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# "Conflict Resolution" - Daniel Dana

# Review and Notes

When I got accepted to present the session How to Work Personality Issues Without Sounding Like a Marriage Guidance Counsellor? at the Agile 2016 Conference I decided that I needed to do more research into the issue of general conflict resolution. This book was recommended to me by Bob Schatz with the comment “Most of us are not trained in conflict resolution.” He went on to say “In fact, most of what we learn about conflict resolution we learned by watching our mother and father deal with issues.”

The reality is that when we are involved in conflicts in a later part of our live, we are more than just “involved”. We are in fact part of the conflict, and so are not exactly unbiased participants in the exercise. Further, it is questionable as to what we learn from the event. Do we have a bias based on what we see the “result” was for example. If I won, was the approach I took good?

Of course, today I know that this perspective on a conflict is in fact part of the problem but it did take me a long time to realize this and to develop tools which I found were effective in dealing with difficult personalities.

So back to this book. Beginning with the definition that:

Workplace conflict is “A condition between or among workers whose jobs are interdependent, who feel angry, who perceive the other(s) as being at fault, and who act in ways that cause a business problem”

It takes you through the process of understanding how much unresolved conflicts can potentially cost you, and then takes you through approaches on how to deal with the conflict. The idea is to provide you with enough tools to help you either work the issue while the conflict is relatively “small”. The thinking is that if it is a big issue, you might want to get someone who is a conflict resolution professional involved (expected to be in the small percentages of cases).

Costs of conflict in the workplace include:

- “Research studies show that up to 42% of employees’ time is spent engaging in or attempting to resolve conflict.”
- Conflict contaminates the decision-making process in even more serious ways than causing information to be incomplete or unreliable as decisions made jointly by two or more people who are embroiled in unresolved conflict will be imperfect at best—and seriously flawed at worst.
- “Raytheon Corporation determined that replacing an engineer costs the company 150% of the departing employee’s total annual compensation—the combination of salary and benefits.”

The initial idea with conflict resolution is to deal with it early as “Every tree was once a sapling, every adult was once a child, and every formal dispute was once an informal conflict.” This makes the issue potentially more manageable and also reduces the impact of the conflict on the organization.

We then need to set up the non-non-adverserial resolution process. Marriage, despite its reputation as a hotbed of hostility, was perhaps the birthplace of non-adversarial conflict resolution. The idea is, instead of focus on the issues or the people involved to focus on the interests the various people have. This is called interest-based negotiation, a non-adversarial approach.

Few people, and fewer organizations, have discovered the benefits of interest-based negotiation. We are not actually wired for it. Since we work with people who behave in ways that we perceive as threats to our self-interests we respond in the traditional, reflexive fight or flight mode:

- Fight: OK, this probably not de-generate to “fisticuffs at dawn”, but we will probably seek to ensure our safety by defeating our adversaries.
- Flight: Again, so we probably don't run away, but we will probably distance ourselves from our adversaries in order to avoid conflict.

The problem is it is these same people whose trust and cooperation we must somehow gain if we want to work effectively together. So we are left with the situation where “We can’t (or perhaps shouldn't) fight our way out of conflict, but we can think our way out of it.”

The essential approach we can take is a mediated dialogue that is:

1. Directly between disputants,
2. Limited by the cardinal rules,
3. About the issue to be resolved,
4. Sustained long enough to find a solution.

The cardinal rules are:

1. We must stay in the essential process—no walk-aways.
2. We must not impose one-sided solutions—no power plays.

If you are mediating others then your job is to set the meeting up, help guide the discussion to the issues, and as much possible keep quiet and let the others talk. Once in the meeting, the first step of every mediation is to allow disputants to express and articulate their differences. This paves the way for understanding, and starts the buy-in process.

You are waiting for the exchange of “conciliatory gestures.” Conciliatory gestures are verbal statements that expose the speaker’s vulnerability to exploitation by the other. A breakthrough moment in the mediation occurs when there is a reciprocal exchange of conciliatory gestures, signaling the disputants’ mutual shift in attitude from me-against-you to us-against-the-problem.

At this point you can perhaps work to a good deal - an agreement describing how the parties will interact in the future that is:

- Balanced - it must pass the WIIFM test (“what’s in it for me?”) for both parties
- Behaviorally specific
- Written down

Of course, the best approach to conflict resolution is to not have the need for a conflict resolution event in the first place. To quote “Preventive mediation is the ultimate in simplicity: 'Mediation without an

event.'" This is a way of conducting ourselves with important others that prevents conflicts from becoming so serious that we must stop doing our work to have a dialogue to resolve the conflict that's causing a problem.

The problem we have is that in many cases when we are involved in a conflict we treat each other as adversaries. With adversaries usually perceive hostile intentions where none exist. Two especially effective thinking tools in preventive mediation are:

1. Feelings as data: The idea is to try and distance yourself from your emotions and try to think about your feelings as "just another data point". We can choose how to act and we can choose how to think, but we can't choose how to feel. Our choice is either to rail against unwanted feelings or to accept their objective existence. Which choice yields the better resolution? By using the feelings-as-data thinking tool, we can
    1. Respond dispassionately to another person's hostility to us
    2. Reflect analytically upon her own strong emotions.
2. Owning my own experience: Enables us to avoid this perceptual trap in two ways:
    1. "By understanding (framing) that there's not a direct causal link between your behavioral actions and my emotional reactions, I remain in control of my experience of our relationship. I'm driving the bus that carries my feelings; I'm not a passenger on your bus."
    2. "By understanding (framing) that there's a high risk—especially when I am angry—that I'm attributing intentions to you that don't exist, I'm able to consider the possibility that the effect that I'm experiencing didn't come from you. Gee, maybe it came from me! Maybe it's my own interpretive process that's causing me to feel as I do!"

Recommended.

# Want to Know More?

- "Conflict Resolution" – Daniel Dana

Book, Learning, Improvement, ConflictResolution, Review

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