

Does Conflict = Stress ?

If there's conflict in your workplace it's normal
- but it's not easy.

Conflict is identified over and over as a major cause of workplace stress. An internet search of the terms "conflict + stress" just on Microsoft Network alone yields over 184,000 hits. That's a lot of people on one search engine who connect the concepts of "conflict" and "stress". We have read many articles telling us where the experience of high stress leads - memory failure, fatigue, burnout, stress-related illnesses, even such life-threatening events as immunosuppression and heart disease.

Unresolved conflict is the computer virus of the workplace. An early symptom is a drop in productivity. What can we do to deal with this? One is to back up and look at our own thoughts about conflict. Mark the following statements according to whether you agree or disagree.

- conflict is neutral, neither good nor bad
- conflict results from differences in people, not whether they are right or wrong
- avoiding conflict has a cost
- conflict can prevent stagnation
- conflict can stimulate our creative problem-solving abilities
- conflict can result in personal and social change which improves situations

The more that you agree with these statements, the less likely you will perceive conflict as "stress" and therefore "bad".

According to Dr. E. Pritchard of the University of Winnipeg one way to understand stress is through the use of the cognitive appraisal model of stress. The amount of stress an event will cause in an individual will depend on the way that the individual thinks about or appraises the event. The cognitive appraisal model has two parts. First people go through a primary appraisal, which involves focusing on the event and interpreting it as either a *harm/loss* (damage already done), a *threat* (damage potential) or a *challenge* (growth or development potential). Following that stage people engage in a secondary appraisal, an assessment of the resources and options that they have available to deal with the event. In other words people ask themselves "What can I do?"

What can we do to combat the stress of conflict? Being prepared is step one. We can make sure we are physically and mentally prepared using the general prescription for good health, such as nutritious diet and regular exercise. We can design systems in our workplaces to deal with the inevitable conflict that arises with staff, customers and suppliers.

The cognitive appraisal model of stress indicates that how we think about stress determines how much stress we will feel. We can teach ourselves to think differently about conflict so that we experience a feeling less of threat or harm and more of challenge. People experience the most stress when the situation is out of their control and there is nothing they can do. We can make sure that the people involved in the conflict have some control over the outcome and teach them how or create ways for them to use that control so that they will feel less stress - and be able to resolve the conflicts.

For more information about conflict and how we respond to it, see the [June 1999](#) issue of Common Ground at www.munnrcs.com.

Tools of the Trade

A brand new column about conflict resolution resources. As always, we invite your comments about this column and any other item in Common Ground.

Dictionary of Conflict Resolution

Compiled and edited by Douglas H. Yarn
Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco
1999

545 pages

This book is exactly what the title says - a dictionary which limits itself to vocabulary used by "conflict resolution professionals, either practitioners or theorists". By its own definition conflict resolution is the "study and practice of means by which to end the incompatibilities of interests and behavior that constitute conflict". The full definition continues for about a page, comparing and contrasting other terms such as dispute resolution and conflict settlement.

When I saw the book my first thought was "This is an idea whose time has come". A great deal of the language of conflict resolution has come into usage in the last quarter-century. This dictionary project was started by the Consortium on Negotiation and Conflict Resolution in the United States in 1989.

The four main purposes were to increase knowledge and awareness of conflict resolution terms, improve understanding between professionals in the field, preserve diversity in the range of meanings and finally, to promote uniformity and consistency in the professional language. Versions of the dictionary were presented at two conferences of the Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution (SPIDR)

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for input from members and a draft was distributed to the chairs of several sectors of SPIDR.

The definitions are extensive and the cross-references took me on an interesting journey through compared and contrasted terms. The definition of "mediation" extends to about 12 pages in canvassing the complexity of the meanings. Before I read this book I did not know the Chinese term *li-lao*, the South Asian term *panchayat*, nor the term *lfugao* mediation. Have I piqued your interest?

I recommend this book equally to people who are just getting acquainted with the field of conflict resolution and those who are seasoned professionals working in the field, whether academics or practitioners. From "AAA" (American Arbitration Association) to "zone of agreement" this is a useful reference book. In addition to the definitions there is an appendix of about 50 pages listing conflict resolution organizations and programs followed by a wide-ranging bibliography.

In my view this book fits right up there on the shelf beside *Getting to Yes* as a key reference book for the conflict resolution field.

Munn-thly Memo

Q. I was just elected to the Board of Directors in a co-operative housing development that has been operating for about 10 years. We have a great deal of conflict within the organization which has made it a stressful place to live and has created a lot of turnover of residents. General members' meetings go on for hours of repetitive debate. Members don't want to serve on the Board of Directors. Committee work doesn't get done and there are members who won't participate at all in running the organization even though it is required in our bylaws. We're having some financial problems that we must deal with if our co-op is to survive. We have hired a neutral chairperson for general meetings on a couple of occasions. What else can we do?

A. You've already taken the first step by deciding that you want to do something to change the situation.

When you anticipate a lot of controversy in a meeting and especially if your organization's chairperson may not be considered neutral by all the members, the strategy of using a neutral chairperson is a good step. While the neutral chairperson only helps directly in the specific meeting for which your group hires her or him, there may be an afterglow effect when mem-

bers feel more positive about the conduct and outcome of the meeting.

For a more longterm solution I suggest that your organization involve all the members in a planning process to develop solutions to the financial problems and general organizational conflicts. For this to be effective I suggest that you work with a neutral facilitator who can lead your group in a way that encourages participation from all the members. It is a key factor that the way your co-op finds the solutions is as a group. I strongly encourage you to use a method which only involves the Board of Directors or an outside consultant with a quick fix or a one-shot effort. In my view what your co-op needs is not only the solutions to your current problems but also the members need to experience a series of dynamic events that successfully engage them, allow them to learn how to work within the organization's structure and encourage them to feel committed to open participation by all members. The specific method which would work for your group is best designed with the input of key members of your co-op and the facilitator. My recommendation is that you hire a facilitator who uses a recognized approach such as the Technology of Participation, an approach applied by the Institute of Cultural Affairs in many countries around the world.

Mark Your Calendar

Upcoming Training Events Presented by Kathryn Munn

Take the Fear out of Conflict!

April 3, 2001

Visit us at the Health and Safety Conference and Trade Show at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre,

April 2,3,4, 2001,
Booth # 514

Call the Industrial Accident Prevention Association, 1-800-669-4939 for more information.

Building Bridges, Getting Contracts: Effective Negotiation

June 5 & 6, 2001

The Management Centre, Lambton College, Sarnia, Ontario

Call (519)542-7751 Ext 505 for more information.

Civil Justice for Mediators

May 10 and 11, 2001

Fanshawe College, London, Ontario

Call 519-452-4430 Ext 4609 for more information

I am pleased to fill requests for presentations about mediation, negotiation and related topics at meetings of professional and business groups. You are welcome to call or e-mail to make the arrangements.

Electronic Common Ground

If you prefer to be on our [e-mail list](#). please send us an [e-mail](#).

Kathryn Munn, LL.B., C.R.C. is a mediator, arbitrator and lawyer. Through her firm Munn Conflict Resolution Services she works exclusively in alternate dispute resolution from a base in London, Ontario. She is a Roster Mediator, Ontario Mandatory Mediation Program - Toronto / Ottawa and a mediator under contract for Canadian federal government departments and Crown Corporations. She is a mediator for the Farm Debt Mediation Service of Canada and for government departments.

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