

Understanding Conflict

WELCOME TO OUR STUDY about conflict resolution in higher education. We begin this chapter by laying the groundwork for understanding a conflict situation. After all, to understand its resolution, we must first know what conflict is. We will introduce important concepts and illustrate how to use them. We discuss how conflict is often destructive—even though it need not be so—and how conflict can be changed into a constructive interaction. We conclude with a discussion of conflict prevention—the easiest way to handle conflict.

CONFLICT DEFINED

In the field of conflict resolution, there are many definitions of conflict. One that we think is both basic and applicable to most conflicts in higher education comes from William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker in their study of interpersonal conflict. They identify three conditions: (1) some kind of expressed struggle between at least two parties, (2) these parties have an interdependent relationship, and (3) these parties perceive they are getting interference from each other in achieving their goals. Using this definition to think about conflict is helpful because it implies that conflicts will not change until there is a change in the parties' *perceptions* about the other(s) and a change in their behavior.

Let's imagine that Charlie, a student at your college, needs to drop a course in the third week of the semester because of an imposed change in

his work schedule. The university policy says that at this point students must pay 40 percent of the tuition. Yet Charlie believes he has a special case and therefore should not be assessed the fee. After all, it is not his fault that he can no longer attend the class. Is this a conflict? Not yet, though it has all the ingredients to become one. Conflict will occur when Charlie is told by Eileen, the enrollment management supervisor—to whom Charlie later appeals—that he must still pay 40 percent of the tuition when he drops the class. Now there are incompatible goals (Charlie's special case versus Eileen's responsibility to consistently apply university rules). Charlie perceives interference from Eileen when she makes him pay. What would you do? Can you prevent this from becoming a conflict?

Conflict cannot occur unless there is an interaction between the parties, and therefore the responses Charlie and Eileen have toward each other are critical. (Chapter Four discusses individual preferences or styles of handling this interaction such as taking an aggressive position or avoiding it to prevent confrontation.) As Charlie and Eileen perceive interference from each other, the interaction is likely to escalate to a conflict situation. If they believe they can work together to find a solution, they are likely to respond in ways that prevent a conflict.

WORKING WITH CONFLICT

As adults, most of us have considerable experience with conflict and have learned ways of coping with it. We have encountered conflict since early childhood. In our families we struggled with siblings and parents and learned, early on, ways to handle others and get our way or lose the struggle. Over the years we developed *preferences* for dealing with conflict. Some of us remain quiet, calm, and restrained; others blow up; some prefer to fight behind the scenes; many avoid or ignore it; and a few intentionally try to get issues out on the table for discussion. During our years in school we struggled with peers and teachers and learned strategies to get ahead, to compromise, to work collaboratively, to be aggressive, or to give in. In the workplace we have struggled with coworkers, bosses, and subordinates and learned how to work with issues of power, authority, and control. In the news we are bombarded with stories of terrorism, war,

and political in-fighting, and we continue to learn about protracted, enduring conflicts that seem nearly impossible to resolve. We are savvy about who to fear and who to bully. We are cognizant about issues of status, class, litigation, and fairness. And we bring this rich mosaic of experience-based information about conflict to our work in the university. So why is it, then—with everything that we have all learned—that conflict continues to persist in the academy?

Let us first consider the nature of the organizational context. American higher education is special in its structure, mission, and governance. One way that it is special is its decentralized model—public and private, four-year and two-year, proprietary and nonprofit. Colleges and universities establish their own decision-making models—embedded in and consistent with the larger culture of similar institutions that are public, private, four-year, two-year, and so on. Another variable to consider is that higher education is one of the few places where inconvenient questions can be asked, multiple voices can be heard, and various perspectives can be considered. This means that the heterogeneity of the people, ideas, and issues will encourage differences and therefore increase the likelihood of conflict. The academy also has a primary leadership role because it provides the intellectual and moral foundation for our youth to become leaders and members of society. Yet the rapid advance of knowledge in many fields of study makes this particular task daunting. In addition to higher education's organizational uniqueness and complexity, its context is embedded in a time of challenging resource limitations and enormous economic pressures, where authority and governance structures continue to be scrutinized, and external accountability is increasingly called forth.

WHEN CONFLICT IS DESTRUCTIVE

Returning to and based on our personal experiences, it is not uncommon when we hear the word *conflict* to think of concepts such as war, anger, destruction, terror, hostility, anxiety, alienation, and frustration. Particularly in U.S. culture, conflict is generally perceived as negative. Simple misunderstandings or minor disagreements can shift into full-fledged battles and become quite destructive. How does this happen? We know

that there are three common conditions that encourage conflict escalation: when the parties *perceive* competition over scarce resources, *perceive* the use of threatening and contentious influence patterns (bullying, showing, challenging, posturing, and so on), and *perceive* unfair highlighting of specific personal characteristics of others (gender, race, disability, and so on). Any of these three conditions will likely result in escalation; the presence of more than one will make conflicts even more difficult to manage or resolve.

Competition over Scarce Resources

The 1990s were financially good for higher education. The economy was unusually strong, investments yielded high returns, and alumni were willing to increase giving. Administrators were adding programs and staff, and upgrading technology. Recently, though, there has been a sharp change in available resources. We read about mandated cuts in budgets across the country. The financing of new buildings is disappearing. At best, the era of growth and prosperity has been put on hold. Why is this important? Because not only do we *perceive* limited resources, there actually *are* limited resources, and a common response to this situation is acting on the belief that we must find ways to “fight” for our share or we will lose. When this happens it is difficult to find much evidence of collaborative teamwork because managers hold their cards closer to their chests and withhold information they think might be dangerous to disclose. If people believe that the biggest bully will get the largest return, what happens? Conflict escalates and finger pointing about the “other” becomes more prevalent.

Threatening Influence Patterns

When leaders and managers experience limited resources, competition between units erupts. This is often accompanied by overt accusations. When the president or provost announces a university-wide multimillion dollar budget cut that will affect all units, posturing between department heads is predictable. Department heads argue—in newspapers or at meetings or administrative forums—that some departments such as athletics should have greater cuts than other departments such as recruitment or

that revenue-generating academic programs should get special dispensation over revenue-spending departments such as technology support. In other words, one department or unit makes a case for fewer cuts at the expense of another department or unit. The other group, of course, experiences this as threatening. Coalitions emerge, one against another.

Long-term, simmering, and unresolved conflicts present themselves over and over again during difficult times. A classic example on many of our campuses is the unresolved conflicts between administrators and faculty that result in the two groups periodically threatening each other. Threatening influence patterns are not limited to large groups across departments, however. It is very common to find evidence of threat and escalated conflict within departments and between individuals.

Leaders and managers must use their position power very carefully to keep employees, members of departments, or other subordinates from feeling abused. Active listening and demonstrating empathy and concern about specific situations is always helpful. Returning to the case of Charlie and Eileen, if she expresses sympathy for his position but can turn to an objective source—the catalogue—which states that students must pay 40 percent of the tuition, Charlie is not so likely to feel that she is using her power at his expense. How Eileen and Charlie handle themselves is important. Their behavior can escalate the conflict situation or help them come to an understanding that seems fair, even if one of the parties does not particularly like the outcome.

Attacks on Personal Characteristics

Minor conflicts escalate quickly when there are inappropriate accusations related to such personal characteristics as race, gender, class, sexual preference, and so on. Talking unfavorably about others based on their role—“administrator,” “staff,” or “student”—also results in similar reactions. We don’t like to be categorized, and we certainly don’t like it when a categorization is delivered or meant in a derogatory way. Joe, a long-time employee of a graphics and design department, has a history of telling off-color jokes. Libby, the new employee, heard a series of his jokes, often at the expense of women, and took offense. She discussed her concerns with another female colleague and learned that many in the department were

unwilling to challenge him. They mostly dismissed his behavior by such comments as “Oh, that’s just Joe. He does that all the time to every group. No one is untouched.” Unsatisfied, Libby decided to challenge Joe about his offensive joke telling. Joe got defensive and responded with anger: “Maybe these jokes have way too much truth to them. You are certainly making me see that!” She was furious that he was so insensitive. Their conflict escalated quickly when he accused her of lacking a sense of humor and being “boringly straight.”

The Impact of Escalation

Group process and group cohesiveness become significantly impaired when simple conflicts turn destructive and escalate. The following are common results:

- Good feelings are undermined
- Cohesiveness is fractured
- Positions are polarized
- Difficulty in seeking cooperation is created
- Differing values emerge
- Comments are later regretted

The escalation of the conflict between Libby and Joe met all of these criteria. First, it undermined good feelings. Libby felt she was being devalued as a woman and as a result was unwilling to make any special efforts to respond to Joe as a colleague. The exchange also fractured potential cohesiveness within the department because colleagues began to take sides. Polarization of positions emerged and justified each party’s behavior toward the other: “Why did we hire her in the first place?” and “How can he get away with such archaic ways of working with colleagues? The academy is no longer an ‘old boys’ network!” Once positions become polarized, it is difficult to see any common ground or seek cooperation. This would violate “face-saving” and be perceived as caving into the other’s position. The differences in values become clear and accusations are

espoused— “he is such a sexist” and “she is such a prude.” Often disputants make comments to and about each other that are later regretted.

We have all experienced conflicts with destructive outcomes. Yet this need not be the case. How we respond to conflict escalation depends upon our ability to listen carefully and consider options. When we are locked into positions and develop scripts about another person, it is difficult to change our perceptions. One way to break the logjam is to ask: “How can conflicts—this one in particular—be helpful in any way?”

WHEN CONFLICT IS CONSTRUCTIVE

There are many examples where conflict turns out to be constructive for individuals and groups. First, constructive conflicts encourage open discussion and allow full exploration of each party’s needs, concerns, values, and interests—the essential ingredients of authentic communication. Second, conflict is constructive if it provides an opportunity to release pent-up emotions. Griping and complaining often help people let off steam so that they can move on. Making space for complaints—formal and informal meetings, time on agendas, hallway conversations—encourages colleagues to take the risk of voicing their concerns. Third, if solutions to problems emerge in the open discussion or griping sessions, these solutions are likely to have greater buy-in. Paradoxically, conflict can build cohesiveness as people begin to have a history together of “surviving” conflict. They are able to solve other problems and negotiate other changes that are likely to occur.

Constructive conflict provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that even when colleagues make mistakes, or deliver remarks they later regret, or perceive another person as being inappropriate, these concerns and errors can be revisited and repaired. As differences arise, new solutions can be generated with appropriate support and willingness to understand one another.

An actual case illustrates one way conflict can be constructive. Jim and Diane were two members of an important task force. They were constantly fighting about what each believed should be the direction of the committee’s work. After three difficult meetings, Susan, a third task force

member, told the group that she did not want to serve on the task force if Jim and Diane's bickering continued. She suggested that each meeting's agenda include designated times for full discussion on controversial topics. Once everyone had an opportunity to present her or his perspective, the group would support the greatest consensus. This small intervention worked and allowed all voices to be heard and considered. It made a special place for discussing real differences, and a process was put into place to move ahead. The task force significantly increased its productivity and got its work completed.

PREDICTING AND PREVENTING CONFLICT

Throughout the book we will be talking about how to analyze conflict situations and strategies to manage or resolve them. Some situations, however, are predictable precursors for conflicts. Two common precursors in our colleges and universities are initiating any significant *change*—welcomed or not—and being involved in any individual or group *transition* process. These are not necessarily sufficient causes of conflict, but under these conditions academic administrators should be on the alert for early detection and possible prevention of conflict.

We are all currently experiencing many changes. A large population bubble is aging. Senior administrators and faculty will be retiring in increasing numbers. As key university citizens, they will need to be replaced. Early-career administrators and faculty already reflect differences in gender, ethnicity, backgrounds, and values. These differences will only be exaggerated over the next decade. We are also shifting the focus in the teaching and learning process away from faculty, and how much they know, toward students, and how best they learn. The massive influx of technology, the creation of virtual universities, the dramatic increases of online courses, the shifts from books and periodicals to web and electronic databases, and the availability of “smart classrooms” for teaching—wired rooms with the best technology readily available, including computer terminals at every seat and multimedia capabilities for faculty, organized in pods for student learning communities—all impact the roles and tasks of

staff as well as faculty and students. Administrators are clearly playing a more direct role in the academic enterprise than in previous decades.

As the economy shifts, so does competition between and among colleges, universities, and corporate classrooms. There are increased demand for accountability at all levels and increased attention to measurable outcomes. As if this isn't hard enough, we also find those outside the academy no longer give us the reverence or prestige we once enjoyed. In fact, there is growing evidence of contempt for such perks as tenure and nine-month contracts, especially in times of economic uncertainty. Finally, nearly all of us know what happens when a college or university has new leadership, either at the top with the president or with heads of departments. These leaders enthusiastically initiate change: they want to make their mark; they want to change the ratings with *U.S. News and World Report*; they want to change their Carnegie Classification from a comprehensive to a research university. The list goes on.

When Change Is Conflictual

Change is seldom embraced with full welcome. We get comfortable with our patterns of doing business, and change introduces dissonance. The dissonance can quickly escalate to conflict, even though the change that caused it may begin with the best of intentions. This is well illustrated by the following case. Mary became the ninth member of an administrative support office for public relations and outreach. The department members were particularly pleased because they had successfully recruited her to join their all-male group of eight. They knew they needed more women in the department, and this was a beginning and important step. They scheduled a two-day retreat shortly after Mary joined them, both to celebrate and welcome her, and to include her in the planning process of their next couple of years' activities. The retreat was held at the second home of a member of the department, fifty miles from the university, on the edge of a golf course. The morning and evening of the first day were work-related sessions while the afternoon was time-out for play. All eight men in the department were golfers, played together regularly, and had prescheduled tee-off times for two sets of four, back-to-back. That left Mary—also a golfer, albeit not a very good one, but no one asked—to

“go shopping, or read, or relax by the pool” or whatever she wanted during the four-hour break. Though the men appeared oblivious to any real problem, Mary was deeply offended. Within a very short period of time, she threatened to break her contract and leave the university.

Most new employees arrive with optimism and hope that they have made the right decision. Mary was no exception. Yet the conflict escalated quickly and became destructive because it met several of the conditions we outlined earlier. This simple incident undermined good feelings. When the men left to play golf, Mary felt intentionally but undeservedly excluded and perceived it would be difficult to have a full voice in the department. A fracture in the cohesiveness of the department resulted. Prior to Mary’s hire, all members of the department worked (and played) well together. Now polarization of positions emerged to justify the men’s behavior of playing golf. Even colleagues outside the department took sides, and coalitions formed. The issue of gender became dominant in the department, and colleagues, out of frustration and high emotion, said things they later regretted.

How could all of this have been prevented? The men’s good intentions of hiring a woman could have been successful had they anticipated ways they would need to change to accommodate a new female member of the department. Mary could have anticipated that gender problems would likely occur when entering an all-male department and could have been prepared to help them. Someone in the department—an informal peace-maker—could bring the group together to initiate an apology, especially for the unintended consequences of the retreat.

Responses to Change and Transition

Research on change informs us that regardless of good or bad intentions, we have fairly predictable responses to it. We know change always generates stress, which is often translated into resistance. Even planned change will meet resistance. Some of our understanding about responses to change is informed by the distinctions made by William Bridges more than two decades ago in his work on transitions. He says that most of our resistance is not so much to the change itself, but to the transition

involved in the change: the transition from old leadership to new leadership; from an all-male department to a mixed-gender department; from a faculty that is predominately white, male, and over sixty to a faculty of women, people of color, and twenty or more years younger. Change occurs when something new starts or something old stops, and it occurs at a particular point in time. But transitions cannot be localized in time that way. There is a gradual psychological process of reorientation. Change is situational and starts with a new beginning while transitions are psychological and start with an ending. Transition means letting go of our old attitudes, behaviors, or ways we conducted business.

Many of the changes we experience in higher education can best be understood by their transitional nature. Why is this important? Understanding change as transition is a useful framework to prevent a situation of change from escalating into full-fledged conflict, as it did in the case of Mary and her all-male department. Academic administrators should take seriously the stages of transitions: letting go of the old (ending), taking time to sort out what the group wants to do, and then starting with the new (beginning). What we typically do, instead, is start something new (beginning) before we stop doing what we did (ending). This often results in resistance and then moves to conflict. The department hired Mary (new) without fully considering the impact it would have on how they conducted business (old).

SUMMARY

When there is an expressed struggle between at least two parties who have an interdependent relationship and perceive they are getting interference from one another, conflict is likely to emerge. Conflict can be useful in a department, but often it is not. We know that the transitional nature of change is also a precursor to conflict and that the academy is currently fraught with change, from both internal and external pressures: the massive influx of technology, the development of virtual universities, the changing nature of the faculty and student bodies, the legislatures' and trustees' challenges to lifetime employment and tenure, organizational

restructuring, downsizing, and shifting finance structures are just a few examples.

In the chapters that follow, we will look at frameworks for analyzing conflicts and identify ways you as a new academic administrator can understand when you are in the middle of a conflict, and what you can do about it. In addition, we will encourage you to be vigilant in seeking ways to contain the necessary conditions for conflict to erupt. Help members of your group find ways to work and learn together. Explore the ways your differences are both helpful and hard for one another. Collaborative projects, opportunities for small and large group problem solving, and including agenda items at meetings specifically requesting areas of concern are all techniques of prevention. As you become a student of conflict management and resolution, you will come to appreciate the importance of conflict analysis. In Chapter Two we present a framework for a conflict analysis process. Nevertheless, any opportunity to prevent full-fledged conflict is well worth exploring.