Conflict or Opportunity: Exploring the Art of Difficult Conversations

Colorado School of Mines, President’s Diversity Breakfast
Melissa Emerson, Conflict Resolution Services
Conflict or Opportunity?

Conflict Styles

Dissecting Conflicts

Using Conflict Resolution Skills
“People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they do not know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Exhibit #1: Professor feeling “threatened and harassed”

Professor X: It’s not like I’m trying to take advantage of the system. I pay a boatload of money to go to this school. I want to learn, not jump through hoops for teachers who lack understanding and flexibility. I have one additional question. Who took the jelly out of your donut?
Exhibit #2: Seeing Double
Staff:  The break room needs to be cleaned by 5 pm tomorrow (Thursday). If not, everyone will be going on verbal warning. If you are already on verbal warning, you will be on written warning.

You are all adults here and therefore you should take responsibility for cleaning up your space.
Exhibit #4: It’s that time again!
Exhibit #5: Roommate Post-Its

Post-It Note Communication:

- “According to Facebook, we are having a party this Friday. Thanks for letting me know.”
- “Rent is due on the first, not whenever you feel like paying it.”
- “Can we please keep the heat on tonight? If not, I’m pretty sure we will need to go ice fishing for Goldie.”
- “Do we have a dog now?”
Lessons Learned:

- Avoidance
- Text/Email
What is your conflict style?

- Avoidance
- Competition
- Collaboration
- Accommodation
- Compromise

http://www.consciouschange.ort/Community/5-StylesofConflict.htm

The Conflict Resolution Training Program: Leader’s Manual; Kestner & Ray
Causes of Conflict

**RELATIONSHIP CONFLICTS**
- Strong emotions
- Misperceptions or stereotypes
- Poor communication or miscommunication
- Repetitive negative behavior

**DATA CONFLICTS**
- Lack of information
- Misinformation
- Different views on what is relevant
- Different interpretations of data
- Different assessment procedures

**VALUE CONFLICTS**
- Different criteria for evaluating ideas or behavior
- Different ways of life, ideology, or religion

**STRUCTURAL CONFLICTS**
- Time constraints
- Geographical/physical factors that hinder cooperation
- Unequal power/authority
- Unequal control/distribution of resources

**INTEREST CONFLICTS**
Perceived or actual competition over “wants” or “needs”:
- Substantive interests
- Procedural interests
- Psychological interests

From The Mediation Process by Christopher Moore
Tools for Difficult Conversations

- Active Listening
- Ask the right questions
- Positions vs. Interests
- Reframe
- Generate Solutions
Active Listening Means...

- Joining the process, not just being physically present.
- Allowing person to feel heard
  - Restating/Paraphrasing parties’ words for emphasis
  - Summarizing helps fill gaps
  - Questioning encourages people to talk
Try Not To:

Advise: “I think you should....”

One up: “That’s nothing. Wait until you hear....”

Shut down: “You seem to be blowing this out of proportion.”

Correct: “That’s not how it happened.”

Story-tell: “This reminds me of a time.”
Eliciting Information

Asking questions (open vs. closed)

Open-ended:
- Requires more than a “yes” or “no
- Stimulates thinking

Examples:
- Tell me about the situation
- What do you think has created this problem?
- How has this situation impacted you?
Focus on…

- **Interests** rather than **positions**

- **Positions** are statements, demands and wants; what someone thinks should happen
  “I want a raise.”

- **Interests** are desires and concerns
  “Why” a person wants/needs something
  “I feel like I work as hard as others and I
  should be compensated.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROBLEM</th>
<th>INTERPRETATION</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>INTEREST</th>
<th>ISSUE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The immediate source of the conflict</td>
<td>How people interpret the other party’s behavior</td>
<td>Demands, threats, fixed solutions or proposals</td>
<td>What really matters to this person</td>
<td>The topic the parties need to discuss and decide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook group</td>
<td>My boss wants me to “friend him” so he can spy on me</td>
<td>I am going to quit if something doesn’t change</td>
<td>I want my work and personal life separate</td>
<td>How can the employee get up to date work info and not be a part of the Facebook group?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Dissecting a Conflict**

Beer & Stief: The Mediator’s Handbook
Problem: Giving a presentation about cheating

Interpretation: The teacher is trying to publicly humiliate me

Position: I would rather take an F in the class

Interest: I am afraid of being embarrassed in front of my classmates

Issue: How can she comply with teacher's consequences without being shamed?

Problem: Student disagrees with test grade. Scoring error?

Interpretation: The professor has no tolerance for people with a learning disability. She's intentionally trying to bring down my grade

Position: I’m filing a complaint with OEO

Interest: I want to look at the test to see if I made an error on the scantron

Issue: How can the student review the test without getting an unfair advantage for final exam?
REFRAMING

Restating what the speaker has said in order to capture the essence while removing negative overtones/words and to translate a positional statement into a statement of interests or needs.
Reframing Examples

Comment: “He’s so lazy. He never cleans up his desk.”
Response: “It is really important for you to have a tidy workspace.”

Comment: “I’ve never met someone as nosey as her. She is constantly butting into my business.”
Response: “There are times when you’d like a certain level of privacy.”

Comment: “My boss is a complete micromanager.”
Response: “It seems as though you would like more autonomy in your job.”
Mediation for Difficult Conversations
What is Mediation? (North American Model)

A process where a neutral third party helps individuals in a dispute engage in constructive communication; allowing them to explore issues and reach a mutually acceptable resolution.

Art Lusse: They Call it Mediation
Mediation is.....
- Voluntary
- Confidential
- Consensual process

Mediators are......
- Neutral and impartial
- Empowering the parties to resolve their conflict

Mediators do not...
- Offer advice or therapy
- Judge
- Have a stake in the outcome
Benefits of Mediation:

- Parties control outcome
- Identify root cause of conflict
- Opportunity to repair relationship
- Apologies offered
- Unique agreements accepted
Generating Solutions

• Where to begin?
  ▫ Highlight Common Ground
  ▫ Start with easiest issue first
    • Builds confidence in parties

• Ask questions that get at solutions
  ▫ “What might work for you?”
  ▫ “What can you do to resolve this situation?”

Art Lusse, Montana Mediators
Generating Solutions
Using a Restorative Approach

- A new paradigm to utilize when having difficult conversations
- Focus on the harm
- Address behavior
- Conversations between individuals or groups
Using a Restorative Approach

- Ask restorative questions:
  - Who has been affected? In what way?
  - How were you harmed? How has the incident impacted you?
  - What were you thinking/feeling at the time?
  - What have you thought about since then?
  - What can be done to make the situation right?
Case Study #1: Academic Misconduct
Final Conflict Considerations:

- Avoidance leads to escalation
- Backing someone into a corner/Blindsiding
- Bringing up the past
- Attacking with a “you”
- Bringing others into the conflict
- Cooling off period
- Power dynamics
- Confidentiality
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