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Holton, Susan A., "Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Conflict Management in the Classroom – and Beyond" (1997). *Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education: Archives*. 177.
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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

Volume 8, Number 3, 1996-97

A publication of The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org).

Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Conflict Management in the Classroom --- and Beyond

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Conflict in academia. Does this thought bring to mind knives thrown across the room, graffiti emblazoned on the walls, professors reeling from a left punch? Obviously, this is not the kind of conflict that most in academia face in the classroom -- and beyond. Rather, the conflict with which we deal is more subtle -- and therefore more difficult to identify, diagnose, and manage.

There will always be conflict in academia. The very nature of the student-professor relationship sets up a situation of conflict because of the power imbalance. But what can we do about it? How can we identify, diagnose, and manage the conflict?

A Model for Conflict Management The model explained here is one that will work for any conflict whether between faculty and student, faculty and faculty, faculty and administrator, or even faculty and partner. This model has three parts: 1) identification of the conflict, 2) identification of solutions, and 3) implementation of solutions. All three steps are necessary in order to manage the conflict well.

Identification of the conflict is a six-step phase, all of which are necessary to understand the conflict.

1. *Who is involved?* It is important to identify the parties involved as

well as all who are not. The relationship of those in conflict is important, both to understanding the conflict and developing solutions. A conflict between a faculty member and a student is very different from that of two colleagues because of the differing power relationship. It is also important to determine the people who are peripheral to the conflict but likely to be affected by it.

2. *What is the conflict?* At this phase of identification, you need to determine objective data as well as emotions and feelings. Because conflict is an emotional fact of life, to ignore the feelings is to have only a part of the reality.

3. *When did it happen?* The beginning of conflict is often difficult to pinpoint. Try to identify its genesis, and also determine whether it is an ongoing or cyclical conflict. Perhaps the conflict occurs whenever a specific assignment is given, or maybe it occurs every year around the time when the faculty decide the schedule for the following year.

4. *Where did it happen?* It is important to know not only where the conflict occurred physically (in the classroom, in the office), but also where within the organizational structure. The management possibilities may be different if it was between peers or between a staff member and a senior administrator.

5. *Resolution attempts?* One must learn whether resolution has already been attempted and, if so, the outcomes.

6. *Consequences of the conflict?* Think ahead about what will happen if the conflict is not resolved and what will happen if it is? Sometimes avoidance or accommodation are appropriate management strategies. Perhaps others in the department can manage the conflict without your presence. There are conflicts of such tribal importance to the college or department that it makes more sense to let it go. And sometimes the relationship of the people in conflict is more important than pursuing the conflict.

Identification of solutions begins after information about the nature of the conflict has been gathered. Those directly involved must work together (sometimes with a neutral third party). Again, this phase must not be shortened. Often marvelous options for management are

ignored out of the intense drive for conclusion. Setting the stage and getting parties to communicate and work together are necessary parts of this phase of the process. The steps are as follows.

1. *Develop a positive attitude.* No conflict will be managed by people who believe it is doomed to failure or who refuse to sit in the same room with the other parties. This may require a discussion about ways of working together in the future and about possible positive outcomes.

2. *Establish ground rules.* Conflict produces a feeling of chaos, and ground rules should include at the very least: a) structure -- frequency and place of meetings; b) communication - agreement that everyone will use "I" statements, agreement on the use of feedback and confidentiality; and c) the membership of the group, which should not change.

3. *Identify interests of the parties.* Parties must understand their own priorities and desired outcome(s). Fisher and Ury in their excellent book *Getting to Yes* have written extensively about the importance of interests versus positions. Parties need to understand what they truly want as an outcome. After an identification of those interests, the parties may discover that one wants to teach in the morning to free herself up for afternoon research and the other wants to keep his introductory course. As both identify interests, rather than stand firm in positions, the answer to the conflict often becomes obvious. Identification of interests includes an understanding of what Fisher and Ury refer to as the BATNA, the Best Alternative to the Negotiated Agreement. Sometimes it helps to explain to parties what will happen if they do not come together to manage the conflict. Often the threat of externally imposed solutions, by the department chair for example, is enough to get parties to agree to work together.

4. *Develop alternatives.* There is never only one answer to a problem, but it may be difficult to see options. Brainstorming is the best process to develop alternatives. In an environment of trust (perhaps facilitated by the neutral third party) disputants can work together to develop multiple alternatives. It is also helpful to identify ways that similar issues have been managed by others. What have other faculty done? How have other faculty and students resolved

similar issues? What has been done at other institutions? It is important that this phase be separate from the decision making based on criteria.

5. *Identify criteria.* Not all of the ideas generated during the previous stage will be appropriate for this individual conflict. It is then necessary to identify appropriate criteria and use them to determine the best solution(s). First, there are often objective criteria. The student may have to finish a final project, but perhaps the nature of that project could be negotiated. Or the faculty member still has to teach three courses per semester, but the specific courses could be changed. Some criteria are also subjective, and, as mentioned earlier, emotions are important factors in conflict management. Thus, one criterion may be that all parties feel good about the solution.

6. *Weigh solutions against criteria.* The solutions generated earlier should be weighed against the prioritized criteria and a **best** solution will result. It is important to determine whether that solution is, in fact, felt to be the **best** by all parties. Too often, after a solution has been determined, parties realize that they left out some important criteria. This will undoubtedly happen if the parties include only rational, logical criteria and ignore emotional aspects of the decision. **The implementation phase** needs to be done with as much care and time as the other two, and it consists of the following.

1. *Develop a plan of action.* Many proposed solutions fail because of a nebulous solution. A plan of action, as specific as possible, must include the following. In extreme cases, it may be appropriate to write up the plan of action and have it signed by the parties

a. Who is going to be involved in the implementation of the solutions? This may involve others outside the immediate group. Who might those people be -- the department chair, the dean, the ombudsman?

b. What exactly is to be done? It is important to itemize all actions that need to be taken -- both major and minor.

c. When will the parties act? What is going to be done tomorrow? By what date will the complete solution be in place?

d. Who is responsible for mediating any differences between the parties? The group has done a lot of work to get to this phase. What

happens if a roadblock - or a minor bump - occurs?

2. *Determine how to handle conflict in the future.* You have just successfully managed a conflict. Now what do you do if it happens again? As a part of the conflict management process, the parties should agree on a way to deal with conflict in the future. They may, for example, agree to go to the university ombudsman, to appoint a conflict management committee, or to meet monthly to discuss issues.

Summary There will always be conflict in academia. It occurred in the establishment of the first institutions of higher learning and will continue.

But if one knows how to identify, diagnose and manage the conflict, then it can be a developmental experience for all involved.

References

Fisher, Roger and William Ury, *Getting to Yes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

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