

UNCONSCIOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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The major purpose of this paper is to identify divergent conceptualizations between management practitioners and behavioral scientists that result in difficulties to separate myth from reality in the field of conflict management.

One easily identified myth in conflict situations is that someone must win and someone must lose. However, the win/lose labeling of conflict situations which occurs outside the immediate awareness of individuals tends to be over-generalized resulting in inappropriate applications to situations that are not in reality zero-sum.

This paper focuses explicitly on how denial and projections enter into conflict situations as two out-of-awareness defense mechanisms with reference to encounter and personal growth groups.

Parental or family styles of coping with conflict that have a bearing on an individual's current way of dealing with conflict are also researched as an out-of-awareness factor in this paper.

The study in conclusion proposes several exploratory awareness training programs to understand the relationship of personal growth to learning more constructive ways of coping with conflict.

There appears to be an emerging divergent in ways of conceptualizing conflict between management practitioners and behavioral scientists. Management practitioners tend to conceptu-

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alize conflict as a process of disagreement between individuals, groups, or organizations where each party attempts to enforce its own views, values, opinions or desires to prevent the other party from doing the same. This conceptualization connotes arguments, threats, aggression, hostility and battle between parties. Given the usual destructive experience of parties to such action, it is not surprising that attempts to deal with conflict are bounded in denial, avoidances and minimization of differences. Any direct effort at managing conflict consists of defining formal rules and procedures for avoiding conflict.

Alternatively, contemporary behavior scientists conceptualize conflict as not only unavoidable but as desirable to the extent that creativity, synergism and multiple criteria are important in problem solving. Since conflict can have a cost component (e.g., waste of resources, dissatisfaction of individuals, unproductive use of time), it is considered necessary that conflicting parties learn to develop and use constructive approaches. Contemporary understanding of conflict resolution does not imply that the ultimate goal is to enable the parties to reach "a happy ending" solution. Instead, conflict is considered a process that allows individuals to learn to both identify their own strengths and weaknesses in handling themselves in conflict situations and discover their own best style in relating to other individuals, groups and organizations where differences exist.

With such divergent conceptualizations, it is not surprising that one can have difficulty in separating myth from reality in the field of conflict management. To be sure, there are some easily identified myths such as in a conflict situation someone must win and someone must lose. Like most myths, it can represent or describe some aspect of reality since there are in reality zero-sum situations where someone's winning means someone's losing. The difficulty with such a myth is that it tends to be overgeneralized resulting in it being inappropriately applied to situations that are not in reality zero-sum. There are a number of experiential group simulations that demonstrate that it is a common experience for individuals to overgeneralize in labeling situations win-lose. Once a situation is labeled win/lose, dynamics are set into motion resulting in needless deception, hostility, betrayal, revenge, destruction, competitiveness and surrender

into passivity. What is not so clear is that the generalization process tends to occur outside of the immediate awareness of those involved. Being outside of awareness individuals are not in the position to learn of their error or exercise choice in terms of selecting more constructive options.

A myth not as easily identified and alluded to in the preceding myth is that individuals in a conflict situation have available in their immediate awareness the cognitive and emotional insight necessary to constructively deal with the conflict. This constitutes a myth in the sense that there are factors operating outside of awareness and in the realm of the unconscious which significantly influence how conflict is dealt with in a given situation. Shevrin and Dickman, after a careful review of the mounting empirical evidence from diverse fields of research (such as subliminal perception and selective attention) conclude that they provide strong support for the concept of the psychological unconscious.⁽¹⁾ They argue that "... no psychological model that seeks to explain how human beings know, learn or behave can ignore the concept of unconscious psychological processes."⁽²⁾ Incorporation of the psychological unconscious and out-of-awareness factors into theories of conflict management or organization development has, however, been rare. Bion's theory of group development in terms of unconscious reactions to an authority figure is a notable exception.⁽³⁾ It seems apparent that theories of conflict management and programs directed toward improving skills may not work out in reality since they do not take into account unconscious psychological processes. Our purpose here is to explore two out-of-awareness factors that have a bearing on conflict management: (A) Out-of-awareness defense mechanisms; (B) Early childhood experiences. It is hoped that the discussion will stimulate others to focus attention on unconscious psychological processes underlying conflict management.

(1) H. Shevrin and S. Dickman, «The Psychological Unconscious,» *American Psychologist*, pp. 35, 5, 421-434.

(2) *ibid.*

(3) For a detailed study of Bion's Theory, refer to Bion, W.R., *Experiences in Groups*: Basic Books, 1959.

(A) Cut-of-awareness defense mechanisms

There are a number of out-of-awareness defense mechanisms (such as denial, projection, introjection, intellectualization, retrojection, hostility displacement-scapegoating) that can influence how individuals cope with conflict situations in which they find themselves embedded. Our purpose here is not to explore all the defense mechanisms related to conflict but to focus on explicitly how denial and projection enter into conflict situations. We have found through experience working with managers in many different organizations that these defenses are ubiquitous and must perhaps be brought easily into awareness and utilized to promote more effective conflict management behavior.

In conflict situations many people are frightened by the imagined negative consequences that might develop if they authentically express themselves by going against cultural norms of "being polite" and "rational." Individuals caught up in such catastrophic expectations find themselves bogged down in their "shadow" personality. The "shadow" personality consists of self-characteristics that seem alien, negative and threatening to the individual.⁽⁴⁾ The individual frequently denies negative aspects of his personality that have not been integrated into the self-image. Typically, the cultural conditioning process does not support individuals in accepting the shadow and learning not to deny seemingly negative parts of themselves.

The shadow personality has its corollary in what can be called the "group shadow." The group shadow consists of all the negativity between members that goes unexpressed either by suppression or repression. When the shadow is operative, individuals in a group often believe that disagreements or negativity cannot be voiced without damaging interpersonal relations. This self-censorship is considered part of the "group think" syndrome by Janis that thwarts the expression of negativity necessary for effectively reducing the occurrence of "group think."⁽⁵⁾

(4) For more information on the «shadow personality,» refer to Stanley M. Herman, «The Shadow of Organization Development,» *The 1974 Annual Handbook of Group Facilitators*, San Diego, Ca: University Associates, 1974.

(5) Irving L. Janis, «Groupthink,» *Psychology Today*, Tiff-David Pub. Co, 1971.

Groups where members are fearful of the shadow and feel inadequate to constructively cope with it frequently become victimized by a "harmony facade."⁽⁶⁾ The "harmony facade" is a publicized myth stating that we are a happy family with no differences, negativity, or conflict between us. A group caught in a harmony facade is characterized by members expressing only positive attributes of the group and reacting defensively to feedback that they are avoiding conflict with the denial of conflict and negativity. The group shadow is disowned and projected into another group.

The use of an OD mirror in helping interdependent groups confront conflict issues between them often surfaces "group shadow" issues. Each group is asked to develop on their own answers to the questions: (a) How do we see ourselves as a group? (b) How do we feel the other group perceives us as a group? (c) How do we see the other group? The next step is usually to bring the groups together to have them share their lists and process the reactions. A group that is caught in their "shadow" is fairly easy to identify since they tend to see themselves in only positive terms while being expected to be seen in negative terms and/or perceiving the other group in only negative terms. This is a case of a dis-owned projection by a group. For some reason they have an objection to experiencing and acknowledging their negativity. The group typically unanimously react defensively to observations that they are denying conflict. It takes a while for the protective harmony to crack and wax cold. When it does, the energy used by in suppressing and repressing the negativity is released and the group learns and grows in its ability to constructively work through differences. It is a common finding in studies of encounter groups or personal growth groups that the expression of negativity is a significant event in facilitating the development of a constructive learning climate. While the defense mechanism of denial and projection by a group is usually outside of immediate awareness, it is not, in our experience working with managers in organizations, too difficult to raise it into awareness.

(6) G. Cemmil, "The Harmony Facade in Intergroup Relationships." Unpublished manuscript, 1981.

(B) Early childhood experiences

While it may seem obvious that parental or family styles of coping with conflict have a bearing on an individual's current way of coping with conflict there have been limited investigations as to the nature of the relationship. One model children are exposed to of dealing with conflict is the discipline techniques their parents incorporate when the child's need or behavior conflict with what the parent wants.

Although studies involving childhood discipline techniques have limitations (such as parents becoming subject to memory lapses while being interviewed, congenital factors affecting parent's choice of discipline techniques, and the problem of causal direction - children affecting their parents behavior) there are research findings which suggest the relationship of discipline to the way children learn to cope with conflict.

According to research studies, the first relationship of parents with their children begins as a caretaker to maximize the child's comfort which is entirely consistent with the child's desires (Hess 1967 and Lorenz 1965). These first relationships do not result in a conflict because both parties fulfill their needs. By two years, however, the situation changes and according to Minton, Kagen and Levine (1971) in 65 % of the interactions between 2-year old young children and their parents, the parents attempt to change the child's behavior against his will.⁽⁷⁾

Compliance with parent against his will from the child's viewpoint is inevitable and represents a source of conflict since the child may not know how to respond to meet his own desires. On the other hand, parents unaware of constructive options to deal with conflict effectively simply apply discipline techniques they themselves were exposed to in growing up. When an individual's parents deal with conflict in destructive ways (such as by denial, projection, blaming, avoidance, forcing) then it is likely that the individual will model the destructive ways. The more an individual is unaware of the influence of their parental

(7) For a detailed review of the research findings refer to Martin L. Hoffman, «Moral Internalization: Current theory and research» *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Academic Press (New York 1977), pp. 88-94.

model on them, the less likely they are to break out of the model and discover more constructive options. With awareness of the past influence the potential for change emerges although it may not easily transpire. For change and learning to occur, new ways of coping with conflict must be presented through new models or training programs. Where an individual has not been exposed to or nurtured in terms of a constructive model, it is improbable that they can teach a constructive approach to anyone else.

In a more specific vein, Hoffman and Saltztein, after a careful review of the research suggest that a child's inner experience in choosing his own style of dealing with conflict depends on experienced discipline techniques. They distinguished between discipline techniques such as power assertion and love withdrawal which may help perpetuate a child's initial opposition between his desires and external demands, and other disciplinary applications which provide him with the inner resources both cognitive and motivational for changing his views about these demands.⁽⁸⁾ Power assertion which is based on creating fear of external detection and punishment associated with punishment and material deprivation can serve as a cause of repressed and suppressed fear, anxiety, anger and hostility. Parents who use a power assertion mode provide an aggressive model for the child in terms of outward expression of anger. As an adult the child who internalizes this model learns to cope with conflict in terms of fighting behavior where one either wins or surrenders. If meeting force with force is not viable, the person will switch to accommodation when they comply at the expense of their own needs with such a bimodal response they are not able to experiment with other options such as compromise.

In the other disciplinary technique called love withdrawal, the parent withdraws and remains silent. As a result the child is left unsupported when he is in need and withheld from the opportunity to learn why he is not loved which might promote constructive learning.⁽⁹⁾

(8) Martin L. Hoffman and Herbert Saltztein, "Parent Discipline and the Child's Moral Development," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 5, pp. 45-57, 1967.

(9) Hoffman (1977).

With this type of upbringing when the child becomes an adult, he is likely to engage in flight behavior and passive aggressiveness in conflict situations. He learns to avoid, deny and run away from conflict all of which block him from learning how to more creatively and constructively cope with it. This unawareness of other constructive options can carry on to adult life until the individual finds an opportunity to learn from confronting others who had been exposed to more supportive discipline techniques.

Both power assertion and love withdrawal can inhibit the child's development of the inductive component by arousing hostility, fear and distrust. Such techniques do not provide the child the cognitive and behavioral resources essential to examine his actions independently and assume responsibility both of which are necessary for constructively dealing with conflict. Aside from the two discipline techniques discussed above, the third technique known as induction is supportive and constructive because it focuses the child's attention on the consequences of his actions for others through pointing to the other's distress that results from the child's behavior.⁽¹⁰⁾ With this technique the child has a better chance to begin determining the content of his own standards. He becomes fully aware of his own needs and identifies the consequences of this actions for himself and others. Such empathy would seem to be a necessary condition for the constructive working through of conflict. For example, in small groups individuals would learn to perceive problem areas from other's views and learn to identify their needs in stating and dealing with problems.

Conclusion

What can be done in terms of incorporating the concept of unconscious psychological processes into both conflict management theory and practice? We feel there are a number of important directions for research and practice. For example, the influence of early parental models on the development of adult styles of coping with conflict constitutes an important area for research. The research would focus also on the extent of in-

(10) Ibid.

dividual awareness of the connection and its influences on the ways they deal with conflicts in their lifestyles. It seems apparent that we are in a transition stage in terms of parents helping children learn to constructively cope with conflicts. Parents themselves lack awareness and are caught in cultural traditions that trap them from finding more constructive ways of handling conflict than they were brought up on. In terms of the conflict management practice, the development of an exploratory awareness training program emphasizing the connectiveness of present ways of coping with conflict with childhood experiences with significant order is a feasible area for investigation. This would do much to allow us to better understand the relationship of personal growth to learning more constructive ways of coping with conflict.

The area of awareness training contains many additional possibilities. For example, what is the impact of amplifying an individual's or group's awareness of how they distort and defend themselves against perceived threats? Can knowledge about how dis-owned projection operate in relationships and group coupled with experiential application lead to more constructive approaches? An affirmative answer would seem probable since empathetic responses are evoked when one can acknowledge that the negativity is in them and it is therefore the basis for keying in on it in others. Awareness training and identifying and managing "group think" is another neglected area for research. We know surprisingly little about the possibility of developing constructive interpersonal skills in creatively coping with identifiable group pathologies. Similarly, training and research oriented to raising awareness of cultural conditioning and entrapment could shed much needed light on creative possibilities. Is it possible to help individuals to learn to deal proactively with their cultural matrix rather than reactively accepting their culture as a given? This appears to be an important question for developing individuals who can transcend their cultural matrix enough to innovate new ways of coping with conflict. Hopefully, we have provided enough sense of direction to stimulate others to do research and training in the much needed area of unconscious psychological processes in conflict management.

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Ö Z E T

ÇELİŞKİ YÖNETİMİNDE BİLİNÇ DIŞI PSİKOLOJİK SÜREÇLER

Bu çalışmanın amacı, çelişki yönetimi alanında yönetim uygulamacıları ile davranış bilimcileri arasındaki görüş ayrılıklarını ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bu görüş ayrılıkları, günün gerçekleri ile eski görüşleri ayırma zorluğundan kaynaklanır.

Eski bir anlayışa göre çelişki durumlarında bir tarafın kazanması diğerinin yenilmesini gerektirir. Ancak çelişki durumlarının bu tür bir açıklanması, bireylerin kazanma kaybetme çekişmesini bilinçleri dışında genelleştirmelerine neden olmaktadır.

Bu çalışma, çelişki durumlarında bireyin kendi kusurlarını red ve olumsuzluğunu başkalarına yansıtması gibi bilinç dışı savunma yöntemlerini incelemektedir. Ayrıca bireylerin çelişkiyi karşılamalarında aile eğitiminin rolü de tartışılmaktadır.

Sonuçta, bireylerin kendi davranışlarının nedenlerini anlayarak, kişisel gelişmeleri yoluyla karşılaştıkları çelişkilere etkin ve yapıcı çözümler bulmaları için yeni eğitim programları önerilmektedir.