Organizational Conflict as Opportunity for Transformation

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Experience with Organizations

• Workplace Mediators
• Workplace Trainers
• Organizational Consultants
• Organizational Ombudspersons
• Leadership Coaches
• Organizational Leaders
• Organizational Employees
Introduction

- Background as a workplace mediator, organizational consultant, and leadership coach.
- Experience of receiving three mediation referrals from a local college that all involved supervisor/supervisee conflict.
Organizations as Systems

• Organizations are both social and emotional systems

• As social systems, they consist of a unique structure and a discrete culture, nested in a particular environment (or set of environments)

• As emotional systems, they include cycles of reactivity, identified patients, and established patterns/habits that are difficult to change.
Culture
roles - rules - rituals

Only see about 20%
(80% invisible)

beliefs and
values that
drive behavior

Leadership
(self-defined)

Organizations

Environment

Geographic

Leadership

Rootedness

underlying Structure

holds organization in place
(infra-structure)
Organizational Structure

Structure allocates and legitimizes power, and turns it into authority. Structure becomes a source of conflict when roles are unclear, when power is misused, or when attempts are made to change the structure.
Organizational Leadership

- Those at the top of the organizational structure are the *formal* leaders; *informal* leaders may appear at any level of the system.
- Leaders have the most leverage to introduce or forestall change within the system, in part through the planning and budgeting cycle.
- Leaders also have a symbolic role in organizations. When things are going well they are praised, when things go poorly they are blamed (and sometimes fired.)
Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is like an iceberg

The visible part consists of rituals and artifacts that are apparent even to outsiders. Less visible are the values that lie just below the surface. Even further down are the beliefs and assumptions that produce the values, rituals and artifacts. These are the hardest to change.
Organizational Environment

Although an organization can change its structure and transform its culture, it has less control over its environments (social, political, economic). Healthy organizations monitor their environments, and make proactive adaptations to be successful in those environments.
Emotional Systems

- Anxiety in organizations is contagious—it spreads even without direct contact
- As in a family, patterns of arguing or withdrawing become established over time and start to seem “normal”
For Reflection

- Think about your organization as both a social system and an emotional system.
- Is the *structure* clearly defined and are power and authority well distributed in your system?
- Is the *culture* clear yet open, with shared norms and values that are lived out?
- How is the *emotional health* of your organization? Who tend to be the “identified patients” in organizational life?
- How proactive is your organization in monitoring and adapting to the various *environments* in which it is located?
Core Premises

• Conflict is not the main problem; it is instead a symptom of our problems and thus an opportunity for transformation.

• A simplistic “3-P” analysis of conflict is inadequate for organizational conflicts.
6 Components of a Conflict Assessment

1. People (Parties)
2. Problems (Issues)
3. Conflict Intensity (Leas’ Scale)
4. Strengths (Assets)
5. Systemic Analysis
6. Process Recommendations
People (Parties)

- Who is most invested in the current conflict (major parties)?
- Who represents the “critical middle”—those who care deeply about the organization but not about the current issue?
- How will we hear from these individuals and groups?
Problems (Issues)

- What are the critical issues about which people are disagreeing (based on the results of the information-gathering process)?
- Frame the issues in impartial terms and limit the list to three to five major issues.
Conflict Intensity

Leas’ Conflict Intensity Scale:
1. Problem to Solve
2. Disagreement
3. Contest
4. Fight/Flight
5. Intractable Situation ("Holy War")
Strengths (Assets)

• What are the key areas of organizational life that many are affirming?
• What are areas of agreement and existing strengths?
• When possible, begin surveys and interviews appreciatively
Systemic Analysis

Organizational Environment

- **Organizational Environment**: those forces outside its boundaries that can impact it.
  - Forces can change over time and are made up of Opportunities and Threats.
- **Opportunities**: openings for managers to enhance revenues or open markets.
  - New technologies, new markets and ideas.
- **Threats**: issues that can harm an organization.
  - Economic recessions, oil shortages.
- **Managers must seek opportunities and avoid threats.**
Process Recommendations

• In light of an understanding of the parties, the issues, level of conflict, relevant strengths, and broader systemic analysis, what recommendations would address problem areas while building on the organization’s assets?

• Recommendations should address the presenting problems (conflict) while focusing on underlying systemic issues and the need for an integrated conflict management system.
Resources

• Organization Development Network
  www.odnetwork.org

• Center for Justice and Peacebuilding
  www.emu.edu/cjp

• Presenter
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