

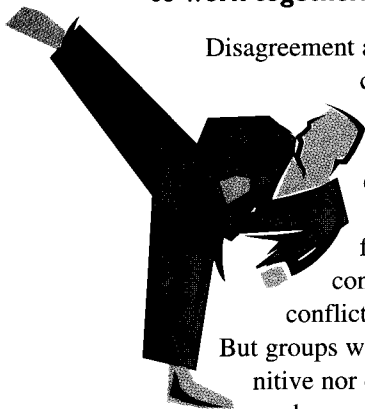


ROBERT J.
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Graceful CONFLICT

*When you care enough,
use the principles of effective fighting*

Faculties who work together can produce student learning in greater measures than faculties in which teachers go it alone (Seashore Louis, et al, 1996; Rosenholz, 1989). But successful work groups must know more than just how to work together. They also must know how to constructively fight with one another.



Disagreement about ideas — known as cognitive conflict — in working groups has a positive impact on the quality of decisions, group member commitment, and follow through. Cognitive conflict can lead to emotional conflict (Amason, et al, 1995).

But groups who experience neither cognitive nor emotional conflict tend to be apathetic and make decisions based on the suggestions of the leader or the group's most vocal member.

THREE LESSONS

How can staff developers help groups develop healthy norms for and forms of disagreement?

In brief form, here are some pragmatic ideas my colleague Bruce Wellman and I have learned as we've helped schools develop maps and tools for dealing with conflict (Garmston, 1998).



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1 Conflict is just energy in the system. It is nothing more, nothing less. It is neither good nor bad. It just is. People bring meaning to conflict. How we react to conflict is influenced by personal history, family patterns, cultural norms, and the group's practices (Crum, 1987.)

2 Part of our difficulty with conflict is how we talk about it.

We tend to talk about "conflict" as if it is a thing. That means we treat it as if it is static, without regard to gradation, intensity, or process. This is known as nominalization.

With conflict — as with love, enjoyment, sadness or any of the emotions we tend to nominalize — there is a starting point, levels of intensity, a cooling off and a transition into another emotional state. In each case, the language which labels these processes as things, freezes these dynamic, activities into static, conceptual abstractions. When groups act on the abstraction, instead of the real stuff, they experience failure and frustration.

Conversely, the more groups use the language of logic, emotion, and process, the greater their awareness and ability to direct and control conflicting energies:

● "We have two opposing views; let's distinguish between the data and inferences supporting each."

● “I am feeling some despair over our progress.”

● “You’ve said the relationship lacks trust. What would we be seeing and hearing if we were trusting one another?”

Often the processes in conflict are less than obvious. Goleman (1995) reports that men and women respond differently to conflict. In one example, he cites studies showing that when the husband begins to stonewall in a tense conversation, his heart rate lowers by 10 beats per minute. At the same time, the wife’s heartbeat raises to a level of stress. How’s that for a systems cycle?

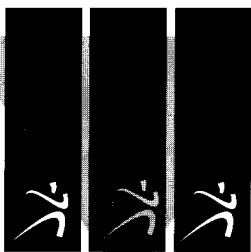
3 Certain dynamics create energy traps that limit possibilities and contain energy in increasingly destructive loops. Energy traps can establish counterproductive recursive patterns throughout systems. Microphone feedback, grumpiness, and raised voices are examples of reactions that stimulate negative responses. In classrooms, when the teacher’s voice intervenes as the volume of the class rises, the class will get louder. If the teacher’s voice intervenes as the volume dips, the class quiets.

A common energy trap is fixing what shows, not what is broken. Ours is a quick-fix culture. Mysteries are solved in 30 minutes minus time for commercials. Daily newspaper headlines focus on new solutions for schools, poverty, and crime. Legislative bodies adopt simple solutions for complex problems, often with solutions that have nothing to do with the problem.

Here’s an example of how this might work in a school: Math achievement at fourth grade takes a dip. What shows itself to be fixed is inadequate mastery of number facts. The school works hard at this, running contests, drilling, assigning homework. Short term gains are not strong but they are evident. Two years later, the problem returns. The school fixed what was showing. But what was broken was students’ conceptual and language capacity with mathematics principles. The first through third

How to bring dignity and effectiveness to the conflict

While many books and strategies exist for conflict resolution, negotiation for success, how to win arguments, and win-win consensus, the following represents the strongest foundation Bruce Wellman and I have found for learning to address conflicting energies with dignity and effectiveness. We offer this as a foundation; simple but not simplistic, clear but not easy, a starting point but not complete.



1. Be grounded.

Take care of yourself. Don’t allow yourself to get too hungry, too tired, or too lonely. Balance your emotional portfolio in work, family, recreation, and spiritual pursuits.

2. Learn to listen.

Listen with your ears, eyes, and heart. Henry Kissinger used to say that during his shuttle diplomacy periods he would remember his humanness and remind himself to forget his agenda. Learn personal ways of calming down and calming down others.

3. Develop group members’ capacity for graceful fighting.

- Teach seven norms of collaboration (Garmston and Wellman, 1998);
- Teach groups to dialogue and discuss; and
- Value human diversity. Engage groups in self studies of what makes each person unique: cognitive style, educational belief systems, learning style preferences, and how, collectively, each adds resources to the group.

4. Learn and teach principles (as opposed to rules) from social psychology, systems theory, and the martial arts for working effectively with conflict.

For example, from social psychology, learn how to collectively define what is meant by “fair.” From systems theory, clarify competing mental models. Get people to describe their assumptions, beliefs, values, and needs. From aikido, honor and acknowledge existing energy rather than opposing it. Dance with it, blend with it. Since resistance persists only in a system of resistance, flowing with the energy removes the tensions and makes resolutions and accommodations attainable.

— Robert J. Garmston

grade program of some math manipulative and gradually increasing paper and pencil curriculum had served students adequately for that math program. But it did not work so well in fourth grade when mathematics became more abstract (fractions, division, ratio). Without rich mathematical language, students struggled, became frustrated, and fell behind.

Fixing the new conflict that shows just leads to another. Since work is being

done only at the appearance level, underlying tensions are left unattended and erupt at the next fissure.

Fixing what is broken requires a deep understanding of the interacting energies that create undesirable conditions. Expertise in any field is marked by a pattern of spending more time in problem understanding and less in problem solving. School staffs skilled in dialogue (Garmston and Wellman, 1998) have the tools for this.

WHEN ANGER SHOWS

Anger complicates conflict. A sense of being in either physical or psychological danger triggers anger. Psychological danger includes symbolic threats to self-esteem, dignity, being treated unfairly, being insulted or demeaned, or being frustrated in achieving an important goal.

These perceptions of danger trigger a limbic surge that has a dual effect on the brain.

1. Release of catecholamines, which generate a quick rush of energy to prepare for fight or flight. This lasts for minutes.

2. Another ripple through the adrenocortical branch of the nervous system creates a general background of action readiness. This can last for hours or days and is one explanation why peo-

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ple are much more prone to anger if they've already been provoked. They are primed and ready to explode.

All conflict begins inside oneself. Learning productive ways of working with conflict is a life-long task. In a sense, the best teacher is a reflective life with access to healthy models.

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