuals who will provide support to the person with less power.
- c. Synchronizing confrontation efforts: Timing is everything – this section reviews the three case studies from the point of view of “timing” – the initiative to confront must be synchronized with the other’s readiness for the dialogue. Coaches play a dynamic role in this area.
- d. Managing the differentiation and Integration phases of dialogue: The differentiation phase is when the two parties describe the issue that divide them and ventilate their feelings about each other. The integration phase is when the parties appreciate their similarities, acknowledge common goals, own up to positive aspects of their ambivalence and express warmth & respect for each other. A coach needs to be comfortable with both of these phases.
- e. Promoting Openness: Three factors contribute to openness in dialogue: the norms of the social system involved, the emotional reassurance available to the participants and the process skills

available for facilitating dialogue. The coach (or third party) should have the skills to provide the last two.

- f. Enhancing communication: Here a coach performs a communication function -increasing the validity of mutual perceptions such as: the nature of the other's demands and the integrity of each parties motivations. The coach helps with articulation and developing a common language for the dialogue.
- g. Maintaining a productive level of tension. If the tension is too low - there's no energy, if too high - there's too much rigidity and polarization. At a moderate level, the parties search for alternatives and are motivated to find a solution. As a coach you can increase the tension level by: increasing the parties' exposure to one another and reducing the number of other persons present. You may also instigate acts that sharpen the conflict. And/or promote the exchange of difference – this increases the stress. Tension reduction occurs when the parties gain reassurance that others present are not disapproving of them as a result of the conflict.

Chapter Seven

Techniques for Managing a Dialogue

- It is important as a coach to prepare the participants – and yourself – for the dialogue. Preliminary one-on-one discussions with each party are essential. Doing so favors openness and provides challenge to and support for each of the parties.
- Finding neutral turf for the dialogue to take place is also important. Walton uses “clubs” and dining rooms for meeting places as ways of increasing relaxation, informality and de-escalation. I have to say that I question the wisdom of having a “round of cocktails” as he does – as a way of relaxing.
- Having open-ended meetings – where there are no time-restraints and when both parties have a similar view of the time available for the interpersonal work increases the likelihood of success.
- Getting the right mix of people to meet is also the job of the coach. Each additional person has many potential effects.
- Refereeing the interaction: at times a coach must terminate a discussion that is repetitive or counterproductive as well as generate shorter, more frequent interchanges. Another effective technique is to allow each person the opportunity to respond immediately to a point made by the other.
- Initiating agenda
- Restating, reframing issues and views: Summarizing each party's view is an effective third party intervention. – they can clarify and/or give closure.
- Eliciting reactions and offering observations: The third party, or coach, encourages feedback – perceptions of each other's point of view. Timing is essential here.
- Diagnosing the Conflict: Aspects of the conflict are diagnosed. For example: the third party encourages one individual to sharpen his insights into his own feelings toward the other and to identify irritants. The coach may also articulate alternate views of one person's behavior – this allows a person to “hear” alternate ways others might perceive him .
- Prescribing discussion methods: for example: “How do your personal problems at this time affect this conflict?”
- Diagnosing Causes of Poor Dialogue: It may at times be necessary to point out to a client that his/her position hinders resolution. A client's statement, “That's just how I am” is responded to with, “Yes you

feel that way right now as things stand but what would have to change for you to feel differently?" – great question.

- Planning for Future Dialogue: As a third party it is important to check with the organization that there continues to be an avenue for continued dialogue (openness), that the dialogue techniques are taught to the individuals, that another third party is available when you're gone – or that you remain available and that an explicit decision is made and action steps taken for further meetings.

Chapter Eight

How to establish and maintain a third-party role

- a. Have professional expertise such as the appropriate diagnostic and behavior skills, an attitude of acceptance and the capacity to provide emotional support.
- b. Have the appropriate power and knowledge. A third party must have some influence over the conflicting parties such as an alliance with their superior – this increases the likelihood that they will put their best effort forward. While knowledge of the issues and their background is important it is also true that too much knowledge makes it harder for the parties to believe in your neutrality.
- c. Have neutrality: to be neutral with regard to the issues and to be comparably related to each of the parties.
- d. Have the ability to work on the role relationship – be aware of your relationship with each of the parties. If one party feels distrustful, for example – confront this as soon as noticed and repair the damage.
- e.

Chapter Nine

Intergroup (Intersystem conflict)

This is a long chapter that describes and analyzes a dialogue workshop involving border disputes in the Horn of Africa in the late 1960's. Walton participated in the workshop. He concludes that the approach to interpersonal dialogue and third party-facilitation discussed in chapters 1-8 is applicable to intergroup settings – with one caveat. If the intergroup setting involves group-on-group exchanges - an additional strategic function becomes crucial – ensuring an adequate level of internal coherence within each group. Also – the composition of the workshop groups and sub-groupings created during the workshop (and the operational goals for the workshop) need special attention.

Chapter Ten

This chapter is a summary of the book – which in effect is what this book report is.

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Many CEO's find themselves asking "What now?" to sensitive situations that only an experienced former CEO can understand. Frumi is brought in to solve problems and often remains to work with you, as your confidante and secret weapon. She has an uncanny knack of getting to the heart of your corporate climate and maximizing your team's performance, profitability and sustainability.

To schedule a free *Break From the Pack to Success* consultation email ceocondfidante@frumi.com or call 949-729-1577