



PRESIDENT'S PAGE

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CONFLICT CAN BE CREATIVE

Fighting, hostility, controversy between groups of people, all of which can be called conflict, is nearly everyday fare for the leaders in organizations, universities, professional associations, or communities. Too often, this is emotional effort and involvement by many people that goes largely unrewarded because they move in *destructive* rather than *constructive* channels. By the same token, conflict releases energy at every level of human affairs — energy that can produce positive, constructive results.

Two realities should be recognized here. First, that such conflict is an absolutely predictable social phenomenon, one that will increase in all organizations as they become larger and more complex. Second, that conflict should not be repressed, but channeled to useful purposes.

The goal of organizational leadership, therefore, is not to eliminate conflict but to use it — to turn the released energy to good advantage. The role of the behavioral scientist is to study, analyze, and report why people behave as they do, and to suggest ways — to the organization leader, among others — in which research in this area can be applied practically.

Conflict is almost always caused by unlike points of view. Because we have not learned exactly alike, and because we therefore see and value things differently, we vary in our beliefs as to what things are or should be. Our democratic form of government, at the organization and community level as well as national, operates on the basis of opposing actions and positions which must be adjusted, controlled, or compromised for the good of the greatest number of people. Fortunately, we are recipients of methods devised by our forebears to manage some aspects of conflict.

The English common law and a political system made dynamic by such innovations as initiative, referendum and recall are precisely means of permitting constructive use of conflict in human relations. Where these means do not exist, the typical recourse is for each side to

reach for weapons. Numerous examples of this are to be found today in developing nations, but the history of all nations provide many more. Even where representative government does exist, it sometimes fails; witness our own Civil War. What is true at the national level is also true at the community level. Our system of government is seldom blessed with uninterrupted tranquility *because conflict, large or small, is inevitable*. The extreme result at either end is a situation that is undesirably abrasive or dialogue that is creatively productive.

The process of conflict occurs to man at several plateaus: *Intra-psychic* (the aversion to be involved personally), *inter-personal* (the eternal manager vs. controller controversy), *community* (where to build the new highway), *organizational* (where blacks are to be hired and trained), and others. At any of these levels, the energies released by conflict can be used for good or evil. The problem is to make the conflict creative for eventual learning. Most of the workable approaches discovered by behavioral scientists have centered on changing the psychological climate of conflict.

In establishing a helpful psychological climate, the leader should minimize — never try to eliminate — the threat that always underlies conflict. Actually, threat is a stimulus to creative conflict as much as to destructive conflict. It is impossible to eliminate threat in the face of real differences. But one satisfactory way to minimize threat is to surround the protagonists with an atmosphere conducive to dialogue. Here attitudes of respect, understanding, and communication can prevail. The main purpose in doing this is to break a vicious cycle that is characterized by reciprocal threat, resistance and aggressiveness.

What more, then, can one do to retain creative controversy?

1. It is important to depersonalize conflict by getting the disputants not to sit in judgement of each other, and to focus the conflict on the basic

issues by concentrating disagreement on factual ground. Progress in this direction, however slight, is usually self-continuing, and tends to reduce wholesale indictment to retail packaging. This limits conflict to manageable areas that are more likely to be subject to negotiation, accommodation, or compromise. When people are introduced to what they recognize as fact, they tend to become more objective — sensible, if you prefer. Unsupported opinion and implication generally causes an opposite effect. The organization leader himself, as a rule, should look at the issues coldly and at the people involved warmly.

2. Conflict will expand — first emotionally, and then physically — according to how the values at issue change. What starts out to be a relatively insignificant dispute can quickly grow to encompass a larger controversy by feeding upon released energy. The latter was violently demonstrated in the ghetto riots that struck cities last summer, but less dramatic

examples regularly occur in our organizations. The alert leader will clearly, quickly, and forcefully describe the parameters of imminent conflict, if he can, and in doing this he endeavors to limit the responses to areas with which the organization can successfully cope. At the same time, reactions must not be heated by the introduction of assumed intentions, inferred beliefs and plain untruths. Remember that people in conflict or out are inclined to act on what they want to believe.

3. Leadership, in resolving conflict creatively, also requires empathy and equality, *but not neutrality*. The neutral position is damaging because by its nature it recognizes nothing. Empathy, on the other hand, means that leadership recognizes both the plight and the ideas of both sides in conflict, without necessarily agreeing totally with either. Equality means that neither party to conflict be made to feel inferior for the alternative is greater jealousy and heightened competition.

4. Lastly, adopting an attitude of one side *winning* and the other side *losing* is like pouring gasoline on the fire of conflict. On the other hand, the *provisional try* — honest fact-finding (all the facts), exhaustive exploration (both parties working together) and meaningful problem-solving (with a lot of “What if we try this . . . ?” thrown in) — pries open the door to constructive creativity.

These are, of course, fundamental rules. The experienced leader knows that they do not always work as they should. He knows that he must contend with counterforces between those who passively refuse to engage in conflict and with those who deliberately develop conflict as a battleground for hatreds and greeds, as well as those to whom conflict is a healthy challenge for betterment. Nevertheless, management of human conflict is the modern leader’s primary task, and he must use every means at hand, politically and psychologically, to make conflict build creatively rather than destroy. It can!

PROPOSAL TO INCREASE SALARY TESTS FOR EXECUTIVE, ADMINISTRATIVE, AND PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEE EXEMPTION

A proposal to increase the salary tests for exemption of executive, administrative, and professional employees from the Fair Labor Standards Act’s minimum wage and overtime pay provisions has been announced by the U.S. Department of Labor.

It is proposed to increase the present \$100 a week salary test for exemption of executive and administrative employees to \$130. For the professional employee exemption, the test would be \$150 a week instead of the present \$115. The payment to administrative or professional employees, but not to executives, may be on a fee as well as a salary basis.

For exemption purposes, executive, administrative, and professional employ-

ees must also meet tests as to duties and responsibilities specified in Regulations, Part 541. These tests are *not* affected by the proposal.

For higher-paid employees in these categories, who are subject to fewer tests as to duties and responsibilities, the present salary test is \$150 a week. It is proposed to raise it to \$200.

There would also be an increase in the salary tests for exemption of executive, administrative, and professional employees in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and American Samoa. For executive and administrative employees, the present requirement of \$75 a week would be raised to \$100, for professional employees, the test would go from \$95 to \$125.