

**“Organisations thrive on conflict.” Evaluate this statement. Describe what methods you might use in an organisation of which you are the leader to resolve conflicts.**

In recent decades there has been a wealth of material written on leadership and management, as well as on organisations (including, more recently, on voluntary organisations). A significant amount of that material has concerned conflict: its causes, nature, and resolution, and there has been a pronounced shift in the perceived role of conflict within organisations. In this short essay we evaluate the claim that organisations actually “thrive” on conflict. Section I provides an introduction to this area of management and organisational theory, including our preferred definition of conflict. Section II considers the extent to which organisations can be said to thrive on such conflict, and Section III outlines appropriate methods for resolving organisational conflicts. Section IV adds an explicitly Christian perspective to this debate.

### **Section I**

The traditional view of conflict within organisations was relatively straightforward: conflict was a bad thing. Managers were tasked with eliminating or minimising conflict, since it interfered with the smooth and normal functioning of an organisation, e.g. its production processes, its decision-making and communication processes or, more generally, its pursuit of its objectives (such as profit- or revenue-maximisation). Mullins (2002, 813) claims that Peter Drucker, the renowned Austrian management theorist, was a leading proponent of this view, which holds that “[c]onflict is seen as a dysfunction outcome and can be explained, for example, by poor communications, personality clashes or the work of agitators.”

Since the late-1970s onwards, however, a different perspective has emerged. This perspective is, more properly, an interdisciplinary series of views which oppose the traditional one, views which are not necessarily homogenous. According to this new perspective, conflict is not an aberration from the norm – it is inevitable and, therefore, in some sense is itself normal. Moreover, it is argued that conflict is either neutral (rather than intrinsically bad) or can be manipulated to be either good or bad. According to this reasoning, “conflict in itself is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong... It is the way we react to conflict” that is the issue (Palmer 1990, 6). Within this new perspective, some go further to claim that conflict performs a positive function, e.g. Avis’ assertion (1992, 120) that conflict is “not only inescapable, but indispensable” and Townsend’s argument that conflict is the sign of a *healthy*, not dysfunctional, organisation (cited in Mullins 2002, 814).

While the modern view now dominates, the debate over the precise nature and function of conflict continues. This has not necessarily been a productive debate, with individual authors each defining conflict in their own terms and reaching conclusions only to be expected from such starting points. That is to say that many of the definitions of conflict have been blunt and tautological, e.g. conflict is defined as a bad thing – and then the answer to the question of whether it performs a positive organisational function will necessarily be no; or, conversely, conflict is defined as being a good thing – and therefore when we come to the question of whether it helps an organisation, the answer will surely be yes. One example of this practice is Charles Handy’s argument (1993, 292) that organisational “differences” may be “useful and beneficial” – in which case they are internal “competition,” or “damaging and harmful” – in which case they are “conflict.” It is inevitable, therefore, that Handy argues that conflict should be eliminated.

The only way to avoid conclusions about conflict which flow directly from an axiomatic definition about it, is to admit the possibility that conflict is neutral. One such definition is that *conflict is non-trivial disagreement based on real or perceived opposition of interests, values or resources*. This short definition has the advantage of stating more clearly the nature of conflict, without starting from value judgements.<sup>1</sup> Thus, opposing interests are not intrinsically bad.

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<sup>1</sup> The actual dimensions of conflict can be interpersonal (between people), intragroup (within a team or group) or intergroup (between groups or organisational departments).

## Section II

For organisations to be said to *thrive* on conflict, it must be demonstrated that conflict helps them be successful and to prosper. To thrive on conflict, they must be better off than if there were *no* conflict. In this section we gauge the extent to which organisations can be said to be better – or worse – off, by looking at the problems and, first, the alleged benefits of conflict.

### (a) Benefits of conflict

The first stage of this section involves considering some of the benefits of conflict. These various benefits are grouped around a main premise, namely that disagreement can be a strong force for creativity, either leading to new ideas or being a testing ground for competing ideas. Here, then, is the first main benefit: that better ideas are produced (than in a hypothetical, and perfectly harmonious, alternative). Related to this point is that, where ideas can be challenged, or are made to compete, an organisation is far less likely to experience stagnation or complacency.

Secondly, there is a group of benefits that come from having an arena, or mechanism, for conflict to occur within. The result of this is that problems can be aired, evaluated and addressed – a preferable outcome to one where a false harmony exists and problems are ignored or sublimated. A further aspect of this benefit is that members of the organisation will feel that they have the opportunity for their views and concerns to be listened to. Thus what appears to be conflict may, in reality, be divergent views which need to be expressed, and may not actually be a hindrance to the organisation. This type of benefit includes what Palmer calls the “escape valve for negative feelings” (1990, 17).

Thirdly, and from a more long-term perspective, are the benefits accrued from members of an organisation participating in genuine yet productive disagreement. Where disagreements and conflict are encountered and lead to fruitful compromise (or the recognition that one idea is superior to another) then the actual process of sharing such experiences together can build trust between an organisation’s members, and lead to growth and maturity.

Thus, the suggested benefits of conflict can be seen to fall into three areas: benefits that are the *product* of conflict itself; benefits from the *presence* of conflict; and benefits from the *process* of conflict. We turn now to suggested problems arising from organisational conflict.

### (b) Problems of conflict

One of the main problems with organisational conflict is that, for all the *potential* benefits, the proven and repeated experience is that conflict is wasteful: of time, energy, resources and opportunities. Energy is diverted away from strategic organisational functions, and operations may be halted or stymied while an issue between managers or departments lies unresolved. This is summed up succinctly by Acland’s observation (1990, 80) that “[c]onflict is always expensive.”

Secondly, conflict is always – by definition – divisive (since parties with opposing views are divided into separate camps), and it cannot always be supposed that such division will be repaired merely because the issue at hand is resolved.<sup>2</sup> Division can, at times, be helpful and productive, but it often means that one side of a disagreement is in the wrong, and tries to form a stronghold on this disputed territory. Division makes enemies of colleagues; it undermines an organisation’s ethos; it both spreads and ferments discontent; and it militates against the fact that an organisation is an entity based around the achievement of a common aim or objective.<sup>3</sup>

Thirdly, the specifically *human* nature of conflict should not be overlooked. Where conflict exists, there must be two (or more) human parties in disagreement, and these people have

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is something if an assumption that resolution will even be reached.

<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding the existence of secondary and multiple subsidiary aims (which may stand in contradiction to each other), one organisational objective will always surpass all others.

emotions, expectations and memories of previous conflicts. It could be argued, therefore – and in direct contrast to the third point in (a) above – that repeated conflict is itself likely to become a point of friction, on top of the issues debated. This may take the form of one party feeling the need to gain a more favourable settlement than the other party, in the belief that he had an unfair outcome in a previous conflict. The existence of more conflict makes such extraneous issues more likely to become involved.

### (c) Thriving on conflict?

The subsections above demonstrate that it is certainly possible to describe both positive and negative outcomes of organisational conflict. The pertinent question is whether this in any way amounts to a *thriving* on conflict. The connotations of such a word are that conflict would be necessary, beneficial and, more than that, something positive which strongly contributes to the health and vitality of an organisation. That is surely too much for us to agree with, given the problems with conflict that are outlined above. We certainly cannot claim that *all* organisations thrive on conflict but, if we are to narrow our terms somewhat, can we agree that *some* organisations thrive on conflict? Or, to rephrase the issue abstractly, is it *possible* for organisations to thrive on conflict?

This still seems too strong a conclusion. Anything upon which an organisation could be said to thrive, anything so unambiguously positive, one would expect to be deliberately sought and fostered in that organisation. This is clearly not the case, due to the ‘expensiveness’ of conflict. Significantly, many of its alleged benefits actually come from *overcoming* conflict, rather than stimulating it. Whilst creativity is encouraged or stimulated, and disagreements tolerated, conflict remains something which is not purposely sought. It may be possible for organisations to respond well to internal conflict, to conceivably gain from it, but it is not possible to generalise that an organisation would actually thrive on conflict. The outcome (like the outbreak) of conflict is unpredictable, and organisations, like animate objects, tend to thrive on consistent and predictable states, and hence limited disruption.

## Section III

With this evaluation in mind, how then should conflicts be resolved within organisations – bearing in mind that whilst it *may* be possible to sometimes benefit from them, it would not be good practice to solicit something that frequently results in unpredictable and damaging effects. With this in mind, we can see much sense in Rowntree’s claim (1996, 140) that the “best way to manage conflict is to prevent it ever arising,” although such foresight is a notoriously difficult skill.<sup>4</sup> The following strategies are those which a leader of an organisation could wisely employ to manage conflict – although there is no magical or instant formula for conflict resolution.<sup>5</sup>

### (a) Perspective

Restating our starting premise, that conflict is not intrinsically bad (or good), gives a helpful sense of perspective from which to begin conflict resolution. That is to say, the mere fact that conflict is occurring should not be given too much weight, and should not be seen by participants as necessarily a sign of failure. It is helpful to frame a debate with this perspective, so an organisation’s leader should make it clear that, whilst resolution is important, the fact that sustained disagreement has occurred is not something that should automatically be condemned or punished, and that people’s *response* to conflict is paramount.

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<sup>4</sup> Pursuing a similar theme, Stewart (1998, 22) stresses that conflict can be prevented (or at least reduced) through negotiation, good communication, a creative approach to problem-solving, openness, fairness and consensus-building.

<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the claims of some recent management gurus and theorists, we concur with Nelson’s assertion (1996, 136) that management “is an art not a science [and therefore] needing adaptation to each organisation,” and hence that there is no panacea to conflictual problems.

#### (b) Prioritisation

Leaders of organisations are typically those with the most visionary perspective, and the widest field of vision. Departmental, local or technical debates and conflicts can occur within relatively narrow frameworks, and so it can be helpful for a leader to remind disputants of the organisation's overarching objectives (Keenan 1995, 35), priorities and ethos. This should be done with sensitivity and without trivialising people's concerns or arguments but should ultimately work to prioritise the organisation's higher concerns ahead of individual or even departmental ones.

#### (c) Focus on the issue

Given that conflict is often as concerned with *perceived* (as opposed to real) differences, and that such differences are often based on personal interests, values or priorities, it is not at all surprising that conflict frequently becomes personal.<sup>6</sup> An important way in which a leader can resolve conflicts is to insist that parties of a dispute focus on underlying issues, rather than on any attendant personal issues or agendas. Such objectivity is a difficult demand, but is essential to being able to address the problem at hand.

#### (d) Commonality

Whilst diversity is essential for creativity, and adds variety and vivacity to an organisation, occasions of serious conflict are times when common values, objectives and shared features should be stressed. These may be the overall objectives of the organisation, as in (a) above, but could also be particular to just the two conflicting parties. They may have a common history, value system, interest or other factor which can be emphasised. Such attention to commonalities is important in bridge-building between opposing parties – as is a more general emphasis on teamwork. In an organisation which people have chosen to join, it can be legitimate to ask people to sacrifice part of their own interests for those of the organisation, i.e. to expect members to be a 'team player.'<sup>7</sup>

#### (e) Personal skills

These are often overlooked by the managerial textbooks, but it is true to say that the personal conduct and example of an organisation's leader will have a significant impact on the nature of conflict in that organisation, and how it may be resolved. The organisation's leader must be understood to be (i) fair, so that all parties will want to abide by his decisions, (ii) a person of integrity, so that all parties will respect his decisions, (iii) interested, so that all parties will feel valued, and therefore more likely to appreciate his decisions, and (iv) approachable, so that all parties will feel his decisions will be relevant and connected to the issues at hand.<sup>8</sup>

#### (f) Other

There are a multitude of other methods for dealing with conflict, of which only a few can be mentioned here. There is some insight in Handy's argument (1993, 310f) that, if conflict cannot be dealt with fruitfully, it must at least be controlled, especially in the short-term. This is an important reminder to have realistic expectations about conflict resolution – that it may be a prolonged process, or that an issue may actually be intractable given the nature of an organisation.

Commentators have suggested further resolution methods, including the use of non-monetary rewards to compensate disputants (Mullins 2002, 817), although this can be easily seen through and may do little to address the underlying issues. Stewart (1998, 166) rightly

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<sup>6</sup> Stewart (1998, 11) notes that "[h]owever apparently irrational, mistaken and misdirected, the feelings of the disputants are crucial to any analysis of the underlying issues." Conflicts are as likely to have their origins in differing interpretations of reality as in conflicting realities themselves. This has led Acland (1990, 45ff) to distinguish between "real" and "non-real" conflict, the latter actually being misunderstandings and the product of miscommunication, and the former being more substantive.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to suppose, as Drucker has (cited in Buchanan and Huczynski 1985, 434), that individuals' "efforts must all pull in the same direction, without friction..." merely that their membership of the same organisation logically implies a degree of shared identity and collegiality, a fact which can be skilfully utilised.

<sup>8</sup> Some of these qualities find their echo in Mullins' call (2002, 818) for a "more participative and supportive style of leadership and managerial behaviour... to assist in conflict management."

stresses the importance of developing constructive ways forward, so that the history of a conflict, whilst relevant, becomes secondary to the search for a way to progress. Rowntree (1996, 137) wisely notes that in order to resolve conflict one will need to *contain* it, which for him involves limiting both the scale and the scope of the conflict. In practical terms this will involve leaders being alert to small but escalating conflicts, which must be dealt with as quickly as possible.

Avis (1992, 121f), who we earlier saw regarded conflict as 'indispensable,' reframes the debate, insisting that the question is not how conflict should be resolved, but how it can be *harnessed* by leaders. His own answer to that question is fourfold: by acting positively; by communicating persuasively; by getting involved but preserving differences; and by appreciating and rewarding participation. These four aspects bear many similarities to conflict management, with the exception of Avis' notable claim that differences should be preserved wherever possible, a suggestion which makes some sense but may prove difficult in practice and could actually exacerbate the conflict.

#### **Section IV**

Having reviewed some of the main methods of conflict resolution, we now add a specifically Christian perspective to the consideration of conflict management and resolution. Many Christian commentators explicitly or, more usually, implicitly conform to the traditional understanding of conflict, that is to say, it is something abnormal and bad. Within Christian belief, (human) conflict began with the Fall in Genesis 3 and has been characteristic of humanity ever since. In Palmer's words (1990, 39), "The Bible tells us how conflict began, when it will end, and a great deal about how we should handle it during the interim." For Palmer (*ibid.*, 68f) that handling involves a three-stage process: gathering relevant information; establishing a positive environment for discussion; and implementing a *collaborative* resolution process.

The Bible recognizes that conflict can be mutually destructive ("If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other," Galatians 5:15), and so Christians are instructed to work towards peaceful solutions ("Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God," Matthew 5:9), and this is as applicable to organisations as anything else. Rush – who maintains that conflict "always produces negative results for individuals and organizations" (1983, 215) – argues that the Bible outlines a "step by step process for handling confrontation successfully," although his case study based chiefly on Matthew 18:15ff does not readily translate to contexts where conflict is organisational.

A Christian treatment of conflict should not exclude the wisdom and experience of secular management theorists – indeed, many Christian organisations would benefit from the methods outlined in Section III. However, those working within Christian organisations (and Christians working within secular organisations) would do well to remember that the biblical perspective on conflict is inextricably bound with its message of forgiveness. Conflict does seem to be an inevitable outcome of different people working together, but the Christian should nonetheless celebrate and affirm cultural and personal diversity.<sup>9</sup> Conflict may tend towards negative outcomes, but the Christian should work towards the preponderance of positive ones. Conflict will need resolving, but the Christian can learn from secular and biblical methods of addressing it – and encourage love and forgiveness between antagonists and for those affected by conflict.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This seems all the more difficult in view of Palmer's observation (1990, 87) that whilst "[m]anaging conflict within one's own culture can be difficult... it can be much more complicated in cross-cultural situations because of differences in language, thinking, and behaviour." Such difficulties, however, should not necessarily force us towards Roembke's rather defeatist conclusion (2000, 210) that a "rule of thumb to avoid conflict, is not to place people... [who are] 'too different'... together."

<sup>10</sup> In more metaphorical terms, this may resemble an organisation working like a body, with its constituent parts functioning in harmony, as Paul describes the church in 1 Corinthians 12: "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body... God has combined the members of the body... there should be no division in the body... its parts should have equal concern for each other" (vv.12,24,25).

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that conflict should be understood to have both positive and negative potential effects, and as such is neither good nor bad *per se*. As Louis Pondy reasoned, "Conflict is not necessarily good or bad, but must be evaluated in terms of its individual and organizational functions and dysfunctions" (cited in Buchanan and Huczynski 1985, 431). However, most evaluations suggest that negative effects are the more prevalent, and this explains why most organisations take steps to reduce internal conflict.

The assertion that "Organisations thrive on conflict" is fundamentally flawed: too many organisations become dysfunctional through conflict, and too many individuals are hurt by it, for conflict to be something that is thrived upon. However, organisations *can* thrive on diversity and creativity, and these are to be encouraged. It is a sad fact that such diversity often leads to tensions and destructive conflict, but we have identified methods of managing such conflict, so that it becomes either an obstacle overcome, or a stepping stone towards personal and organisational development. The result of this, as Palmer says (1990, 19), "is a more stable and healthy organisation."

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