

THE DYNAMICS, OUTCOMES AND RESOLUTION OF INTER-GROUP CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiential exercise in which participants experience inter-group conflict. The debriefing enables them to understand the dynamics and outcomes they experienced. It also explains how conflicts between groups within work settings and elsewhere may be addressed and resolved. This has been used effectively with both undergraduate and graduate level students.

THE EXERCISE

The participants are given a case situation that offer seven ways of dealing with the problem presented. The participants are told to select the alternative which they think would be the best way to deal with the situation described in the case. Once everyone has made their decision they are asked to form into groups of those who selected the same alternative. The groups are told that they will have five minutes to develop their case for what would be the best solution to the case. They are also informed that each group will then have two minutes to present their case as to what is the best solution to this case. After each team's two minutes the floor is open for discussion and anyone may provide further information. They are told that the objective is to get others to join their group.

THE CASE SITUATION: THE NEIGHBOURS

A young couple, Bill and Joan bought a new home in April. They did a lot of work after moving in including landscaping and having a swing set, play equipment, and sand box installed in their back yard for their 4 and 6 year old children, Jennie and Johnny. They were initially very happy with their home and the neighbourhood, but by July they were becoming upset by their neighbours, the Wilsons.

The Wilsons have two children and a big dog. The dog comes into their yard and leaves "deposits" which have killed off some of the newly planted shrubs. Bill is getting more and more upset going out and cleaning up after the dog. Bill is even more aggravated by the dog barking early ever morning. During the week it is not as bad because he has to get up and go to work, but it is really annoying on the weekends when he'd like to sleep-in.

To make matters worse the Wilson's kids, Harry who is six and Harvey who is eight have been coming into their backyard and are playing in their sandbox, playing with the toys and not letting Jennie and Johnny play with them. Jennie and Johnny are scared of them and have told Joan that Harvey has hit them and won't let them use their own toys.

Bill and Joan have had a number of heated discussions trying to decide what to do. It's a friendly neighbourhood and the Wilsons are very popular with just about everyone. Bill and Joan like the Wilsons as well and they had started to develop a friendship, but they have not gotten together with them for the last three weeks. However, Bill and Joan would like to maintain a friendship with them. They also don't want to do anything that would create an impression in the neighbourhood that they are difficult or unpleasant. None-the-less they are getting more and more upset with the Wilsons' two kids and dog.

Of the seven alternatives listed below, select the one which you would suggest to Bill and Joan to best help them cope with this situation. (Select only one that you feel would be best).

1. The men should talk. Bill should initiate a conversation with Mr. Wilson. He should not make a big deal out of it. He should just bring it up when they are outside and if possible show what the dog had done.
2. The women should talk. Joan should do this in an informal way, perhaps by inviting her over and talking about it over a cup of tea.
3. They should build a fence around the yard. There is no way that the problem could be brought up to the Wilsons without their being offended to some degree. A fence would solve the problem.
4. They should shoo the dog and the Wilsons' kids out of the yard. There is no need to allow the neighbour's dog in your yard and whenever either of the kids is behaving inappropriately they should be told to leave. There is no need to tolerate the behaviour being exhibited by Harvey and Harry.
5. Nothing should be done. There is more to lose than to gain by bringing up the issue. The Wilsons are popular in the neighbourhood and by complaining to them it is likely that you would be labelled as a grouch. Bill should not consider it a big deal to clean up after the dog and getting up early on the week-end should not be a problem, given all the things Bill wants to get done. The children should learn to take care of themselves. Bill and Joan both believe in the biblical expression "Love they neighbour" so this seems like a good place to start practicing what they believe. It is safer to accept the situation as it is for now. Things will probably get better on their own.
6. Bill and Joan should not take any direct action, but they should get a big dog. They could train it to keep out the other dog. The dog might also stop the neighbourhood kids from coming into the yard.
7. They should write an anonymous letter and send it to the Wilsons.

TEACHING NOTES

Prior to conducting the exercise

Information is provided regarding the resolving of conflicts using Fisher, Ury and Patton's (1991) concepts of Principled Negotiation from their book Getting to Yes. This is done either in the class prior to conducting the exercise or at the beginning of the class with some other activity or lecture/discussion occurring before initiating the exercise. This is done to provide some time to elapse between presenting the concepts and providing the participants an opportunity to apply them.

What to Do and Expect During the Exercise

At the outset of the exercise tell the participants that if they have any questions to raise their hand so that you may individually respond and to not disturb the others. This instruction is intended to minimize the sharing of information at this stage of the exercise. Some students may ask whether they have to select one of the seven alternatives or whether they may create their own. The response is "at this point in time you must select one of the seven alternatives". The purpose of this response is to require them to select one of the seven alternatives, but leave the option open to creating other alternatives when they are in their groups or presenting to the other groups.

Ask how many selected alternative one and obtain a show of hands. Repeat this for each of the seven alternatives. Afterwards form groups of those who selected the same alternative, placing the groups in different parts of the room. Most of the students select one of the first three alternatives. If more than seven people have selected the same alternative then divide the group into sub-groups with each sub-group having an equal number of members. These sub-groups will be combined into a single group half-way through the five-minute preparation period. Creating sub-groups allows for greater discussion and involvement in the exercise. If there is only one person that has selected a particular alternative, I have the person work as a one-person team, if that is acceptable to him or her. If the person objects I allow him or her to join another team.

When the groups have been formed they are provided with the following instructions.

You will have five-minutes to prepare your case for what you believe to be the best solution to this case. You will select a spokesperson that will have up to two-minutes to make your case. After all teams have presented the floor will be open for discussion. The objective is to get others to join your group.

During the rest of the exercise I leave the following posted, if available using power point.

"Present the best solution to this problem and convince the others to join you."

This is left posted so that it may be referred to during the debriefing. If anyone asks if they may create another

alternative other than one of the seven I respond by referring to what is the posted, that is, "Present the best solution to this problem and convince the others to join you."

After the five minutes preparation period the groups are given two minutes to make their presentation. This should be done without allowing others to interrupt them. I ask everyone to stand and tell them that this is so that they can more readily move to another group. Asking them to stand tends to increase their involvement in the exercise. To facilitate the process I have the teams present in numerical order so the team that selected alternative one presents first and so on. At the end of two-minutes I tell them they need to stop and move on to the next team. Often a team ends before their two-minutes and I confirm that they are finished and then move on to the next team. When all the teams have presented the floor is opened to allow anyone to say anything. I do not intervene and allow the participants to manage the discussion themselves. At some point into the process, often after about ten minutes, multiple discussions are occurring and people are not really listening to one another. At that point I end this stage of the exercise and ask everyone to sit down.

What to Do and Expect Immediately After the Exercise

Once everyone is seated I ask the following questions and request a show of hands.

1. Were you reluctant to leave your group?
2. Did you feel a sense of commitment to your group's position?
3. Are you more convinced now that your position is the correct one than when you initially made your choice?
4. Were you carefully listening to others?
5. If you were carefully listening were you doing so to learn the merits of their ideas – or to tell them why they were wrong and why your team's position was better?
6. Were you successful in this exercise?
7. What could you have done differently?

The discussion that follows makes a number of points.

The Dynamics

The first two questions highlight how people develop a sense of loyalty to their group, be it a team, department or organization. The third question supports the idea that when people join groups of similarly minded members, their commonly held views gets reinforced. Then when they present and defend their position to other groups they become more convinced that their position is correct and the other's is not. Once we are convinced we are right and the others are wrong we stop listening to the merits of their ideas, which is the point of questions 4 and 5. The research regarding the dynamics within groups and between groups, when the groups are in conflict, is then presented. Most agree that what they experienced was consistent with the research findings. That is, they became more loyal to their group, more committed to their position and stopped listening for the merits of the other's ideas. The research findings, which follow, are usually presented as power point slides.

Dynamics within groups in conflict

- Members become more loyal and cohesive.
- There is a greater commitment toward achieving the task.
- There is more of a willingness to accept a single leader.
- The tasks and activities become more structured.

Dynamics between groups in conflict

- The other group is seen negatively and one's own group is perceived more positively.
- The merits of one's own position are overestimated while the strengths of the other's are underestimated.
- Hostilities tend to increase.
- Meaningful communication decreases and whatever listening that may occur is for the purpose of reinforcing one's own position, rather than to learn the value of the other's perspective.

Outcomes

Asking whether they were successful and what they could have done differently, questions 6 and 7, gets them to think further about what happened. In response to question 6, were you successful, most concede that they weren't. This is because they defined success as having others accept their position and join their team. Most of the time no one moves from their team to another, but sometimes one and occasionally two people change teams. When teams are in conflict and try to convince each other that they are correct and the other is wrong, they are rarely successful.

Resolution

When asking question 7, what could you have done differently, often there is silence. I quickly break this silence by pointing out that each team took a position and tried to convince the others that they were right and the others were wrong – or that they were more right than the others. I then refer back to the dynamics between groups in conflict. They were in conflict because they took a position and tried to convince others that their position was the correct one – or a better one. They were not trying to solve the problem, but were taking a win-lose approach. They were trying to sell their solution. They did not focus on their common interests.

In this situation everyone had the same information and the same interests. Their interests were to not to have the neighbor's kids take advantage of their children, not have the neighbor's dog mess up your yard or bark and wake you up and also to maintain good relations with your neighbors. I then present a power point summary of the learning points from Getting to Yes. This is the same power point slide I presented prior to the start of the exercise.

Key learning points from Getting to Yes.

- Take a problem solving perspective.
- Separate the person from the problem
- Focus on interests not positions

- Develop alternatives
- Identify objective criteria
- Select solutions based upon objective criteria
- Develop a BATNA (Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement)

I point out that they focused on their positions, rather than their common interests and that they did not develop alternatives. I summarize their common interests and point out that if they could agree on common interests then they should be able to develop alternatives that would meet their common interests. Examples of these include having the couples talk together, then shooing the dog out of their yard if necessary and if those don't resolve the problem, then building a fence.

At this point someone usually says that they were told to select only one alternative. I agree that was what they were initially told, but they were not told they could not later generate alternatives. I then show the power point slide that was posted throughout the exercise, which is as follows.

“Present the best solution to this problem and convince the others to join you.”

I reiterate that the best solution was not necessarily the first one they generated. I then admit that I set them up, but that they fell right into it. However, I add that the exercise is analogous to what happens very often in organizations between departments. When departments that have a dispute get together to “work out their differences”, they usually try to convince each other that their way is the better way. The departments' representatives have been reinforced in their views by their department members. They often believe their position is the right one or the best one and try to “win” their points.

Instead, if they focused upon their common interests they would more likely be able to generate alternatives that would satisfy those interests. By taking such a collaborative problem solving approach they would probably avoid the win-lose conflicts that individuals, groups, organizations and nations often engage in. Although it may not always be possible to generate solutions that meet the multiple interests of the different parties, most of us do not attempt to identify those interests or to work at developing alternatives that may satisfy them. This exercise helps to demonstrate that identifying interests and developing alternatives to meet those interests is a more productive approach.

REFERENCES

- Getting to Yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in, 2nd Edition, Fisher, Ury and Patton, Penguin Books, 1991
“The Management of Interdepartmental Conflict: A Model and Review”, Administrative Science Quarterly, 13, 1969, 73-84.

The case situation, The Neighbors, is based upon an exercise originally developed by Adventures in Attitudes.