The role of leadership in creating and using positive conflict

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Jepson School of Leadership Studies

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William Bolitho once referred to conflict as "The adventurer... within us, and he contests for our favour with the social man we are obliged to be. These two sorts of life are incompatibles; one we hanker after, the other we are obliged to" (Brussel 103).

To this I add conflict is a human phenomena, a reaction to a stimulus or even pre-existing conditions, with the intention of creating a change. Conflict permeates our society and our world and has been long accepted as a human phenomena. Beyond this, conflict is a necessary component of our being if we are to coexist in a diverse world; if we are to contribute our diversity and individuality to change our environment. In his working paper, "Empowerment for Change," James MacGregor Burns stated:

"I believe conflict - both within and between groups - is a more powerful force working for change because it forces actors to dig down beneath superficial, transient attitudes to the motivations that, when the chips are down, most closely influence their actions. Moreover, notes Mecca Antonia Burns, conflict situations can give actors access to motivations of which they were previously unaware" (5).

This paper is about but about conflict management, resolution, and conflict use. Conflict through its proper and successful resolution can be used for successful change and enhanced relationship building.

As the Twenty-first Century rolls around, our society can look forward to an increase in the expression of diversity
throughout the world. Kathleen E. Allen et al. in their paper, "Leadership in the Twenty-First Century," note that as economies, institutions, and perspectives have become more globalized, immigration and population growth have increased (4-7). As diversity in our lives and our work force increases, future leaders will no doubt encounter the differing perceptions and interpretations that make up conflict.

Leaders have already begun to recognize diversity, of thought, heritage, appearance, and ideology, as an advantage to human society and institutions. Diversity allows us to view problems from multiple angles, and to take into account solutions which might not otherwise be considered. Often these advantages are reached through the medium of conflict. Because diversity is demonstrated by the clash of different and sometimes opposing viewpoints, it can be said that conflict is another function of diversity. Conflict exists in diverse parties when one party expresses that it identifies itself as different from another party. Conflict may be expressed casually, as in a dinnertime conversation, or seriously, as in a physical confrontation. The most extreme forms of conflict take the form of violence and war. Not all forms of conflict are positive. Conflict controlled and used effectively can contribute to the progress of humanity through the incorporation of diverse individuals.

As the world becomes smaller, it will be the role of leadership to ensure that conflict is used towards positive
constructive ends. Used effectively, conflict may help to improve decision quality, foster innovation, cause reevaluation of the status quo, and encourage adaptation to a particular situation (Jehn 226). In the long run, conflict may also help groups to achieve greater consensus and teamwork (Torrance 316).

Once leaders accept that conflict can be a positive constructive force rather than a destructive one, we can begin to explore the role of leadership in the creation and use of positive conflict.

Conflict is the basis for many of our institutions, and it is not possible to discuss constructive conflict without a discussion of group and personal politics. Aside from the institutionalized politics of our government, we conduct ourselves politically every day. More often we use words like tact, discretion, and sense to describe these actions. But many of our decisions every day are made with consideration as to who will be affected and what their reactions may be. This combined with the attempt to achieve consensus and advance a particular viewpoint or policy make up the group and personal politics of our daily lives.

This project will look at conflict at the individual level in organizations and groups. Often conflict among individuals and among groups occurs simultaneously. Attention will be given to recognizing motivational and reactions among other individuals, and maximizing efficiency in an organization experiencing conflict. This paper will not address conflict on the scale of
international politics or government, although its analysis and conclusions can be applied to the leaders of modern government. This paper will also not specifically address the deal-making and negotiation of business transactions (e.g. Mergers, acquisitions, etc).

The main premise for this approach is that one individual, through his/her understanding and actions, can make change on the organizational and global level after making preparations to understand the conflict. All of the institutions in our global environment, at their most basic level, consist of people as their foundation, their arms, legs, ears, and eyes.

This research will make a significant contribution to leadership studies by challenging the negative connotations, stereotypes, and assumptions which are commonly applied to all forms of conflict. This paper will examine past research on the advantages and disadvantages of conflict, and develop a framework through which leaders can identify positive and negative conflict. Few studies on the framework of conflict and conflict resolution have been related to the discipline of leadership studies. This paper will help leaders to analyze and understand the conflict in their groups. Through reflection and knowledge of the different types of conflict and their causes, leaders will learn to read and understand the boundaries of a particular conflict and determine whether the behavior exhibited contributes to positive or negative results. This paper will not provide a model for behavior, and
will recognize the situational considerations of conflict.

Methodology

The design of this project was one of historical and descriptive research, pertaining to the role of positive conflict. By objectively reviewing literature and theories of conflict and conflict resolution, this project was able to identify the paradigms which prevent the effective use of intellectual, cognitive conflict and distinguish them from the paradigms and techniques which encourage the use of emotional, irrational conflict.

The issue of conflict is one which must be faced in all aspects of leadership where individuals work together. Conflict is an essential part of any interpersonal interaction, and will therefore be an element of any group or organizational situation. The implications of successful conflict use for leaders and leadership are be tremendous. One function of leadership which was be addressed in this paper is the need to develop a cohesive group out of a diverse group of individuals. The project recognized that if the task of the leader is to implement change among these people, then it is to the advantage of the leader to use the inevitable conflict successfully.

The initial research questions of the study were: (1) is there a type of positive conflict, (2) what are the roots and
sources of personal conflict existent in groups, (3) what defines and produces positive conflict, (4) what environments foster effective conflict, (5) how can one handle conflict in a productive fashion, and (6) what is the role of leadership in positive conflict? The hypothesis of this study is that there are elements of conflict which allow it to be used successfully for change and that it is possible for these elements to be uncovered through the application of leadership.

Because this study described conflict in a framework different from the common perceptions, it was necessary to collect information from a wide and diverse range of topics. Only through the synthesis of multiple descriptions of conflict can an underlying framework for a theory be established. Conflict is rooted in our world and national history, our institutions, and our politics. The research collected in this project incorporated points of view from each of these sources. Specifically, this project analyzed the treatment of conflict by groups whose task is to make strategic decisions and solve problems. By combining these perspectives it was a goal of this project to develop a better sense of the common sources of conflict in groups engaging in strategic decision making and task implementation.

Beyond this historical and descriptive analysis, this project has laid the groundwork for a theory of conflict use. The analysis describes the mental framework and types of behavior which are necessary to use conflict successfully for change. The
The project may serve in the future as an introduction to a theory of conflict use, but it did not attempt to include a finite theory of conflict resolution or test its application.

The primary method of data collection was the review of past studies and experiments of conflict management, conflict resolution, and conflict use. This project was also based on the review documents which attempt to classify conflict types and categorize behaviors as encouraging positive or negative forms of conflict. The project synthesized the commonalities of both historical and theoretical sources to determine general methods of successful conflict use. A wide variety of sources was used so that the phenomenon of conflict could be addressed from multiple points of view. Particular attention was paid to conflict on the personal and interpersonal level, the organizational level, and the psychological level. The study utilized business, leadership, and political books, journals, and articles. The subjects of these references ranged from studies on group dynamics to domestic and international conflict and violence. The literature review also relied on theories attempting to describe conflict as a constantly changing situational or environmental condition.

In addition to a review of research, this project includes data from the interview of Dr. Hugh O’Doherty, a professor currently at the University of Richmond, and a practitioner of alternative dispute resolution techniques.

In reviewing these sources of data, the study paid close
attention to the behaviors, events, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, structures, and processes accompanying conflict, for the purpose of uncovering common elements of positive conflict (Marshall 41).
Literature Review

Conflict and the Group Dynamic:

A great deal of research has been done on the role of conflict in organizational and task oriented groups, particularly from the point of view of team management. Because conflict is an element of all human interaction, it is of crucial importance to groups concerned with problem solving or strategic decision making. In most situations of this type, successful leaders and managers recognize that the complexity and ambiguity of their assigned problem is too great to be solved by the knowledge of one person. These leaders build groups or teams with the intention of creating the most effective solution (Schweiger 1989; 745).

Today we recognize that diversity is an advantage in constructing a team. Prior research has shown that “when solving complex, non-routine problems, groups are more effective when composed of individuals having a variety of skills” (Bantel 1989:109). Furthermore, “top management teams with diverse capabilities made more innovative, higher-quality decisions than teams with less diverse capabilities” (Amason 124). Indeed, “diversity provides an assorted stock of capabilities upon which a team can draw when making complex decisions” (Amason 124). To develop a solution with the broadest advantages it is necessary to take into account as many different point of views as possible. But simply possessing a team of individuals with different
experiences, does not by itself, mean that the end result will be effective. For this process to occur, an interaction process must occur. The interaction must be one where different views are compared, contrasted, and evaluated within the group. This clash of ideas and perceptions is a form of conflict.

To obtain the highest quality group decision, there must an environment of challenge and disagreement. In their article in The Handbook of Business Strategy, Schweiger and Sandberg “suggest that decision quality, consensus and affective acceptance cannot peacefully coexist” (Amason 123). The reasoning behind this is that if there is total consensus around a particular point of view, the decision will lack the quality which results from the combination and synthesis of multiple points of view. Conversely, the disagreement through which multiple contrasting views are expressed is opposed to group consensus (Schweiger and Sandberg 6-5 - 6-6). Consensus, in this case is the agreement of all members on the task’s conclusion.

Types of Conflict

Brian Muldoon also offers a classification which may help one recognize the different types of conflict in a situation. He classifies conflict into two main types: hot conflict and cold conflict. Hot conflict, Muldoon notes, is of a volatile, destructive, and chaotic nature (35). The spreading nature of hot
conflict can be threatening and often provokes aggressive behavior in retaliation. Examples of hot conflict might erupt in "wars, riots, custody battles, violent strikes, corporate takeovers, revolutions, [and] lawsuits" (Muldoon 35). Cold conflict, on the other hand, is that conflict which is ignored or repressed (Muldoon 65).

Cold conflict builds when confrontation is avoided. If the avoided confrontation is personal, it may result in the creation of an enemy, that is, a person who actually wishes ill will. However, avoided confrontations may be more complicated to resolve than interpersonal disputes. Muldoon described four different objects of confrontation: "(1) other people, (2) our own circumstances, (3) questions raised by those circumstances; and (4) ourselves" (68).

Allen Amason wisely points out that conflict is not yet well understood (127). What is recognized, however, is that there are different types of conflict coming from different sources. Amason focuses on two types of conflict in organizations. These are cognitive conflict and affective conflict.

Cognitive conflict is conflict which involves the cognitive and intellectual diversity of the group. It can generally be characterized as a functional task-oriented conflict involving judgmental differences about how to achieve the group's objectives (Amason 127). Cognitive conflict is usually an intellectual conflict caused by the group's perceptual diversity (Amason 127).
Affective conflict, on the other hand, is dysfunctional, and is characterized is manifested as a more emotional disturbance. This type of conflict tends to be focused on personal incompatibilities and disputes (Amason 128). Affective conflict can be “triggered” in many ways, and often develops the characteristics Muldoon associates with hot conflict.

The Sources and Roots of Conflict:

To better apply conflict to leadership, it is helpful to look at the source and roots of conflict, rather than its superficial manifestations. At its root conflict is not about the disputes of cultures, factions, or otherwise groups of people. Conflict is the expression of an individual condition, involving vague concepts such as liberty, identity, spirituality, security, and other values at its core (Burton 15-17).

Conflict is a difficult phenomenon to study because of the abundance of assumptions we make in our daily lives. Barbara Gray, in Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems, pointed out that a common assumption is our conclusion that different interpretations are necessarily opposing interpretations (12). Valmik Volkan might consider this assumption to be an essential element of conflict. In his books The Need for Enemies and Allies and Bloodlines, Volkan describes the human need for an enemy as an underlying cause of conflict.
This phenomena is identified as negative self-definition, in which people identify themselves as individuals separate and opposed to another individual, group, or idea (O’Doherty Interview).

Although these concepts provide one with a general philosophical idea as to where conflict forms, they are of less practical use in situational contexts of task oriented groups. It is important to recognize that the sources of conflict are just as varied as the types of conflict. This study primarily focuses on task oriented, cognitive conflict and emotional, affective conflict. This paper will describe different methods of fostering positive cognitive conflict and will describe behaviors and circumstances which have the effect of encouraging forms of hot, destructive conflict.

**Traditional Methods of Handling Conflict:**

John Burton introduced the term “provention” in his chapter “Conflict Provention as a Political System” (1987). He adds the prefix “pro” to distinguish coercive conflict prevention acts (such as the use of police) from efforts designed “to eliminate the causes of conflict by looking ahead and dealing with their sources” (115).

“Leadership in the Twenty-First Century” draws the conclusion that to take advantage of diversity and other trends in the social environment, collaborative leadership should involve supporting
relationships and interconnectedness, practicing stewardship and service, and valuing diversity and inclusiveness, to name a few (Allen, Bordas, Rickman, Matusak, Sorenson and Whitmore 6-7). This is consistent with the Needs Theory, developed in 1979 at a conference in Berlin. Needs theory challenges "the assumption that human behaviors are wholly malleable," and states that "some fundamental needs, such as individual and identity groups needs, that are compulsive and will be pursued regardless of cost" (Burton 120). Burton's conclusion is that to prevent conflict, it may be necessary for the institution to be adjusted to human needs, rather than require that the individual mold to the institution (Burton 120).

In Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett, the author directly tackles the topic of constructive conflict. She identifies three main ways of dealing with conflict, those being: (1) domination, (2) compromise, and (3) integration (Metcalf 31). Domination is defined as a win-lose situation where one side has "a victory... over another" (Metcalf 31). The author defines compromise as: "the way we settle most of our controversies; each side gives up a little in order to have peace, or to speak more accurately, in order that the activity which has been interrupted by the conflict may go on" (Metcalf 31). The third method, integration is the most beneficial in helping groups to change and progress. Integration is a process by which "both desires have found a place, [and] neither side has
had to sacrifice anything" (Metcalf 32). Integration is separate from compromise in that "compromise does not create, it deals with what already exists; integration creates something new..." (Metcalf 35). Integration involves creative invention. In doing so it helps to avoid the trap of remaining within the boundaries of the few expressed alternatives. In fostering creative invention, integration also helps to avoid the assumption that the alternatives are opposing and mutually exclusive (Metcalf 33).

The author also introduces another advantage of conflict unrelated to task accomplishment; it makes it possible to measure the progress of that group. The premise behind this is that as we develop, our conflicts rise to higher levels (Metcalf 35). This phenomenon can be expressed in the saying "A man is known by the dilemmas he keeps" (35). The author gives the situation of a man who’s greatest concern is whether or not he should steal as an example of someone less spiritually developed than perhaps one whose dilemma was of a deep philosophical nature.

The Paradox of Conflict

Amason synthesizes a great amount of conflict into what he identifies as "The Paradox of Strategic Decision Making" (Amason 126). The paradox is that "the antecedents of decision quality – diversity and interaction – may actually hinder the development of consensus and the maintenance of affect" (Amason 126). In other
words, although the cognitive conflict is necessary and produces the best outcome, it also has the effect of hampering the development of consensus. Cognitive conflict is important to develop high quality decisions, but consensus is equally as important in implementing those decisions.

To achieve high performance it is necessary for a group to develop decision quality, consensus, and affective acceptance. Of these terms, decision quality is the most subjective because it can only be measured in hindsight by examining its success. Consensus is the group's ability to come to some agreement, and affective acceptance is achieved when the group takes ownership of a particular decision. Decision quality is important to develop a practical decision which will complete the task or solve the problem in the most effective manner. Consensus is necessary for groups to come to agreement and end their task. And affective acceptance is necessary for the group to carry out its decision. However, Amason points out that these elements are contradictory (126). His reasoning is rooted in the premise that individuals on diverse teams will view a given problem differently. By developing cognitive conflict among these individuals, these different points of view are expressed with the intention of determining the key points of disagreement. During this process, actors in the group have the opportunity to focus their energies on these dissimilarities, "likely provok[ing] some acrimony" and thereby decreasing consensus (Amason 126). The result it that
"the benefits of a high-quality decision can be lost if the team lacks the understanding or commitment needed to implement the decision or the will to work together on other decisions in the future" (Amason 126).

There are methods which attempt to capture the ability of conflict to improve decision quality while maintaining or offering the group an opportunity to develop consensus. Two of these methods, the dialectical inquiry and devil’s advocacy approaches, are summarized below.

Positive Conflict: Newer Methods and Advantages

Newer methods of incorporating positive cognitive conflict into group processes have primarily taken the form of dialectical inquiry and devil’s advocacy approaches. Part II of this section elaborates on the advantages of incorporating these and other forms of structured conflict into the group process.

I.

In their article "Experiential Effects of Dialectical Inquiry, Devil’s Advocacy, and Consensus Approaches to Strategic Decision Making," David Schweiger, William Sandberg, and Paul Rechner examine two methods of incorporating conflict into the group decision making process. These are (1) dialectical inquiry, and (2) devil’s advocacy (Schweiger 1989; 746). The authors examine three issues related to these approaches.
The processes of dialectical inquiry and devil’s advocacy are similar in that they both make use of formalized debate. In a dialectical inquiry approach, a group is divided into two subgroups. The first sub-group develops an analysis and conclusion for the problem issue on the table. The second group then develops “plausible assumptions that negate those of the first, then uses these assumptions to construct counterrecommendations” (Schweiger 1989; 747). The groups must then come to consensus first on assumptions, and then on recommendations.

In the devil’s advocacy approach, the first group also develops an analysis and conclusion for the problem. The second group then critiques the assumptions and flaws of the proposal explaining why it should not be adopted. Unlike the dialectical inquiry method, the devil’s advocacy group offers no alternative. The first group revises its proposal to meet the criticisms of the advocacy group and presents it for a second critique.

First, the authors explore the usefulness of these “programmed conflict approaches” on making good decisions (Schweiger 1989; 747). They support their hypothesis that:

“[A]mong groups using different approaches to strategic decision making, (a) groups using dialectical inquiry and devil’s advocacy will perform better than groups using consensus, and (b) groups sing dialectical inquiry will perform better than groups using devil’s advocacy (Schweiger 1989; 750).

Second the authors attempt to determine the impact of these conflict approaches on the intragroup dynamic. This dynamic includes them members’ acceptance of group decisions, their
satisfaction with the group, and their desire to work together on subsequent tasks (Schweiger 1989; 750). They support their hypotheses that:

"Among groups using different approaches to strategic decision making, (a) members of consensus groups will react more positively to their groups than will members of dialectical inquiry or devil’s advocacy groups, and (b) members of devil’s advocacy groups will react more positively to their groups than will members of dialectical inquiry groups."

and

"Among groups using different approaches to strategic decision making, members of dialectical inquiry and devil’s advocacy groups will evaluate their own assumptions and recommendations more critically than will members of consensus groups" (Schweiger 1989; 750).

Third, the authors question the amount of time these approaches consume, recognizing that many strategic decisions require fast conclusions and implementation. They determine that "consensus groups will require less meeting time to make decisions" and that devil’s advocacy groups require less time than dialectical inquiry groups (Schweiger 1989; 750-1).

Fourth, the authors examine the effects of having experience with groups that utilize dialectical inquiry and devil’s advocacy. They conclude that performance of groups will continue to improve as experience within these methods of formal conflict increase, and that, as experience increases, the amount of meeting time needed will decrease (Schweiger 1989; 752). The authors further conclude that as groups will become more effective at using these approaches, subgroups that question assumptions and prepare counterrecommendations will develop better critical evaluation
II.

In “Group Decision-Making and Disagreement,” E. Paul Torrance offers a more practical military application of the usefulness of conflict. Through his study of air-crew effectiveness over Korea, Torrance determined that crews which had a greater tolerance for disagreement performed better in air combat battles. These groups were characterized as having “greater participation, initially wider divergence of expressed judgement, and greater acceptance of decisions” (Torrance 314).

Unlike the paradox described by Amason and Schweiger, Torrance study indicates that conflict actually increases group cohesion and consensus. He states:

“The evidence suggests that a higher degree of consensus is actually obtained when there is a greater expression of disagreement... Apparently, individuals feel that their opinions have been considered and are more willing to accept the group judgement” (Torrance 316).

Negative Conflict

The opposite of the functional cognitive conflict is the dysfunctional affective conflict. Affective conflict can be described as “emotional and focused on personal incompatibilities or disputes” (Amason 129).

There are a number of ways for affective conflict to develop. Affective conflict generally results “when cognitive disagreement
is perceived as personal criticism" (Amason 126). Affective conflict may also be attributed to perceived "political gamesmanship," a behavior in which "one team member tries to gain influence at the expense of another" (Amason 129). Affective conflict may also be triggered through the encouragement of constructive conflict. This may occur when competitive individuals are given the task to oppose each other. It can also occur when individuals become too attached to their positions. Through extended discussion, group members may also discover that there may be contradictions between group decisions and personal values which were not apparent at the beginning of the discussion (Amason 126-129).

This type of conflict can be a destructive force not only for a particular decision, but for the future of the group. One danger of negative conflict is that it may affect whether a group may be willing to work together in the future. This type of conflict, if escalated may also hinder accomplishment of the task at hand. If a group generates too much conflict, it runs the risk of "burn[ing] itself up," a process by which so much divisiveness is generated that the members of the group are unwilling to continue working together (Schweiger 1989: 746).

Negative conflict can also be tied to what Torrance called "negative identification" (316). Negative identification tends to occur when the values, background and/or personality of an individual are so opposed to those of the rest of the group that
other members cannot identify with him/her. "Any opinion he expresses, no matter how valuable or accurate, brings immediate and forceful disagreement. Attention to interpersonal relations has become greater than attention to the task." (Torrance 316).

Encouraging Positive Conflict

The most successful cognitive conflicts are conflicts caused by different ideas over and about policy. Policy, in this case, is defined as the result of a judgement made by policy makers (Brehmer 986). It is important to realize that in strategic decision making, problem solving, or policy situations, there is no proven means to obtain objective scientific knowledge. This is because problems are defined by people based on their prior knowledge and impressions, none of which can be absolute. For these reasons it can be said that personal judgement is the only way to obtain information (Brehmer 986).

Furthermore, Brehmer describes the judgement of people as being "quasi-rational" because "human judgement is based on both analysis and experience, rather than analysis alone," and involves "a mode of thinking [that is] partially rule bound and in which the thinker cannot fully account for the way he arrived at his conclusions" (Brehmer 986). The resulting problem is that:

"... For since the decision maker cannot fully account for the way he arrived at his decision, there will be endless speculations as to why one course of action was chosen instead of another, speculations that will almost inevitably involve assumptions about sinister motives that
the decision maker does not want to reveal. As a consequence, suspicion and distrust develop, and what started as a purely cognitive disagreement turns into a full-scale emotional and motivational conflict" (Brehmer 986)

Prior research supports the idea that there are both positive and negative forms of conflict. Positive conflict is generally task oriented and may be encouraged through such structured forms as Dialectical Inquiry and Devil’s Advocacy. There have been several studies and experiments with the intention of determining what types of behaviors and techniques are necessary for and detrimental to encouraging positive conflict. Some of the concepts behind these approaches will be discussed in the Analysis section of this paper.

**Turning Conflict into Compromise**

In an interview, Dr. Hugh O’Doherty described the difficulty of turning conflict into constructive compromise as resulting from the inseparableness of the emotional self from the task at hand. In every interpersonal situation there is an overlap of the group’s task and the individual’s socio-emotional disposition (see figure 1). In situations where an individual becomes a part of a collective entity such as a decision making group there is a tension between the individual and the group. This tension may stem from issues of power, control, and influence over the final product of the group. Also of psychological importance is the tension between independence from the group and interdependence
within the group. The first is important to maintain an individual identity and the second is necessary to develop a sense of belonging to the group. Also, Dr. O’Doherty points out it is not possible to separate the emotional aspect of human behavior from the advocacy of a perspective. This is because all of the information that people possess is interpreted from the socio-emotional self. This often leads to the effect that when a person’s views are challenged, his/her sense of self is challenged (O’Doherty).

This presents the dilemma of how to introduce new information into the group that will change the way in which they view the world. O’Doherty states that “Information by itself is not going to do it” (O’Doherty).

Conflict, through the encouragement of change, disturbs the status quo. This disturbance can either lead to positive constructive change or it can lead to emotional panic. O’Doherty uses the example of the collapse of the 1978 Irish Peace Talks to illustrate what happens when people perceive the threat of change to be too great. When change is attempted at too large of a large scale, it may be undermined by the fears of the community. When the change is attempted at too small of a scale, nothing may change at all. The task of the leadership in this situation is to find a level of stress that the system can tolerate and achieve change (O’Doherty).

Developing tolerance for change becomes the next task for
leadership. This is the task of getting the people to reflect on what their fears may be and to take responsibility for those fears. In other words, the parties involved in conflict must recognize that they have created the conflict through their own mindset. A conflict does not exist unless a person identifies himself at odds with another. Until the party(ies) involved realize that their perceptions create the conflict, they will not take responsibility for the situation (see figure 2).

Furthermore, it is necessary for a party to take responsibility for their role in perpetuating the conflict through their personal judgements to discontinue the scapegoating or blame they place on the other party. As long as an individual places fault in another party (through scapegoating or blame), there will be little compromise. This process of making people responsible for creating their own reality is part of the learning process which through which leaders must lead their followers (see figure 3) (O‘Doherty).

This task is one element necessary to the development of self-managed followers. Encouraging self-managed followership is important because it requires that the followers take responsibility for their role in the conflict.
**Figure 1 - The relationship between group task and individual socio-emotional disposition**

![Diagram showing the relationship between task and socio-emotional aspects.](image)

*O'Doherty*

**Figure 2 - The typical frame of individuals in conflict.**

This figure demonstrates the individual's natural tendency to view and define the conflict from their own socio-emotional point of view. The box represents the reality that the individual created based on his/her past cognitive processes. As long as the individual remains in this "box" her prejudices will allow her to scapegoat the other party, thereby decreasing the probability of compromise.
Figure 3 - The self-managed follower. The challenge of leadership is to teach the follower to recognize that the conflict exists as a result of his/her perceptions and prejudices. Once a follower accepts responsibility for their role in promulgating the conflict, progress toward compromise becomes much easier.
Findings/Results

Through the review of literature, it is possible to categorize the characteristics of positive and negative conflict. The following chart is intended to help summarize the differences between positive and negative conflict:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Table 1 - Findings</strong></th>
<th>Positive Conflict</th>
<th>Negative Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>Dysfunctional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on differences of ideas (Schweiger 1989: 6-15)</td>
<td>Focuses on differences of individuals (Schweiger 1989: 6-15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves an intellectual understanding of other individuals</td>
<td>Characterized by an emotional reaction to other members</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Types</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Cognitive Conflict&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Affective Conflict&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Task Oriented&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Emotional&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Effect on Group Decision Making Process</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improves the quality of decision making by incorporating diverse perceptions and judgements about the situation</td>
<td>Does not improve the quality of decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on Consensus</td>
<td>Increases the difficulty of coming to consensus</td>
<td>Extremely difficult to come to consensus while this conflict exists</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on Decision Implementation</td>
<td>May be damaging only if escalated into negative conflict</td>
<td>May prevent or undermine decision implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on Future Tasks of the Group</td>
<td>May be damaging only if it escalated into negative conflict</td>
<td>Will damage future projects of the group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis - Leadership Implications: The Role of Leadership in Conflict

At the task and intellectual level, conflict makes leadership possible. Many societal institutions are created to manage interests and factions of people who are at odds with others. The legal and political systems are two components of society created for the purpose of managing, resolving, or ending conflict. Other institutions and businesses are created to provide the means of securing the basic needs and desires that are often at the root of conflict. Religions and community groups may provide a sense of spirituality or identity to its constituent individuals (Burton 1-15).

Handling conflict between interests, individuals, and groups is one of the core roles of leadership. According to Burns:

"Leaders... Do not shun conflict; they confront it, exploit it, ultimately embody it... Leaders shape as well as express and mediate conflict. They do this largely by influencing the intensity and scope of conflict. Within limits they can soften or sharpen the claims and demands of their followers" (Burns 39).

As we move toward a truly global society, the greatest challenge of leadership will be to incorporate diverse views into a decision making process while simultaneously maintaining a positive relationship within the group. The trick of these two seemingly nonexclusive tasks is that to achieve the highest quality decision making, the group needs to foster constructive conflict while avoiding interpersonal or emotional conflict. To successfully implement the decision, the group also needs a higher
level of consensus and acceptances of the group's decision, which may be hindered by either type of conflict (Schweiger 1989).

Leadership Traps

Torrance describes conflict as necessary to prevent groupthink in a military context, and describes the encouragement of conflict as necessary for avoiding a trap of popular leadership. Conflict that incorporates a willingness to disagree is very important because it expresses your "real opinion" to the group and can avoid misunderstandings (Torrance 315). Torrance states:

"Also, if the individual perceives the leadership as "good," he is less likely to question the opinions of the leader. He finds it more comfortable to think as the leader thinks, or as the group thinks, because his experiences has taught him that he is usually wrong when he thinks otherwise. He may have more faith in their decisions than in his own" (Torrance 317).

James MacGregor Burns also describes the relationship of conflict to consensus. Whereas Amason and Schweiger focus on conflict as discouraging consensus, Burns offers the idea that cohesion may encourage conflict. "Indeed, the closer, the more intimate the relations within a group, the more hostility as well as harmony may be generated" (Burns 37).

It is of crucial importance to recognize that there may be a thin line between cognitive and affective conflict. Emotional, affective conflict may be triggered by intentional attacks or simple misunderstandings within the group. In addition, this
transformation may be obvious or completely unnoticed. However, even if the transformation is unnoticed, the results are just as destructive (Amason 129). This may be the worst outcome because the conflict is not discovered until the group’s interaction is ended and there is no way to correct errors. As with other situations, the decision quality and implementation may suffer.

A trap of leadership which may result in affective conflict is the “political gamesmanship” which is often a component of the group dynamic (Amason 129). When one individual attempts to place him/herself above another individual, he/she may trigger affective conflict. This behavior may result in animosity or a feeling of disenfranchisement within the group which might decrease the level of participation and disagreement among individuals. In cases involving more aggressive individuals, it may result a more emotional and divisive confrontation.

There is also a danger of producing affective conflict through the exercise of zero-sum conflict. Zero-sum conflict is a situation where the conflict must produce a winner and a loser. Zero-sum conflict is not a collaborative or cooperative process between parties and is often a function of a competitive relationship. This is related to Volkan’s concept of negative identification, and Burton’s description of the need of individuals to locate an identity in different groups. Together these elements of human behavior may help to create a competitive environment. Many human systems encourage this behavior,
particularly political systems where the goal is to be recognized as a winner and in situations where objectives are reached by ad hominem arguments, that is, attacking the person or the person's character/beliefs/intentions/etc. unrelated to the issue on the table.

These types of behaviors are dangerous because when disagreement is perceived as personal criticism, the result may lead to full-scale emotional conflict (Amason 129). Amason also states that this misunderstanding could "trigger personal, affective conflict, fostering cynicism, avoidance, or counter-effort that could undermine consensus and affective acceptance and jeopardize decision quality" (Amason 129).

Aspects of group structure which may impede disagreement are status and power differences, permanency of the group, and leadership techniques.

Differing status within the group or team may have the effect of harming positive conflict. In such a situation, Torrance discovered that the less powerful members of the group demonstrated an unwillingness to disagree with the most powerful member of the group. Though this effect was primarily studied in the context of military hierarchy, the author notes that the result is frequently the same regardless of the context. Not only does the unwillingness to disagree with a higher ranking member of the group hierarchy adversely affect the quality of the decision, but it also has the result "that the decision is ineffectively
Another factor which have a hindering effect on the clash and development of ideas has to do with the permanency of the group - individuals who hold back for fear of offending a member of higher rank or fear that their words will be held against them will be more likely to disagree in a less permanent group. In the more permanent groups, where the leadership is powerful and/or popular, the individual is more hesitant to disagree. In the case where the individual has a positive perception of the leadership, he/she may find it more comfortable to think as the leader or group thinks.

There may also psychological barriers to positive conflict. One such barrier might be the side effect of popular, successful, or charismatic leadership. Torrance describes this phenomenon:

"Also, if the individual perceives the leadership as "good," he is less likely to question the opinions of the leader. He finds it more comfortable to think as the leader thinks, or as the group thinks, because his experiences has taught him that he is usually wrong when he thinks otherwise. He may have more faith in their decisions than in his own" (Torrance 317).

**Techniques for Maintaining Positive Conflict**

Burns warns us that leaders must first discard the negative connotations associated with conflict. Some of the most basic elements of our society and our organizations are the result of the successful dealing with conflict. For example, the use of process and structure is a result of past efforts to control and
encourage certain types of conflict. Aside from setting up dialectical inquiry or devil's advocacy type programs, groups set up structures to ensure fairness and representation so that involved parties may discuss a particular task and limit the conflict within mutually agreed upon rules. Burns notes that in a perfectly harmonious group, there is no need for structure or process (Burns 37).

Positive conflict can have many advantages. By itself, conflict is "intrinsically compelling" in that "it galvanizes, prods, [and] motivates people" (Burns 38). Burns states both the advantages of conflict and task for the leader to encourage conflict in his statement:

"The essential strategy of leadership in mobilizing power is to recognize the arrays of motives and goals in potential followers.... Conflict - disagreement over goals within an array of followers, fear of outsiders, competition for scarce resources - immensely invigorates the mobilization of consensus and dissensus. But the fundamental process is a more elusive one; it is, in large part, to make conscious what lies unconscious among followers"(40).

Social scientists, leadership scholars, and managers have devised different strategies for controlling conflict and encouraging positive conflict in organizational, political, and community environments. Although there are some commonalities in these approaches, they are a testament to difficulty of developing a comprehensive methodology for dealing with conflict. Because the nature of conflict involves dealing with diversity between personalities, perceptions, groups, and situations, it is impossible to develop methods which will be effective in all
situations.

It is the conclusion of this paper, though, that there are certain leadership behaviors and techniques which help to maximize positive conflict and minimize negative conflict, while at the same time preserving the group cohesion necessary for successful implementation of the decision.

First, when creating an atmosphere for positive conflict, it is important for a leader to develop a team relationship, that is, an environment where discussion and disagreement can exist. A good team relationship can increase the tolerance of the individuals in the group to intellectual conflict before reaching the trigger point at which cognitive conflict becomes affective conflict. A social relationship among team members may also help members to better understand the way others think and communicate. Misunderstanding and faulty perceptions of attack and personal criticism are common factors in the explosion of affective conflict (Amason 129).

Second, as part of the relationship, it is also important to develop effective communication. There are many different ways to communicate within a group while attempting to foster productive conflict. Members need to be conscious of the language that they use and express themselves in such a way as to minimize misunderstanding. Understanding of the opinions of the group members and the goals of the group is crucial to groups seeking to improve their cognitive conflict. Amason notes that a common
understanding of the group's decisions and positions allows the individual to act independently while remaining consistent with the group's purpose (125). It is important for members to act independently when voicing their own perception to the group.

The third main task for leaders who hope to incorporate constructive conflict into their groups is to empower the followers and develop a self-managed followership within the group. Torrance cautioned us of the possibility that hierarchical systems and popular leadership may hinder member participation and harm the development of positive conflict. Developing self-managed followers will allow a team to exist where people are can independently work to advance their opinions and perspectives, before coming to agreement and consensus.

Conclusion:

As organizations prepare for the global society of the Twenty-First Century, leaders will have an increased number opportunities to use and develop diversity within their organizations and communities. This new diversity has the potential to offer us many advantages if we learn to use it wisely and control the dangerous interpersonal conflicts which will inevitably accompany it. It is possible for leaders to use the conflict as an intellectual exchange of ideas to improve decision making organizational dynamics, if they develop teams of individuals to work effectively as both individuals and as a
collective.
Works Cited and Bibliography


