CHAPTER 3

The Leader as Peacemaker: Managing the Conflicts of a Multifocal Workplace

Cooperation is the thorough conviction that nobody can get there unless everybody gets there.

—Virginia Burden

Chapter Objectives

At the completion of this chapter, the reader will be able to

• Recognize the key principles of conflict resolution in dealing with a wide variety of conflict-based issues.
• Apply conflict management principles and processes in the everyday exercise of the leadership role.
• Distinguish between normal conflict management and the management of differences.
• Formulate personal insights regarding how to apply conflict management skill sets as part of the leadership role.
• Distinguish between identity- and interest-based conflict and describe the best approach to dealing with each type.

Conflict is often viewed as a negative aspect of reality, yet it exists everywhere, from the foundations of life to the complexities of social interchange. The challenge presented by conflict is that it is often rife with pain and violence. However, that it frequently has those features is evidence of our inability to see conflict as normal and to develop mechanisms for managing it well (Kriesberg 2003). Because it is so much a part of the human experience, we would do better to learn the dynamics of conflict and incorporate its management into our human skill set. This chapter treats conflict as normal and offers a range of techniques and methodologies for managing it in such a way as to ultimately achieve purposeful action and improved relationships. The emphasis is on developing skills for facilitating the use of conflict as a tool for promoting good interaction and advancing relationships.
The chapter also outlines the difference between interest- and identity-based conflicts and describes the processes used to address each.

Conflict is normal. It is present in every human relationship. It is a sign of the Creator’s commitment to diversity and in fact represents diversity in action. It is the dynamic content of diversity, and human conflict is essentially diversity being worked out in the human community.

Conflict should never be avoided. Instead, it should be embraced as a fundamental part of human interaction. Conflict is the most frequent dynamic in human relationships. And yet it is the most misunderstood and misused element in the whole arena of communication and interaction.

Embracing conflict is easier said than done, of course. A particular instance of conflict can involve a significant emotional overlay that adds stress to the interaction. This emotional component takes the conflict to a level of intensity that is uncomfortable and often destructive. At higher levels of intensity the process of being in opposition becomes its own end, and the purpose and product of the conflict disappear in the dust raised by the process. The emotional component creates so much unpredictable and untenable content that most people simply back away from the conflict, unable to figure out how to deal with it or cope with its pain.

Fear and avoidance of conflict are main causes of the problems that can arise when a conflict occurs. Another cause is ignorance of the processes of conflict management. When a person becomes embroiled in a conflict, many feelings rush to the surface and begin to be expressed in one form or another, until eventually the person is dealing with feelings rather than the conflict that generated them. As a result, the original reason for the conflict can get lost in the interaction and may even be forgotten, replaced by another reason. In this scenario, ending the conflict amicably does not resolve the underlying problem, which has the potential to bring about another skirmish. The cycle can continue indefinitely, building layer upon layer over the underlying problem and making it ever harder to discern.

**Growth and Transformation**

All conflict provides a dynamic opportunity for growth and transformation, and leaders should treat conflict as simply another tool of good leadership. Peter Drucker (1998) has often said that 90 percent of leadership is addressing human behavior issues. A good proportion of this 90 percent involves addressing issues that have some form of conflict at their base.

The secret of good conflict management is simple, but the process is not. The secret is to get the parties in conflict to discern the root issues and mutually agree on actions to be taken. Actually building an effective process to accomplish this goal, however, is a complex task.
Conflict management takes into account that people differ in a whole range of ways and that factors as broad as culture, race, gender, social status, and income group, and as specific as personal beliefs, family position, mental health, intelligence, and emotional maturity all can influence the onset and process of a particular conflict (Exhibit 3–1). It also takes into account that typically the parties to a conflict are unequal in some way, that one party may have a substantial advantage over the other (e.g., the lion’s share of power). If a satisfactory outcome is to be obtained, the conflict management process must create equity at the table. It must utilize a mechanism that closely reflects the character and content of the conflict and moves it toward a mutually agreed-upon resolution. This mechanism must take into account the sources and contextual components of the conflict, as well as the content elements. It must also address the power equation so that any unevenness can be accommodated and the process can unfold in a balanced and fair way.

Leaders, to do their job well, must acquire basic conflict management skills. Most lack these skills or have failed to master them, and as a result in many organizations a whole range of conflicts fester and grow. The possession of well-honed conflict management skills has become even more important due to of the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of the workplace, because questioning historical relationships can easily give rise to conflicts.

Nurses have an additional set of concerns regarding conflicts and their resolution. In some ways the history of nursing parallels the history of the women’s movement, including the subordination and powerlessness experienced by both women and nurses (most of whom have been women). Recently, the education of nurses and other health professionals has gone far toward creating intellectual and role equity, but long-standing medical

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**Point to Ponder**

About 90 percent of the average leader’s responsibilities involve dealing with human behavior and human interaction. Given that this is true, why do leaders spend so little time learning how to resolve the issues that arise out of human dynamics?

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**Exhibit 3–1  Sources of Conflict**

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practices and legal constraints on the scope of practice for various health professionals make these professionals, including nurses, uncertain of the agendas of physicians and administrators and skeptical of the processes that have been used to resolve conflicts between the professions. In the view of nurses, the relationship they have had with physicians and administrators has historically been one-sided and biased against them, and their sense of being ignored or even silenced has not created a good foundation for building equitable relationships and resolving conflicts, to say the least.

Indeed, nurses are sometimes inclined to engage in passive-aggressive, hostile, uncooperative, or avoidance behavior, even if the consequences are damaging to themselves. One explanation is that they have not always been able to avail themselves of the maturity that comes with development, dialogue, conflict resolution processes, and some level of success. Another explanation may be that the practice and service delivery models in use generally do not require nurses to interact at a high level. Most nursing work is designed to be performed by independent nurses or nursing teams assigned to defined groups of patients. This type of work involves little work sharing and keeps nurses from the vital interactions that would develop their relational skills. The conflicts between nurses and between nurses and other health professionals fall into the category of identity-based conflicts, and their ultimate resolution requires, among other things, reconstructing the relationship between nursing and the other professions.

Avoiding Unnecessary Conflict

Because conflict is an essential component of human interaction, trying to create conditions in which conflict is completely absent is pointless. There is often a sense that conflict is negative. Nothing could be further from the truth. Conflict is simply the indication of the presence of differences. Ignoring essential differences provides solid ground for encouraging unnecessary conflict. It is not a good use of the leader’s skill or time trying to prevent inevitable conflict. Leaders instead should devote themselves to managing conflict, which also includes preventing unnecessary conflict. Some of the conditions that help prevent unnecessary conflict are described below.
AN ENVIRONMENT OF OPEN COMMUNICATION

It goes without saying that creating a climate of openness and trust is an excellent way to facilitate work and relationships. Although some leaders believe that tightly controlling work creates the fewest problems and that a “tight ship is the best run ship,” that is not true for the normal activities of work. Leaders must realize that the relationship between the members of the work team is the most critical factor influencing the extent to which the conflict becomes a way of life. A sense that there is nothing that cannot be dealt with, that there are no “undiscussables,” is essential to avoiding unnecessary conflicts.

The leader of an organization has enormous influence over the organization’s culture. The leader’s personal style of relating to and communicating with others sets the tone for the workplace, and it does not take long for others in the organization to discern what is acceptable and what is not. The leader’s behavior toward staff and his or her responses to the stressors and challenges of the job create the model of acceptable conduct and act as the framework for what topics can be approached and what behaviors are appropriate.

Groups become very skilled at seeing and noting the permissible and the political. Group members know what they must “go around” to get things done. What cannot be dealt with openly and directly is addressed secretly and behind closed doors. It is when open communication is absent that the infrastructure of conflict begins to take form and processes leading to irresolvable differences begin to emerge.

CONGRUENCE BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL WORK GOALS

A good way to prevent conflict is to ensure that the goals of individual workers and the goals of the organization support each other. It is commonly understood that complementary goals prevent conflict and competitive goals generate conflict. The history of work in America is rife with instances where organizational goals and processes were at odds with the goals and expectations of those doing the work and where conflict sprang up as a result.

When there is goal congruence people are more open, cooperative, engaged, and supportive and less angry and frustrated. When everyone is clear about expectations and processes and there is a supporting structure that contributes to the meeting of expectations, less conflict is generated.

Of course, congruence between goals is not always possible. Therefore, people must be given the opportunity to disclose what the differences are and how they are affected by these differences. If the reasons for the differences and the character of the differences can be made clear, people find them easier to accommodate or accept. In addition, they
find them easier to accommodate or accept if they understand that all issues and situations are transitional and all relationships operate within the context of the human and relational journey (Figures 3–1 through 3–5).

**MANAGING CONFLICT PRODUCTIVELY**

Leaders should devote more resources to the task of recognizing sources of conflict soon enough to handle disputes in the right way at the right time than they should devote to avoiding conflict. Following are some rules for handling conflict appropriately and productively.

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**Figure 3–1**  Structural Conflicts

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**Figure 3–2**  Value Conflicts
Time and place can play a role in diffusing or inflaming a conflict. For example, if a conflict arises in public, the wise leader acts to remove the parties to a private place where the issues can be dealt with directly and freely. In many cases, a conflict first reveals itself at a critical or stressful moment, fooling the participants into believing that the situation is the source of the conflict rather than simply an occasion for its expression. In such a case, trying to deal with the conflict within the context of the situation will likely escalate the conflict, and so it is better to put the participants into a different environment or deal with the conflict at a later time and focus the dialogue on the issues, not the events.

**Figure 3–3** Information Conflicts

**Figure 3–4** Interaction Conflicts
Conflict is primarily about behavior, not about people (although see Identify-Based Conflict, below). In dealing with a conflict, the leader needs to be clued into the behavioral patterns and concerns and their impact on the parties’ relationship, because the ultimate goal is to sustain this relationship. The leader is looking for accommodation and the ability to develop a working relationship that evinces the values and commitment necessary to do the work and continue to do it. In addition, the goal is to fix the problem, not to affix blame. No conflict is unilaterally driven—there is enough fault to go around. Wasting time on trying to affix blame delays long-term resolution of the conflict.

The resolution of a conflict depends on the achievement of some level of agreement about the parties’ behaviors or responses. Further, the agreement must be clearly articulated and must be understood by all parties. In addition, at some point the parties must define their common ground in a joint meeting.

If a conflict is to be resolved, the parties must have a sense of ownership over their own feelings and the agenda. The leader must ensure the parties own their feelings and do not cast them onto the shoulders of others, and that they do not interpret what others mean without confirming that their interpretation is correct. The use of “I” approaches is critical to the dialogue. By making certain that each party’s insights, feelings, and views are expressed from the party’s own perspective and in his or her own language, the leader keeps both parties away from “us versus them” statements and “you” statements. The leader also can help maintain the focus and flow of the dialogue by making certain it stays within the limits of self-directed communication and personal ownership of the dialogue.

A flip chart or other visual tool can be used to get the conflict elements out in front of the parties in a two-dimensional way. The use of visual tools can overcome some of the obstacles likely to be raised by poorly chosen language and place the ideas of all the parties before their eyes in a way that automatically creates equity. It also can help balance the
dialogue and move the issues closer to real resolution by expanding the foundation of understanding between the parties.

Vagueness is to be constantly fought against. Although a certain amount of ambiguity is unavoidable as people sort out the issues, continuing vagueness obscures the issues and stops the dialogue. The leader must work to facilitate clarity around every issue of concern. By naming names, identifying events, describing situations, and illustrating behaviors, the leader seeks to get down to basics. The goal is to ensure that the real issues and processes are laid out on the table in clear enough terms that all the players can see them plainly.

Each party is looking for something, and unless this something is obtained or willingly given up for something else, the conflict will not end. First, each party must articulate what he or she wants and what the other parties want in a way that all can understand and agree to. Second, each party must leave the conflict with a sense that he or she obtained something valuable, and each must feel good about what the other party got as well. In other words, the parties must view the resolution as equitable. This does not mean that what everyone gets is equal. It means that the resolution dispensed to each party is enough to satisfy that party, regardless of how important what was given may be to any of the other parties.

The above advice on how to manage conflict is not all-inclusive. For instance, leaders must take into account both situational and cultural factors when trying to facilitate the resolution of a conflict. The flexibility necessary to incorporate these factors is part of the conflict management skill set.

**Team-Based Conflict Issues**

Working together to provide health care services can be intense and difficult and can easily lead to conflict. To reduce the chance of unnecessary conflict, leaders must pay attention to relationship issues and create and keep an open and honest context for the work. Still, even in the best context the behaviors and characteristics of people can lead to conflict.

Different personalities deal with conflict in different ways. Some folks are naturally generators of conflict, whereas others are skilled avoiders of it. Most of us fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Because different interests and personalities are present in the workplace, there is always opportunity for conflict to emerge.

The leader of a health care organization should always be on the lookout for the potential for conflict. Because conflict eventually arises in any human environment, its potential is always present, at least to some degree. Further, if a conflict can be detected in its very
early stages, it can be addressed soon enough to keep it from becoming critical and requiring extensive intervention. In general, the amount of effort needed to resolve a conflict is directly related to how early in the conflict’s development the issues are dealt with.

Leaders must be aware of the main factors that lead to team-based conflict. Some of these are as follows. If team members believe they are on the receiving end of unfair or inequitable treatment, they will descend down Maslow’s ladder. Conflict and acting out inevitably occur unless everyone is given an equal opportunity to provide input and have an impact. Another source of inequity is the tendency of people to use each other or the team for their own agendas or advancement. All team members must try to be just and fair in their dealings with each other to ensure the ground is even and everyone gets treated impartially.

Everyone does not need to know everything, but there must not be a lack of essential information, especially the information people need to do their work and to function and relate efficiently. In addition, team members must have a common understanding of the information and be able to see it within the correct context. It is common for people to believe they have the information they need but discover upon further investigation that each has a different understanding of it, and so the team leader must make sure that everyone shares a common understanding. Also, team members need to share their knowledge, insights, and experience in a way that can influence the team and what it does. Expressing what they know and believe is critical to their own sense of value and place on the team and is likewise critical to the viability of the team.

Game playing always leads to conflict. The team leader must therefore be certain that the members are singing off the same song sheet. The rules that govern the team’s activities should be clarified to and by the team members at the outset and often along the way. The members also need to be reminded that they will be held accountable for respecting the rules. Although any team must be able to accommodate different personalities, the interaction of team members must keep within certain boundaries. Processes that impede good interaction and communication between members ultimately lead to conflict.

Not acknowledging everyone’s uniqueness can be a source of trouble. Every person approaches his or her work differently, has a different array of talents and skills, and has a different background and set of experiences. The team leader must not only recognize the differences between team members but must use them to advance the work of the team. For instance, some members are more reflective, and others are more active. The leader usually does not need to prompt the more active members to make themselves heard—they are usually the first to initiate dialogue or action—but the leader may have to ask the more reflective members for their views. Because the reflective members often have excellent insights and thoughtful opinions, they also must be involved in the team process to ensure the team’s work is fully effective. Thus, the leader must recognize that the presence of personality and role differences can actually enhance the team’s effectiveness and that getting the full range of contributions from members avoids conflict, because no one feels unjustly neglected.

Behavior based on hidden agendas is a prevalent source of team conflict and is extremely difficult to address. Almost every team has members who are not “on board” be-
cause they are pursuing their own agendas. They attempt to realize their goals by manipulating others and preventing others from attaining their objectives. They tend to see the world solely from their own position and treat others simply as a means of advancing their own interests. Whether they keep the team from growing or move the team in the direction of their choosing, they damage the integrity of the team and its sense of purpose. The team leader must try to detect these patterns of behavior early in the team process to correct them before they do serious harm. If members are allowed to pursue their own agendas with impunity or for a long period of time, they reduce the team’s effectiveness and eventually cause the team to descend into a state of chaos and conflict.

Lack of mutual appreciation among team members impairs team integrity. An old Zulu adage says, “I can only be me through your eyes.” Who people are and the gifts that they bring are sacred and important. All team members should believe they have value and are there because they have a unique contribution to make. They should know what it is they offer and be acknowledged for it by the other members. Each member should be aware of the character and role of any other member and understand how to advance and honor his or her own role. By clearly articulating the gifts that everyone brings to the table and the value of those gifts, the team leader keeps all the team members in mind of everyone’s importance and thus diminishes the potential for conflict and breakdown.

Power issues are a common source of conflict. How power is dispersed and used has a great influence on the occurrence and intensity of conflict within a team. In particular, conflict inevitably occurs if the expression of power is not seen as competent or balanced, or if the location of power is not seen as appropriate. A team operates like a community, and the team leader has the responsibility to maintain a sense of community among the members. The leader is always looking for breaks and potential problems in the relationship between members as a way of anticipating conflict and dealing with it before it develops into a major crisis requiring substantial time and resources.

Getting ahead of the conflicts that emerge is the best possible method for diffusing them and mitigating their consequences. The team leader should set up the team’s structure and processes to make conflict a normal part of the interaction and relationship between members. The leader should not ignore conflict but instead implement strategies to expose the essential differences between members early enough to resolve the inevitable episodes of conflict as quickly as possible. By valuing and validating differences between team members and accommodating them, the leader reduces the number of conflicts and at the same time decreases the chance that any of them will become crippling.

Key Point

Power is a sensitive issue in health care. For example, the word *power* is rarely used by health professionals, as if they do not really believe it operates in their relationships with each other. Of course, it always does. It is vital that the issues of power and authority be open for discussion, because they are critical elements in the interaction of team members at every level of the system.
Identity-Based Conflict

Conflicts generally fall into two categories: interest-based conflicts and identity-based conflicts. Interest-based conflicts arise from circumstances or interactions and often can be resolved quickly. Identity-based conflicts go much deeper and last longer. Rothman (1997) suggested that identity-based conflicts are rooted in threats to people’s need for dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy. For these conflicts to be adequately addressed, their origin and their meaning to the opposed parties must be adequately appreciated. In general, identity-based conflicts

- Reflect the parties’ culture and beliefs.
- Involve questions of identity and sense of self.
- Arise out of the parties’ commitment to their values.
- Are of long duration.
- Are the most difficult conflicts to resolve.
- Can be passed on from one generation to next.

Their sources include

- Values
- Religion
- Language
- Heritage
- Culture
- Family
- Community
- Country

Group Discussion

Look around the room at the other occupants and write down as many differences as you can in a few minutes. After listing all the differences on a flip chart, discuss how each might lead to a conflict. Also discuss how the resulting conflicts might affect relationships, interactions, and the work environment. Then identify how the different types of conflict are related to each other and consider the possibility that together they could result in an irresolvable state of conflict. Finally, discuss how the conflicts identified could escalate and describe the impact such escalation could have on patient care.

Each person has a unique background and set of life experiences and brings a personal and a cultural framework to any dialogue or deliberation with others. Further, it is because everyone is a unique individual that relationships and interactions exhibit a dynamic pattern and that identity-based conflicts are possible. It is the differences between people that create life’s mosaic—it’s fabric. The richness of human experience is driven by the broad diversity that is characteristic of human life and that forms the foundation for human inter-
action. It is no surprise that for conflict resolution activities to be successful, they must be based on an understanding of the ingrained differences between the parties and must encompass a respect for and appreciation of these differences.

Conflict is a normal part of all human affairs, from marriage to politics. Recognizing this fact encourages us not to ignore conflict, downplay it, or leave it unaddressed. The best strategy is to accept that conflict is inevitable and acquire the skills and methods for safely and effectively dealing with it, including paying attention to what it means and where it is trying to move us.

Identity-based conflicts are very difficult to either define or resolve. Because they are rooted in historical, psychological, cultural, and experiential factors, their boundaries and content are hard to determine. Because they are deeply embedded in personal sentiments, the contending parties are less willing to compromise. Therefore, they demand a deep and creative engagement.

GIVING THE PARTIES A VOICE

When confronted with an identity-based conflict between two or more parties, a leader must facilitate the resolution of the conflict. Acting as facilitator, the leader’s first job is to give the parties a voice and listen to their essential concerns and their perceptions of the conflict. They must be allowed to express where they are in the conflict and what their feelings are about the conflict. Note that their perceptions do not have to be correct, because the main goal is to find out what each party has experienced from inside the experience. The stated perceptions of each party constitute a personal expression of his or her experience of the conflict and are bound to be different from the stated perceptions of the other party. In some cases, the parties’ perceptions are so different that an objective third person may wonder if each is describing the same situation.

Getting the parties to give expression to their perceptions of the conflict is an essential first step in understanding and resolving it. The way the perceptions are formulated should reflect the feelings and sentiments of those who have the perceptions. This stage, when the parties give voice to their sentiments and perceptions, is not the time for clarification and process. The facilitator needs to allow the expression of perceptions to be natural and unconstrained. The result is sometimes uncomfortable because the emotion can be intense and raw. Yet intensity of feeling indicates to the parties how critical the process is and just what the stakes are.

For there to be movement toward resolution, the facilitator must make sure that all
the issues and all facets of the issues believed by the parties to be critical are laid out in detail, including issues related to dignity, recognition, value, and meaning. There is nothing more threatening to the process of resolution than a belief on the part of any party that his or her story was not told, that the origin of the conflict has not been fully appreciated, and, as a result, that the process is flawed.

Identity-based conflicts are rooted in the parties' need to protect their value and identity (Exhibit 3–2). They believe there is a threat to who they are—a threat to the very foundation of their being—and they often respond by going on the attack. For example, conflicts between nurses and physicians over practice are rooted in their notions of who they are as professionals and their sense that their value and even survival is threatened by the other professional group. Physicians believe that nurses jeopardize their independence as practitioners and their economic well-being, and nurses believe that physicians obstruct their ability to practice, grow, and thrive. In fact, each group views the other group as a major threat to its own interests, predisposing members of both groups to let their negative perceptions of the conflict inform every interaction they have on issues of practice and service.

Interest-based conflicts, if left unresolved long enough, can and often do become identity-based conflicts, but the latter, no matter what their origin, require strategies different from those used to resolve conflicts that are simply interest based. For instance, legalistic and negotiation-oriented strategies tend to alienate the parties to an identity-based conflict. These strategies limit the amount and types of dialogue that occur, preventing the parties from establishing the kind of relation-

### Exhibit 3–2  Identity Characteristics

- Needs
- Self-image
- Insight
- Knowledge
- Skills
- Balance
- Clarity
- Investment
- Breadth
- Ownership

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**Key Point**

Identity-based conflicts take longer to resolve than interest-based conflicts. They arise out of people's identity—who people are as opposed to what they do—and often have substantial historic content. In an identity-based conflict the two parties, to reach a resolution, must come to appreciate each other's value and respect each other's uniqueness—a very challenging task given the passionate attachment of each party to his or her own identity.
ship they need to deal with the issues affecting them. Using resolution strategies aimed at getting to an early agreement can poison the conversation and keep the parties from finding common ground. People are not willing to compromise those things that they believe are fundamental to their own identity and survival. Some issues simply are not subject to negotiation.

**Time and Patience**

In trying to resolve an identity-based conflict, it is a mistake to begin by pushing the parties to compromise, often the strategy of choice for interest-based conflicts. Another mistake is to try to get the parties to separate their feelings from the so-called facts of the conflict, for their feelings, especially their sense of identity, are at the root of the conflict. Using a strategy that threatens their identity makes the parties more suspicious of each other and of the conflict resolution process.

The resolution of identity-based conflicts takes a great deal of time, especially the first stages of the process. However, these stages are the most crucial and warrant the extra time and patience. Naming and certifying issues, feelings, and positions clearly at the outset establishes a firm foundation upon which to construct a process that moves effectively to a successful outcome.

In a traditional negotiation process, the parties try, through compromise, to arrive at a place where they can essentially “split the difference.” This process works best when the issues are clear, the goals are well defined, and the parties are reasonably clear on what the common ground looks like. Unfortunately, the underlying issues in an identity-based conflict are blurred, and the parties feel especially vulnerable because the stakes are seen as so consequential. The parties therefore are hesitant to compromise early in the process, and moving too quickly toward a resolution could threaten the process itself and prevent the parties from dealing with the underlying issues, in which case these issues would ultimately give rise to another episode of discord.

**Building Trust**

Much of the early work in the resolution process is directed toward getting the parties to change the way they think about each other and agree on a process and method for interacting. The parties are essentially suspicious of each other. Their suspicion is itself a great source of conflict, and getting to a place where the rules of engagement are clear and can be used as the vehicle for dialogue increases the probability that the parties can work out their differences.

In an interest-based conflict the root issues are not always put on the table, and the negotiation strategies are typically as important as the issues. In contrast, in an identity-based conflict, posturing and
positioning are generally ineffective, because the parties need to disclose their powerfully held sentiments and beliefs—those things that reveal who they are and what they do. To build a proper foundation for resolving the conflict, they must fully understand these sentiments and beliefs—their own and those of the other party—and identify whatever common ground exists.

Because of the high stakes involved in an identity-based conflict, the facilitator should move the parties toward negotiations slowly, after a trusting foundation has been established. In the initial stages of dialogue, the facilitator should encourage the parties to set practical goals, such as arriving at a common view of the conflict and agreeing to a description of the issues in a common language. By achieving these goals, the parties are more inclined to accept that resolution of the conflict is a real possibility and can feel comfortable with the resolution process. In short, the parties must develop a sense of relationship with each other before moving further along toward resolution.

The facilitator must realize that building a trusting atmosphere and getting the parties to recognize they each have a substantial stake in resolving the conflict are both essential steps. By showing the parties their relationship to the larger context, the facilitator helps them see where their common values lie and what a resolution equitable to everyone might be.

The facilitator is likely to find that one or both parties exhibit a currently prevailing pattern of behavior characterized by deviousness, secretiveness, manipulation, and a sense of “us against the world.” This pattern provokes a response of unilateral defensiveness that is hard to break through. To fight against it, the facilitator must try to nurture cooperative inquiry, establish credibility, and engage in relationship building. A good part of the resolution process must be devoted to creating a common identity around the issues in a way that allows all the parties to believe they are mutually contributing to the end of the conflict.

The parties must arrive at a place where they can honestly say what they value and believe. Getting them to this place may not be easy, because the parties may have strong emotional blocks that prevent them from articulating what their issues really are. Sometimes the parties believe they are articulating the issues by stating how they feel, but in doing this they are focusing on the results of the issues, not on the issues themselves. The facilitator must get them to focus on what caused these feelings—the conflicts that lie at the heart of their emotions.

The long-term work involves helping the parties reconceptualize the conflict, perceive their relationship in a new way, change the language they use to describe the conflict, and even change the nature of the conflict altogether. The conflict may be rooted in a lack of clarity, and one or both parties may say things that are inconsistent with what they do. They both need to achieve a good understanding of their own motives and desires before attempting to move toward an end to the conflict. Otherwise, each will be unable to hear and understand where the other is coming from.

**Finding Differences**

As mentioned above, each person is a unique blend of differences, and their differences from each other are what make people exciting and intriguing to each other. We celebrate our differences and honor diversity in culture and personality. Yet differences can become
an impediment to understanding and relationship, and given enough time any human relationship will give rise to some level of conflict. When it does, those in the relationship must understand that it is not the conflict that is problematic but its nonresolution.

Group Discussion

In any organization, unresolved conflict eventually creates a culture of conflict, increasing the incidence of conflict at every level (LeBaron 2003). After identifying personally experienced unresolved conflicts in the workplace, discuss the impact that each conflict had on relationships in the work group. In talking about this issue, consider the following questions: What kinds of factions formed? Did the one conflict lead to others? Did the group leader take any action to ensure that the conflict would be resolved? That it would not be resolved? What was the long-term impact of the unresolved conflict? Was the conflict ever resolved? How?

To figure out just what caused a conflict, the parties to the conflict must frame the issue in a way that gives it focus. One method is for each party to ask, what do I want here? To answer this question, each must be clear on how he or she stands on the differences between the two parties. Framing their notion of the conflict or of their position in relationship to it gives the parties a foundation on which to take a position. To get there, they need to ask themselves some specific questions.

Do the parties remember the period before the conflict existed? Looking at the before and after can help the parties give the conflict a time and a frame of reference, allowing them to identify its elements in a way that makes it real. Furthermore, the parties, in reviewing the period before the conflict, give the facilitator an opportunity to see how each perceives the beginning of the conflict and to detect any differences in their perceptions. What antagonisms emerged? What did they look like? How did they feel? Here the focus is on perceptions of the moment of conflict. The issues of resentment, behavior change, and cultural and personality differences get expressed in the unique language of each party. Both parties begin to express their special insights about the feelings and animosities that emerged and grew as a result of their differences, and the individual flavor of the conflict starts to become clear. The parties now get a chance to express not only how they felt but why and what it meant to them at the time, allowing the circumstances to be reflected through the lens of personal experience. This process disciplines their insight and forces them to focus on the conditions and circumstances that give form to their sense of the conflict.

Who is to blame and what are they to be blamed for? Answering this question is a good way to get to the dynamics of the conflict. In almost every conflict, a strong element of blame lies at its heart. The parties need to get some idea of what the blame is, where it resides, and what form it takes. Not only is it important to uncover the blame, the facilitator must push each party to describe the content of the blame it points at the other party and explain why it is justified. The explanation is likely to make reference to stress, pain,
or anguish experienced by the party doing the blaming and indicates how the other party was responsible for it.

These questions get at the fundamental antagonisms causing the conflict. The parties’ perceptions and feelings need to be articulated at the beginning of the resolution process for two reasons. First, both parties must see and say where they are in relation to their notion of the conflict. Second, the facilitator must get some sense of where the parties are at the start of the resolution process. The agenda for building the process and achieving reconciliation is constructed at the very beginning of the process. By getting the parties to delineate the differences in their perceptions and positions, the facilitator gains information about the work yet to be undertaken.

To get this information, it is best to talk with each party independently. The facilitator should keep the meetings informal and focused on gathering information and helping the parties get ready for their work within the process. These meetings also offer a good opportunity to discuss the rules of engagement that will be used when all the parties are at the table. Note, however, that the rules of engagement must be finally deliberated and agreed to when both parties are present.

WHO WANTS WHAT?

People in conflict generally know what it is they believe they want. When individuals or groups are at the point of conflict, they generally have reached the stage of holding black-and-white positions—positions that are mutually exclusive and sit at some distance from each other.

To bring the positions closer, the facilitator must be steeped in the resolution process and look for every opportunity to foster congruence, strengthen trust, and improve the interface between the parties as their relationship begins to grow. As noted above, the parties to an identity-based conflict must establish a relationship and not simply obtain a resolution of their issues. The facilitator helps them do this by knowing them as well as possible, and being familiar enough with their issues and positions not to miss opportunities for bridging differences and constructing common ground, because such opportunities rarely are presented twice. The facilitator’s knowledge is his or her main tool for advancing the process and moving the relationship through the tough times.

ARIA*

In his seminal work on identity-based conflicts, Rothman (1997) suggested a format for the resolution process. The stages of the format, which he calls ARIA for antagonism, resonance, invention, and action, are outlined below.

Antagonism

In the first stage the facilitator pushes the parties to express their antagonism, which, besides helping the facilitator move the process along, helps the parties lay out their raw emotions in plain view and, in so doing, diffuses them, thereby reducing the temperature of the conflict. Given the proper context, this initial expression of antagonism also pro-

*Source: Resolving Identity-Based Conflict, J. Rothman, Copyright © 1997, John Wiley & Sons. This material is used by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
vides extra motivation to do something about the conflict and the negative feelings that it generates—to end the pain and discord and move to a better place, where there is more peace and stability and opportunity.

In addition, it can reveal to the parties their own limitations and constraints. They are able to see how their own intensity of emotion polarizes their views and positions. Although unlikely at this point to be able to make substantial changes, they can at least get a picture of what their positions look like and how strongly they hold their views, possibly opening a window to understanding.

Indeed, expressing their antagonism and hearing it reflected back in the language of the facilitator may surprise them and finally make them realize just how fixed, strident, or polarized they have become. After all, the flames of antagonism are fanned by a wide range of emotions that, regardless of their legitimacy, are strongly felt and often strongly expressed.

In a typical conflict, one or both parties blame the other side to strengthen their own position, at least in their own eyes. Blame serves to escalate the conflict and give it a justification. It creates an “us and them” position, locates the enemy, and defines the terms of opposition. It puts the other party at fault and provides a reason to be angry at and in conflict with the other party. The natural tendency to place blame is best exemplified by the common childhood claim, “He hit me first.”

Blame helps the parties avoid focusing on their part in the conflict. By concentrating on why it is the other party’s fault, each party evades having to reflect on the role he or she has played. The parties never have to consider how they might have acted differently, experience the pain of admitting their own contribution to the conflict, or engage in the work of reaching a resolution. Indeed, blame suggests that a resolution to the conflict is not possible.

Blame helps keep the conflict external—safe and free of personal content. It puts the responsibility for resolving the conflict in the other party’s court and suggests that if the other party would make certain changes or act differently, the issues and the conflict would simply disappear.

Blame never has any real value. The facilitator’s best strategy is to pursue naming the feelings of each party and their intensities. Even when restating accusations of blame,
the facilitator does not spend time in the blame. Discussing the blame that has been leveled merely helps the facilitator figure out (1) where the parties are in relation to each other and to the issues at the root of the conflict and (2) how to move the parties toward reconciliation.

Blame also generalizes feelings and perceptions and keeps the parties from being specific and reaching clarity. The facilitator’s role is to get the parties to focus on the particulars and delineate their own positions.

Posturing and positioning commonly act as intensifiers of conflict. They support the culture of justification and rights and lead to rationalizations of the polarization that typically occur in a conflict. The parties give reasons for the polarization and construct a whole logic to support it. In other words, they circle the wagons and make the war their cause, rather than the issue at the root of the war. They then devote more time and energy to conducting the war than they ever did in pursuing the underlying issue.

At this stage the conflict has taken on a life of its own. Nothing the other party does with regard to the issue is right or appropriate. Further, because each party is acting out of his or her own identity, the other party not only does the wrong thing but becomes wrong. The next step is to describe the other party as bad and to conclude that he or she must be opposed. If the one party did not oppose the bad party, the former would be bad too, and in the same way. This would be untenable. Thus builds the polarization between the parties and the intensity of the conflict.

Also, as the characterization of each party by the other grows increasingly negative, the less necessary each believes it is to resolve the conflict. Who would want to resolve a conflict if it meant giving up a justifiable fight against what is bad, perhaps even evil? In the mind of each party, what needs to happen is for the other party to stop being bad. If that occurred, the conflict would automatically end.

The facilitator must realize that each party has a selective memory. Each vividly remembers events that led to the conflict and for which blame could be laid on the other party. On the other hand, each tends to forget contributing events for which he or she was responsible, not to mention dishonorable motives.

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**Group Discussion**

Greg Shue, manager of a hospital department, was angry with the head of critical care. She had beaten him out of a part of the budget he needed to make programmatic changes in his own department. He occasionally referred to her in derogatory terms and seemed unable to get past his anger, which was beginning to have a serious effect on the relationship between Greg and the other department head and on the entire organization. You are the conflict mediator in this case. How would you begin the conflict resolution process? What would you do to get Greg to own his anger? What would you do to induce Greg to move beyond his feelings and begin dealing with the real issues?
When the negatives run high, each party’s desire to resolve the underlying issue wanes. Their energy is instead devoted to building a culture of opposition and to placing themselves in the right. They act to strengthen their position and get it validated by prospective allies. Correspondingly little energy is devoted to pursuing strategies that might lead to a resolution of the conflict.

As time goes on, each party becomes increasingly critical and disapproving of the behaviors, practices, and even culture of the other party. Words and actions become opportunities for the one party to challenge, skewer, or demean the other and further validate continuation of the conflict.

Projection is commonly used by parties in a conflict to strengthen their positions. Projection involves attributing to others problematic behaviors we engage in or embarrassing characteristics we possess. It is universally understood as a defense mechanism for avoiding responsibility for such behaviors and characteristics. In a conflict one party, in addition to viewing the other party as fundamentally different, might project, for example, unacceptable motives onto the other party and thus avoid confronting the fact that these are his or her own motives.

If this occurs, the facilitator’s goal of getting the parties to see what they share in common becomes even harder. Each party resists admitting that the other could in any way be similar because doing so might involve acknowledging parallel objectionable behaviors. Though daunting, the facilitator’s task at the outset is to achieve as much clarity about the antagonism as possible, and his or her initial activities largely are spent on getting the parties past this part of the conflict so they can pursue resolution strategies.

Resonance
Resonance is the process of moving away from antagonism and toward the identification of common ground. Through “reflexive reframing,” the parties begin to articulate their values and concerns and seek commonalities on which to build dialogue.

In the preceding phase, the focus of each party is on the behavior of the other. Each party’s view is outward and other-oriented. Reflexive reframing refocuses the gaze of the

**Group Discussion**

The parties to a conflict each possess their own values and beliefs. If the conflict is identity based, their ownership of their values and beliefs and their sense of who they are unavoidably has an impact on their interaction with each other. Assume you are assigned the job of facilitating the end of an identity-based conflict between two people. How do you break through the identity issues to get the parties to talk with each other? What should you explore and settle with the parties separately before you bring them together? Break the discussion group into two and give each subgroup the role of acting as one party in an identity-based conflict (a conflict arising out of a difference in nationality, ethnicity, religion, or politics). List the elements of conflict as they come up during the ensuing dialogue.
parties back to themselves so they can clarify who they are and what they want before trying to fashion a resolution.

An identity-based conflict is likely to involve intangible and subjective issues. The facilitator might have a hard time believing the two parties are talking about the same concerns. In point of fact, they may not be. The two parties are likely to have different cultural and experiential backgrounds, have different perceptions of the conflict, and use different language to express their perceptions. The notion of objective truth is irrelevant because each party cannot help seeing the conflict through his or her own eyes and treating his or her own perceptions as true.

However, by expressing their deepest feelings and values, the two parties start to fashion a common frame of reference. Each begins to sense that the other shares certain sentiments and to develop a fuller picture of the other. By going deeper into their own experiences, the parties build the foundation for future dialogue. They discover that their initial views and positions—those expressed during the first stage—are inadequate and cannot be supported. The personal and “why” questions they ask help turn the conversation into a vehicle for learning about each other’s different perspectives and values.

Reflexes come in two varieties, the automatic reflex to external stimuli and the reflective response based on study and assessment. The latter type is characteristic of good conflict management. It requires the ability to step back and look at issues and concerns from a far enough distance to see the whole landscape related to the conflict. The goal of the facilitator is to get the parties to take the necessary step back. Ideally, they would see each other’s pictures of the conflict, understand the circumstances and variables placing them in the conflict, and understand how all of that stands in relationship to everything else. Ultimately, the facilitator wants to create a double-loop experience for the parties. Once each has articulated his or her own experience and completed the circle of experience, the two parties would link their experiences in a way that exposes their similarities and intersections. Common elements and frames of reference begin to emerge as a result, and the relatedness of the elements become clear to the parties and form a foundation for further dialogue.

The two parties also need to see clearly that both have the same fears, uncertainties, meanings, and values and to recognize that they could find themselves saying the same things. When one party says, “I am concerned,” “I am afraid,” or “I am angry,” the other should be able to admit honestly that he or she could easily utter the same statement. Furthermore, through the “I” form of the expression, the individual ownership of thoughts and feelings ultimately becomes mutual. It is precisely because of the deep ownership each has of his or her own insights and feelings that mutuality can begin to emerge without causing the threats of challenge, accusation, or alienation. It is hard to reject in another what you just affirmed in yourself.

Identity-based conflicts can exhibit elements of reaction. Each party’s sense of self may actually be formed in opposition to the other party’s sense of self. The parties’ discernment of who they are not can sometimes be as important as their definition of who they are. For instance, they might see themselves as not having characteristics that they attribute to the other party, possibly just because they perceive the other party as having them. They are likely to view themselves not just as possessing different interests, but as being fundamentally different. Religious, cultural, ethnic, national, and sexual differences often serve
as the basis of identity-based conflicts. After all, there is nothing any of us can do about our gender, nationality, ethnicity, or religion, and so these are seen as defining us.

In health care, discipline, role, function, and license can similarly act to divide people in fundamental ways and create a priori positions that are hard and sometimes impossible to get around. For example, “I am the doctor; the buck stops with me” or “I am the nurse; I manage the processes of care” or “I am the caregiver; I do the work of health care.” Each of these statements is partially true, but by holding to them the parties can become polarized and entrenched. Moving them from their positions is a challenging task, but it can be done by persuading them that no role is the most special, important, critical, powerful, or viable and that no person can do what needs to be done if the other parties fail to meet their responsibilities. The fact is that “I am because you are.” That is, we are all interdependent, and indeed the clearer I am as to how I stand in relation to you, the clearer I am as to who I am and who I can become. It is essential that the parties understand the interdependence of their roles so they can reach a sustainable resolution of their differences.

The parties to an identity-based conflict are faced with a fundamental choice: They can continue to maintain an isolated identity against the world, or they can search for and uncover their common roots and frames of reference and find their mutuality. To get them to do the latter, the facilitator should help them move

- From blaming to articulating their sense of self.
- From antagonism toward the other to identification with the other.
- From the attribution of negatives to understanding.
- From projection to ownership.
- From anger to acceptance.
- From fear to a sense of safety.

As the parties move through these initial stages of the conflict resolution process, they clarify the conflict, obtain ownership of the process, and explain to each other what is most present in themselves, thereby deepening their self-understanding and establishing a foundation for the later stages.

**Invention**

During this stage the parties begin to see some payoff for the work they have done. The focus is on inventing solutions that can take the parties to a place where they can live in peace and engagement.

Their main task is to look at solutions through a larger lens or use a greater frame of reference—in other words, to think outside the box. They should try to develop new ways
of looking at the conflict and come up with new solutions. As noted, in identity-based conflicts negotiating a compromise is fraught with difficulty, because the parties would view compromising as giving up something of who they are, not simply something they have, and would thus find it unacceptable.

Instead of seeking compromise, the facilitator must challenge the parties to apply a broader framework and see the situation in a new way. They both have a stake in the outcome and stand to gain from a solution. They must therefore reconceptualize the conflict, which is the purpose of the invention process. This process is about developing whole new ways of seeing the issues and working through them. It demands a focus on the practical and the real, and by going through the process, the parties should be able to develop a different vision of their concerns and a different image of each other. In particular, they should recognize that they are interdependent and need each other and that the resolution of the conflict requires everyone to get on board.

The first step is to develop and agree on statements of objectives. These are derived from statements of the issues. They help the parties see and say what they want to get from the process, especially as relates to their fundamental needs for safety, security, value, dignity, and so on. They also inform the more detailed discourse the parties will engage in regarding the steps and processes intended to move the parties to where they would like to be.

This step includes components that allow the parties to educate each other on what they need and to explain why. The education expands on what has already been shared but with a new focus on safety, security, values, and so on. Because the issues at the root of the conflict are identity issues, the parties must try to explain how what they are asking for advances or protects their identity.

Watching negotiations, uninformed observers often believe that the haggling that occurs over the smallest detail is ingenious and foolish. In an identity-based conflict, each detail has implications for the identities of the parties after the resolution, and thus each one counts.

Point to Ponder

In trying to resolve an identity-based conflict, the facilitator should help the parties differentiate themselves and develop a clearer sense of who they are and what they bring to the table.

Note that there is a significant difference between interests and needs. Interests generally play a central role in resource- or interest-based conflicts but a subsidiary role in identity-based conflicts, where needs are primary. Consequently, in an identity-based conflict the most critical task is to get parties to express their needs and then to reach an understanding of their interests based on their needs. For example, as they see it, the nurses in a health care organization need to give care to patients unconstrained by financial considerations. On the other hand, the managers, as they see it, need to ensure the financial health of the organization. Both needs—the nurses’ need to give good care and managers’ need to ensure financial viability—relate to a common interest, ensuring the existence of enough financial resources to render good service to the public. If the two groups understand that because of their needs they share an interest, they are more likely to reach a resolution of their conflict.
Of course, achieving a resolution does not mean that the parties get everything they desire. At best, they can negotiate a method for meeting their needs—a method that may involve working together, such as one of those described below.

Sometimes differentiating between the parties more clearly, that is, accentuating and enumerating their differences, can lead to a more suitable resolution for each. Although their needs may differ, clarifying them and seeking alternative ways to satisfy them through common action can help move the parties to a new place. For example, imagine a respiratory therapy union is seeking greater recognition for its members and a stronger role for its leaders, whereas the management wants a reduction in complaints and grievances instituted by the union. Both groups agree to apply a different method of problem solving, one in which the union leadership plays a more direct role. The result is less use of the grievance procedure. Here the different needs of the two groups provide a basis for resolving their conflict creatively.

A second technique involves expanding the playing field so the parties can each get more of the resources they need. For example, nurses may request more staffing, and management may want to save more money. The two groups may agree that if the nurses meet set productivity targets, management will use part of the savings to hire more nurses. By consenting to work together to expand the organization’s resources, they each help meet their own needs and those of the other party. The result is a win–win resolution of their conflict. To reach a mutually beneficial resolution, the parties usually have to identify joint activities that move them past the issues that prevented them from ending their conflict in the past.

If the parties find that their needs are seemingly irreconcilable, the solution may lie in offering compensation for not meeting a certain need by bestowing something of equal value. If one party is asking for money that the other party cannot afford to give, it may agree to accept something it views as equally valuable, such as more vacation time. The two parties must engage in clear and creative dialogue to ensure that the substitute is truly viewed and explicitly accepted as equivalent; otherwise, the issue of just compensation will likely arise later and cause problems and further conflict.

Identity-Based Conflict

Group Discussion

Nina Conners really did not want to settle the issues she had with Frank Kliener. They had been feuding for three years. Both she and Frank used their conflict as a way of getting more for their own departments and keeping their staff energized and competitive. However, the organization has been paying the price, and its goals are sometimes held hostage to the war between the two departments. Discuss how a mediator would begin to resolve this conflict. What are the apparent issues? What might be the real issue? How would the mediator structure the resolution process? As part of the exercise, create a resolution plan that contains steps for addressing the issues and resolving the conflict.
The leader-facilitator must look for signs of enough movement and energy to take the parties to the next step—or provide the necessary energy. There is nothing like a small success now and again for maintaining the momentum. Once successes begin to occur, they serve to spur the process and move it in ways that nothing else could. The process, energized by the successes already achieved, begins to change the dynamic, the emotions, and the relationship of the two parties without any further intervention. Through good timing and careful pushing, the facilitator can get the parties to work on the more difficult issues in the midst of good momentum, increasing the chance that they will be finally settled.

The inventing stage is when the parties’ interaction changes from being oppositional to being collaborative. It is an essential stage on the journey to a resolution, and the techniques of differentiation, expansion, compensation, and momentum all have the potential of increasing the probability that the parties will achieve an end to the conflict.

Action
The final stage is devoted to crafting a plan of action. There is nothing more disheartening than to get through the touchy issues and concerns, establish a strong commitment to pursue possible solutions, build an effective relationship, and then have the process fall apart because an action plan either could not be constructed or was not detailed enough to guide the parties to a final resolution.

As the process progresses toward action, the parties need to reaffirm where they have come from and where they believe they are in relation to their own needs and their interaction with each other. The mutual understanding that results serves as the ground for the subsequent focus on action. In the action phase, the new questions are what to do, who is to do it, why is it being done, and how to do it.

The first step is to set the agenda for action. What are the priorities of the agreements reached? Where do the parties start? What are the items that must be translated into substantive work, enabling the agreed way of relating and behaving to be realized? These questions serve as the basis for the next level of critical dialogue. Here again patience and attention to detail are required from both parties and from the leader-facilitator.

Setting the agenda includes deciding the priority of actions, their timing, their criticalness, and what other actions must be done in preparation. It also includes reaching an agreement on who is to be accountable for the actions.

New kinds of structures and institutions may have to be constructed as vehicles for implementing the actions. If built early on, they provide a framework for implementing the actions and evaluating their progress. They also help ensure that the issues important to the parties are addressed as expected and that any problems or concerns that arise are defined precisely (Moore 2003).
Once problems are defined, they need to be solved, which means building problem-solving mechanisms into the implementation process. Unaddressed problems have the potential to negatively impact the relationship between the parties and eliminate the progress made to date.

The parties need to clarify immediate and long-term goals and priorities based on the critical elements identified during the reflexive reframing process (which occurs in the second stage of ARIA). They also need to ensure that the principal, pivotal, and relational items are handled first during the implementation.

The facilitator must try not to upset the delicate balance achieved between the parties. The facilitator’s tasks include determining the specific needs each party wants to satisfy as a result of the implementation process and devising an evaluation schedule so that progress can be assessed at critical points. Evaluating the process regularly keeps the parties on board and ensures the process remains in line with their expectations.

Equally critical is the assignment of accountability for specific outcomes. Who does what should be a practical rather than a political issue, yet at this stage politics often take precedence in a way they never should, typically because the skills, talents, and roles of the participants have not been discussed in advance of the assignment. These must be ascertained before the point of assigning accountability if political machinations are to be kept at a minimum.

Content (goals) must always be placed before process (methods). Once the parties set their goals, however, they need to choose methods for achieving them. In thinking about methods, they need to anticipate potential impediments and select those methods that are most likely to succeed.

The parties should keep in mind that each is going to judge the other by his or her actions, because these actions are the visible evidence of that party’s commitment to the agreement. They represent what the one party has done on the other’s behalf. The parties’ actions therefore require as much attention as any of the other components of the resolution process.

The leader-facilitator must always keep the parties focused on what is at stake and how important it is. The parties must have the sense that they are a part of a meaningful effort that is larger than their own contributions and that will lead them to a better place.

In any conflict resolution process, no matter whether the conflict is interest or identity based, the leader-facilitator must establish his or her neutrality at the outset. If that cannot be done, the leader-facilitator may consider relinquishing his or her role. A facilitator who is seen as too close to the issue or unable to act in a neutral manner is more of a hindrance than a help.
The facilitator must be as committed to the process as to the parties. He or she has an important position of trust and is responsible for moving the dynamic in critical ways. If not careful and skillful, the leader-facilitator will cease to be credible to the parties and will lose their confidence, thereby crippling the process and ensuring that further problems will arise.

The facilitator must make it clear at the outset that he or she is working for the whole, not one side or the other, regardless of how he or she got there. Further, the parties must agree to the notion that the facilitator is neutral or the process simply will not progress. If one side or other is paying for the facilitator’s services or the facilitator holds a specific role in the organization, accommodation may have to be made at the outset of the process to ensure that the parties trust and support the leader-facilitator equally.

Although identity-based conflicts are the most difficult of all conflicts to deal with, they can be resolved using the processes and mechanisms outlined here. Many of them are allowed to continue because leaders have no idea that these tools even exist and mistakenly try to use approaches suitable only for interest-based conflicts.

In the current world of health care, the potential for conflict is greater than ever. The various disciplines and work groups are being forced to revise their relationships and their boundaries—or even establish them for the first time. Team-based and continuum-driven approaches to service place a great emphasis on who people are rather than simply what they do. Thus, a vital part of the leadership role in the new age of health care involves working through the differences between professionals and building mutuality as a basis for preventing unnecessary conflict and resolving unavoidable conflict when it arises.

**Interest-Based Conflict**

In dealing with an interest-based conflict, a leader acts essentially as a mediator, a neutral third party who helps the parties resolve their issues and bring closure to the conflict. There is much more negotiation and give-and-take than in the resolution process for an identity-based conflict. Offers are made and countered as the parties try to work out an agreement consistent with their interests.

The mediator typically undertakes two kinds of intervention: contingent and noncontingent. The noncontingent interventions focus on the processes necessary to any mediation. The contingent interventions are implemented in response to specific circumstances arising from the process itself. Problems, emotions, issues, and other contingencies can individually or collectively have an impact on the mediation process (Figure 3–6), and the mediator occasionally has to respond by adjusting the process accordingly.

**Ten Steps to Resolving an Interest-Based Conflict**

The resolution of an interest-based conflict typically includes 10 steps (Figure 3–7). Each step requires a different amount of time and a different approach. By keeping track of each step of the process, the mediator is able to discipline the parties and keep the process moving steadily in the right direction.
Establishing the Initial Relationship

The mediator’s first task is to establish credibility with the parties and introduce them to the process. A conflict resolution process has components and rules that the parties must understand and agree to if the process is to result in a resolution.

Developing Strategies to Guide the Process

Discussing approaches and processes, as well as the rules of engagement, with the parties up front is a good way to strengthen the relationship between all the participants. In addition, it helps the parties learn about the process and select those activities they determine will best assist them in moving effectively toward resolution.

Constructing the Initial Database

The mediator needs to become familiar with the parties and the issues as soon as possible. Thus early in the process the mediator should ask the parties about their histories and experiences, and also ask them for their insights to build a foundation for establishing priorities and deciding on an approach. Verifying the accuracy of the collected information and the central issues of concern is part of the data-gathering process. After the gathering stage, the participants should spend time reflecting on the content of the conflict and its implications for the resolution approach and process. Here again, they get to know each other better. In particular, the mediator obtains a view of the personal processes and behaviors of the parties within the context of the mediation process and can adjust the approach accordingly.
Figure 3–7  The 10 Stages of the Conflict Resolution Process

- Stage 1: Establishing the Initial Relationship
  - Contacting the Parties
  - Building Credibility
  - Roles of Engagement
  - Contracting to Proceed

- Stage 2: Developing Strategies to Guide the Process
  - Assessing
  - Selecting
  - Coordinating
  - Approaches

- Stage 3: Constructing the Initial Database
  - Analyzing
  - Getting to Substance of Conflict
  - Verifying
  - Sorting Out Inaccurate Data

- Stage 4: Organizing the Plan for Mediation
  - Developing
  - Defining
  - Defining the Right Moves
  - Accommodating
  - Contingency

- Stage 5: Building Trust and Communication
  - Dealing with Prejudice
  - Creating a Safe Space
  - Naming the Right Intent
  - Developing Effective Communication

- Stage 6: Beginning the Resolution Process
  - Defining Expectations
  - Applying an Approach
  - Devoting Structure and Flow
  - Honoring Parties Heard

- Stage 7: Defining Concerns and Setting Priorities
  - Engaging
  - Defining
  - Setting
  - Understanding, of Issues
  - Honoring Maturity of the Issues
  - Agreeing on the Issues
  - Developing Tactics for Move Beyond

- Stage 8: Looking for the Unseen
  - Finding the Real Issues
  - Pulling out Hidden Information
  - Naming Hidden Agenda
  - Determining Potential Agreement

- Stage 9: Naming Values and Options
  - Moving to Agreement
  - Choosing Options
  - Naming Places of Consensus
  - Afirming Understanding and Choices

- Stage 10: Concluding the Conflict Process
  - Converging Around Options
  - Agreeing to Proceed
  - Contracting for Performance
  - Developing Action Plan
Organizing the Plan for Mediation

The first stage, the mediator considers the approach and structures to use for the mediation. The goal is to develop a plan of approach that fits the situation and the parties, accounting for the contingent factors discernible thus far. The mediator designs the noncontingent structures, considers process elements that could move the parties closer to agreement, and constructs a framework for guiding the process. The plan is simply a plan and is not cast in stone. The participants need to be flexible and adjust the process in response to the inevitable emergence of new information and unexpected factors.

Building Trust and Communication

It is essential to build trust between the parties and to strengthen the parties’ trust in the mediator. The challenge is obvious: The parties have entered the mediation process precisely because they are in conflict and have negative feelings toward each other. The mediator's job is to get the parties at least to trust the process enough to get from it what it has to offer. Through exploring the emotional component of their perceptions of each other and of the process, the participants can lay a firm foundation for the subsequent work they will do.

Beginning the Resolution Process

The first stages of the conflict resolution process set up the parties for everything that is to follow. The mediator clearly lays out rules of engagement at the beginning, ensuring that the parties understand what to expect and how to proceed. These rules include guidelines for meeting together and for expressing feelings. The mediator also clarifies the areas of focus and the mechanisms used to proceed, and apprises the parties of the opportunities they have to be heard, have their issues considered, and be included in deliberations. Familiarizing everyone with the structure of the process is essential, because that increases the participants’ flexibility. Flexibility is especially important for the mediator, because he or she must respond appropriately to what emerges along the way and take advantage of any opportunity to bring the parties to agreement.

Defining Concerns and Setting Priorities

Here, doing one’s homework pays off. The mediator, having come to understand the beginning issues, gives the parties an opportunity to explain their individual perceptions and how they formed their related expectations. The mediator also gets agreement from the parties on their understanding of the issues. The participants discuss the substantive points and positions until they are clear to everyone, work out the flow of events, and express their expectations of the methods for dealing with the issues.

Looking for Hidden Information, Agendas, and Interests

The mediator is constantly focused on what the real issues are and on finding clues that could direct the parties toward sustainable solutions. During this stage many issues, concerns, and problems are likely to emerge, and the mediator must be on the lookout for opportunities to get the parties to work them out. The seeds of solution are to be found in the parties’ dialogue. The parties are engaged in a great amount of detailed work, sometimes together and sometimes apart or one-on-one with the mediator.
Finding Potential Solutions and Determining Their Value to the Parties
As the parties move closer to an agreement, the mediator concentrates on getting them to understand where they appear to be in accord. The mediator’s main task is to help the parties work out and state in detail any points of agreement between them, assess the applicability of potential solutions to the issues, determine their acceptability, and do whatever else is necessary to bring closure to the issues. As part of this process, the participants figure out the expected benefits and costs of meeting the obligations of the solutions.

Formalizing the Agreement
Once all the issues in the dispute have been dealt with and the parties understand what they have agreed to and find it acceptable, the mediator and the parties fashion an official agreement that is both clear and acceptable to the parties. Depending on the breadth and complexity of the agreement, different levels of documentation may be necessary. The parties must make sure they all have the same understanding of what they have agreed to. In this final stage the mediator prepares the documentation that formalizes the agreement and forms the foundation for carrying out the solutions. The parties, once they are satisfied there is a mechanism for implementing the agreement, formally accept it.

Keeping the Process on Track
The conflict resolution process outlined above is of course influenced by the issues, behaviors, personalities, and circumstances of the parties to the conflict. Some of these are unanticipated and move the process in directions not initially imagined by the mediator. However, the mediator, by paying attention to the dynamics of dialogue and remaining flexible, can guide the process in a way that ultimately gets the parties to an agreement and/or an end to the conflict.

The mediator uses many techniques to get the parties unstuck and moving toward a workable consensus. Taking the parties aside and working with them individually (commonly called caucusing) helps each deal with the issues in a way that is impossible when they are all in the same room. Getting more information, expanding the options, introducing new considerations, moving horizontally on the issues, pressing the parties to consider other factors, and expanding the parties’ perceptions, among other strategies, are all part of the mediator’s tool chest.

The mediator is always attempting to move the parties toward a negotiated settlement by means of a joint problem-solving process in which the parties work out the solutions themselves. The mediator is not invested in any particular outcome. It is the parties who must be satisfied. They own the issues and the solutions. The mediator is simply providing them...
with tools and a structure within which the resolution can be more assuredly achieved. The mediator stays neutral, not favoring either party and moving both toward a state of mutual satisfaction.

The mediator is also constantly aware of the need to maintain a balance of power between the parties. In any dispute issues of power are embedded in the process, and each party is tempted to pursue his or her own advantage to the exclusion of the other party’s interests. Aware that jockeying over power is going on, the mediator does everything possible to make sure that the balance of power remains constant so that no party is disadvantaged as a result of the process. The mediator must not become an advocate for one party and must not act in a way that creates a perception of favoritism. The best strategy for dealing with issues of power is to be as public as possible about maintaining a balance, making it clear to the parties that this is a necessary feature of mediation.

Conflicts come in all shapes and sizes and levels of complexity, but in any conflict it is the mediator’s role to guide people through the process of problem solving and solution seeking who have been unable to get through this process by themselves. Although what this entails for the mediator’s role is subject to debate, the mediator must recognize that the issues and their solutions belong to the parties. The mediator can bring his or her insights and skills, as well as sophisticated techniques and new concepts, to the process, yet the parties essentially own it. Whatever solutions are chosen are chosen by the parties and implemented by them. This is not to deny that sometimes the parties might want the mediator to control more of the process or take over responsibilities that properly belong to them, either because they view the responsibilities as too difficult or see the mediator as better placed to handle them.

The mediator must keep in mind that the process lends itself to tricks and stratagems that can slyly or inexplicably change the character or context of the interaction between the parties with such subtlety that it happens unnoticed. To avoid such shifts from occurring, the mediator needs to remain constantly focused on the process and its dynamics, evaluating its viability and efficacy and working to ensure that it is unfolding as it should.

**People and Behavior**

In conflict situations, stress levels are high and not everyone is at his or her best. Further, because of the history of conflict and people’s general attitude toward it, people in conflict are not disposed to engage in relationship building and problem resolving.

Parties to a conflict generally take the position that someone must win and someone must lose. The role of the mediator is to see that this outcome does not occur. It should be clear that only a mutually satisfying solution is likely to end the conflict permanently.

In the effort to “win,” either party might try one or more tactics to unbalance the situation. The mediator needs to be on the lookout for these tactics and counter them through good techniques and a good process. In addition, the mediator needs to be aware of other factors that often influence the outcome of a conflict resolution process, such as those discussed below.
COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUE
The mediator must always be listening. And not just listening but listening actively, which means continually restating points in a way that is understandable to all the parties and gets the issues out in the open. Almost any conflict is rife with emotional energy, and the mediator must manage and diffuse as much of it as possible through being clear and understandable and by translating every nuance and every embedded message into an explicit assertion. The parties are more likely to come to an agreement if they fully comprehend all the issues and each other’s positions.

MEETING SETTING AND SCHEDULE
The meeting place should be comfortable and not favor any particular party. The room should exhibit balance, the table should be round instead of rectangular, the seating arrangement should be comfortable and informal, and the lighting should be conducive to dialogue and therefore not bright or irritating. It is important to schedule the meetings at a time of the day when the parties are alert and invested instead of tired and worn out. By being sensitive to the possible influence of the environment on the resolution process, the mediator can ensure the meeting place is pleasing and congenial and supports the process rather than works against it.

DEMEANOR
Mediators come from all kinds of backgrounds and have all kinds of personalities. Personality is always a consideration in mediation, and there must be a good fit between the mediator and the parties. If there is not a good fit, the mediator will have difficulty moving the process forward, possibly to such an extent that the process comes to a dead halt. The mediator must exhibit confidence and competence and present him- or herself as someone the parties can depend on in the times of challenge. The mediator is responsible for the process and its culture and dynamics, and by showing a proper demeanor and gaining the respect of the parties, the mediator can do much to create a suitable culture and stimulate movement toward resolution. When the fit between the mediator and the participants is clearly nonaligned, mediators must recuse themselves from the mediation process and make room for a neutral mediator who can create a better fit and can help facilitate the resolution process to success. Mediators should not be offended by their lack of congruence. In many aspects of the human interaction, relationships do not always work as anticipated. Recognizing this and moving on is often the critical moment in accessing successful problem solving.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE
During a conflict resolution process lots of information gets laid out. The mediator must facilitate the transmission of correct information. The more accurate the information exchanged between the parties, the more likely the process will move along smoothly. There is always a danger of having more information than is necessary for good decision making. Having lots of information is not the same as having the right information. The mediator tries to ensure the parties have the information they need and...
can differentiate between desired data and needed data (needed data are data they can use to fashion an agreement).

**Use of Experts**

The mediator tries to provide the parties with access to whatever will help them resolve their conflict. Because no mediator could be an expert in all the elements and processes associated with every kind of conflict, others may need to be involved in the process. There are no rules limiting access to what or who is needed to resolve issues. Planning for and scheduling the use of experts or other resources and determining the focus of their use are among the critical responsibilities of the mediator.

**Conclusion**

Resolving conflicts is a fundamental part of managing human relationships. All relationships have the potential for conflict embedded deep within them, especially in our increasingly diverse health care system, where professionals with widely different backgrounds and roles are now required to work together. As they sort through their unique contributions, they face many opportunities for conflict and are almost guaranteed to fall into disputes and disagreements. Health care leaders are responsible for supervising the relationships between the disciplines, and as the roles of the disciplines change and their relationships become more complex, the leaders have the critical task of helping all who work in the health field to respond to the changes and build stronger more positive relationships.

The kind of intense interdisciplinary interaction characteristic of continuum-based teams is new to health care. Historically, there were only a very few types of professionals, and each type performed a wide variety of tasks. With the advances in technology that have occurred, more types of professionals exist, but the activities of each type are more narrowly focused. As a consequence, more people will be negotiating the clinical practice landscape, and, to complicate matters, these people will have more divergent roles and views. Working through their differences to find common ground will be essential to creating a more aligned and integrated health care system. Leaders have an important role to play in bringing this kind of system into existence by assisting others in solving problems and resolving conflicts.

Dealing with conflict is a normal part of the leadership role as it currently exists, and therefore leaders must understand the basic elements and learn the essential skills of conflict management. Like any skills, these require development. Leaders must recognize this and persevere in their learning efforts. The payoff is that these skills serve any leader well in dealing with the increasingly complex set of relationships in the delivery of health services. To the extent that a leader develops the necessary skills and takes on the role of conflict resolution facilitator, he or she will strengthen the relationships between health professionals and, most importantly, increase the effectiveness of health care.
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References


Suggested Readings


Quiz Questions

Select the best answer for each of the following questions.

1. Conflict in everyday relationships is
   a. to be avoided
   b. unacceptable
   c. normal
   d. destructive

2. Conflict resolution facilitators must recognize the value of
   a. uniformity
   b. diversity
   c. anxiety
   d. humanity

3. Conflict is destructive only if it
   a. is not resolved
   b. is accompanied by anger
   c. is secretive
   d. becomes physical

4. The perceived imbalance of power can lead to conflict. To mitigate its potential for mischief, power should be
   a. viewed as a necessary evil
   b. placed in the hands of managers
   c. placed in the hands of staff
   d. distributed equitably across the organization

5. Two parties in conflict generally know
   a. each other’s position
   b. why they are angry
   c. what they want
   d. what they dislike

6. The difference between interest-based conflict and identity-based conflict is that
   a. interest-based conflict concerns how the parties view themselves
   b. identity-based conflict concerns how the parties view themselves
   c. identity-based conflict involves tangible issues
   d. interest-based conflict is harder to resolve
7. The primary role of a conflict resolution facilitator is to
   a. bring the conflict to a sustainable end
   b. establish a good resolution process
   c. keep the parties moving through the process
   d. help both parties get what they want

8. A conflict resolution facilitator must never
   a. take sides
   b. stop the process
   c. get angry
   d. interject personal insights

9. To reach a successful completion of the 10-step conflict resolution process, the mediator should ensure that
   a. the interaction between the parties is friendly and their dialogue is courteous
   b. the parties use effective techniques for communicating and exchanging information
   c. the parties always meet with the mediator together, never one-on-one
   d. the parties receive all the information the mediator is able to acquire

10. The attribution by each party of negative motives and qualities to the other party usually indicates that the parties
    a. hold fluid positions
    b. have an accurate understanding of each other’s positions
    c. do not fully understand the issues at the root of the conflict
    d. want to avoid dealing with the real issues