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Collaboration Analysis Essay

## Conflict – It's Not About Winning

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All of my life I have shied away from conflict. In my mind I thought that if the relationships in my life had conflict in them then there must be something fundamentally wrong with those relationships. You may imagine how frustrating my life has been in this regard as I have discovered that conflict has arisen in all of the relationships in my life. Not a single relationship has escaped unscathed. My purpose in writing this paper is to provide hope to those of a similar mindset. Conflicts arise in every single interpersonal relationship (Beebe, pg. 221) at one time or another. By learning the skills to collaboratively manage conflict we will have the skills to grow and maintain healthy relationships with the people in our lives, the interdependent people, for whom what we say to them and what they say to us has an effect on the other person (Beebe, pg. 222).

### Managing Conflict Through Collaboration

In order to manage our conflicts collaboratively, or in a way in which each person's "high regard" for the other is evident (Beebe, pg. 238), it is important to identify and explore the five conflict management skills, or "problem-solving structures", which have been proven to result in positive solutions to many different types of conflicts (Beebe, pg. 249). This simple five step approach involves the following elements:

The first element is to "**define the problem**" (Beebe, pg. 249). This begins by identifying what we want from the person we are in conflict with. We must identify what the problem is that needs to be solved before we will be able to reach a decision as to how to solve it. I often allow my emotions to overshadow the true issues in a conflict. I am a classic gunnysacker – someone who dredges up past mistakes and recycles old hurts (Beebe, pg. 243). Often I do this because I have a difficult time putting a simple label on an issue. This destructive tactic is often easier for me than focusing on the problem at hand. This is a mistake which I have made in the past.

Avoid attacking the other person with either your words or nonverbal messages (Beebe, pg. 243). This type of behavior is emotionally destructive and clouds the true issue which needs to be resolved. Try to remove emotions and experiences which are not relative to the discussion on hand out of your conversation. Focus on the heart of the issue rather than the emotional drama which often surrounds the issues. This can be difficult to do. After all, the first sign of a conflict can be identified by very strong emotions such as fear, frustration, anger and the like (Beebe, pg. 241). The key to mastering this first step of "defining the problem" is to manage the information that is involved in the discussion at hand. Clearly describe the issue or problem (Beebe, pg. 245).

The second element to collaboratively manage the conflict is to "**analyze the problem**" (Beebe, pg. 249). Keep it simple and approach the problem in a very systematic way. Describe the problem from when it first began to where it stands today. This step is where all of the effective listening skills you have been trying to develop can be a very powerful tool. Focus on the other person, giving them your undivided attention. As they describe the problem as they see it, try to tune out the emotional noise and other internal thoughts you may be having which are distracting you from what your partner is saying (Beebe,

pg. 246). After you have shared your view of the events with your partner, wait for their response. As they are speaking, try not to focus solely on the facts and details, but also on the ideas and insights that these facts may reveal about your partner.

The third element to collaboratively manage the conflict is to “**determine the goals**” (Beebe, pg. 249). Identify what your goals are and what the goals of your partner are. Because both of the parties in an interpersonal relationship want something, it is important to learn what each of you wants (Beebe, pg. 247). Two prominent communication researchers, Daniel Canary and Sandra Lakey, determined that being aware of our partner’s goals is essential in resolving conflicts which may arise in our relationships. If you do not know what the other person wants, then you will not be able to figure out a solution to your conflict. In identifying the goals of each person, it will be easier to see which goals you may have in common, or the areas of your different goals which may overlap (Beebe, pg. 247). If we focus on these shared goals and common interests it will be easier to come to a solution to our conflicts.

The fourth element to collaboratively manage the conflict is to “**generate multiple solutions**” (Beebe, pg. 250). Work together with your partner to think of as many possible solutions as you can. This is a brainstorming party, so try to hold judgment on the ideas shared until everything has been brought forward. Be creative and focus on solutions that address both the problem you defined in the first element and the overlapping goals defined in the third element. By focusing on the shared values and interests you already have, you are more likely to come to a solution which is agreeable to both parties (Beebe, pg. 249). As you work together with your partner to find a viable solution, you will both feel more invested in an outcome that is agreeable to both of you.

Finding a solution together with your partner leads very naturally into the fifth and final element to collaboratively manage the conflict – which is “**select the best solution**” (Beebe, pg. 250). From the multiple solutions you have brainstormed, decide on one that is the best. How do you know that a solution you have chosen is “the best”? When the two of you have worked together, brainstormed, and come to a mutually beneficial solution, you have found the best solution for your conflict. Sometimes this requires you to review your common goals, return to what the simplified problem really is, and may even require several brainstorming sessions before you are able to reach the solution needed. The best solution will also be one which allows both you and your partner to “save face” (Beebe, pg.250). Saving face means that the other person is saved from feeling embarrassed because of the way they reacted or behaved during the course of the conflict. When feelings are hurt, letting the other person know, in a positive way, that you genuinely still care about them will help to heal those hurt feelings. Admit when you are wrong, and work together to make the solution you decided on become a success.

## **Background of Conflict**

Last year my husband and I decided to put our home of fourteen years up for sale and move to a neighboring town. This was a time of transition for our family. My son was entering his final year of high school, and my husband and I felt it would be a good time to downsize to a smaller home as Andre, my son, would be moving out of our home shortly after graduation and moving on with his life. My husband and I were almost giddy with excitement as we shared our plans with Andre. He, however, did not share in our enthusiasm. This was a simple conflict in that Andre did not agree with our goal. He wanted us to wait until after he graduated from High School. However, we did not want to wait another year before moving forward with our plan.

## Comparative Dialogues

The following illustrates two types of dialogues which could have been a part of the when-to-move conflict.

**Dialogue A:** *[The first discussion does not use the five step approach to collaboratively manage a conflict]*

*Me:* Andre, your dad and I have decided to put the house up for sale and move.

*Andre:* What?? Why would you want to do a thing like that? That is just lame.

*Me:* Well, you are almost all grown up and will be moving on with your life soon. Now just seems like a good time to sell.

*Andre:* No, no, no! That is just going to mess up my entire Senior year! Can't you wait until after I graduate to . . . . *[I didn't even let him finish his thought before butting in with...]*

*Me:* Hmmm, no. Sorry, buddy. We think it would be best to move now. Let's just put the house on the market and see what happens. Who knows, maybe it won't sell.

*Andre:* Mom, that is seriously the stupidest idea ever.

**Dialogue B:** *[Same discussion but using the five step approach to collaboratively manage a conflict]*

### Step 1: Define the problem

*Me:* Andre, we need to talk about something. Your dad and I would like to sell this house and move sometime this summer. What do you think about that?

*Andre:* Mom, that would really make my senior year difficult. I would have to start at a new school and I wouldn't know anyone.

*[Andre removed his knee jerk emotional reaction, and instead very clearly stated what the problem he had with my plan was. We must identify what the problem is that needs to be solved before we will be able to reach a decision as to how to solve it. ]*

### Step 2: Analyze the problem

*Me:* So, you don't have a problem with us moving, you just don't want to go to a new school, correct?

*Andre:* Yes, that is exactly right. I don't care where we live, I just want to graduate from Grantsville High.

*Me:* Do you think it would be difficult to meet new people and have new experiences? Is that what is troubling you?

*Andre:* No, mom, that's not the issue at all. It would just be awkward to be the new kid. My senior year...I don't want to have to worry about fitting in. I just want to enjoy my time with friends who know me and already like me.

*[By removing the emotion and accusation out of the conversation, Andre has helped us to both focus in on the real problem. He doesn't want to go to a different HS, and he wants to enjoy his senior year without the added worry of "fitting in".]*

### **Step 3: Determine goals**

Me: So...if you can still graduate from Grantsville High then you would be happy?

Andre: Definitely! I would even help you to do whatever we need to sell the house – if in the end it would mean that I didn't have to change high schools.

*[We came to a clearly defined goal. Note how the defensiveness has completely gone out of Andre's responses. By letting him know that his feelings matter, and recognizing that we do have common goals, the conversation is a collaborative effort]*

### **Step 4: Generate many solutions**

Andre: Can you and dad just look at homes in Grantsville? You like it here...and I love it here.... Is that a possibility?

Me: Well, dad and I actually wanted to move closer to Grandma and Grandpa Bagley. Grandpa's health isn't doing very well and it would help Grandma a lot to have us closer to help her with him. Tooele is only 20 minutes away though...

Andre: Do you think I could still go to Grantsville High and you or dad could drop me off on your way to work?

Me: Hmm, now there's an interesting thought. That would be a lot of extra driving for dad and I though...Grantsville is not actually on the way to work. It is about twenty minutes out of the way. What if we let you use the blue car instead and be in charge of driving yourself to and from school? Would that work?

Andre: Would you pay for gas? Or would I have to?

Me: It only seems fair that if dad and I are the ones who chose to move then we should pay for gas. But what if we say that Dad and I pay for gas for school events, and anything extra like visiting friends and dates would be paid for by you. What do you think?

*[By coming up with several solutions together, we are both vested in the outcome. It's no longer mom and dad trying to wreak havoc on Andre's life, but us working as a team towards the same goal: Andre graduating from Grantsville High School. We want the solution to be a win/win for both of us.]*

### **Step 5: Select a Solution**

Andre: You mean you and dad trust me that much with the car?

Me: You bet we trust you. You have earned our trust over the years, and we know that we can count on you to make good decisions. We love you very much.

Andre: Wow mom, thanks. That sounds totally fair to me! So I can still go to Grantsville High my senior year...I will drive to and from Tooele.

Me: Yes, and dad and I will cover gas for school stuff, but you are in charge of paying for your own dates, football games and other fun stuff. Agreed?

Andre: Yes, totally – Agreed!

*[By reviewing what the solution was and the agreed upon terms, the solution became one that was mutually beneficial to both of us rather than a verdict passed by my husband and I as Andre's parents.]*

## **Analysis**

### **Outcomes and conflict resolution styles:**

The two dialogues shown above had some very definite differences in both their overall tone and outcomes.

### **Outcomes, Dialog A & B:**

The first dialogue was very confrontational from the beginning, and was filled with conflict triggers (Beebe, pg. 225). The first message Andre heard when I told him that dad and I had decided we were moving was one which he had not verbally heard, but which he felt through the tone of voice which I used as well as my choice of words that showed the decision had been made and there was no room for discussion. He perceived that there was a serious lack of fairness in this decision in that he was not made a part of the choice to move at all. He had a keen sense of his lack of power over the consequences of this move and the negative effect it would have on his senior year. He knew that he was dependent on his parents for where he lived and the affect that the location of his home had over the other aspects of his school and social life, and he voiced his frustration with the situation through name calling and shouting. In the text we read about the circumstantial nature of power (Beebe, pg. 232) and Andre felt the unfairness of this power balance very sharply. The outcome of this first discussion was very negative and disconfirming (Beebe, pg. 148). Our conflict began as a simple conflict, but shifted into an ego-conflict as it became very personal (Beebe, pg. 229) and very negative.

The second dialogue was very different from the first dialogue. Unlike the first discussion, Andre realized he was not powerless. He was being included in the decision (Beebe, pg. 232). He identified his feelings and provided me with a reason for his opposition which I had not previously considered. This discussion felt more like a dance and less like a boxing match. In the text, we read that "a good conversation has a rhythm" which is created when both parties "listen and respond to each other" (Beebe, pg. 162). We were freely sharing ideas and expectations with one another, and this allowed a positive solution to our conflict to naturally arise. The outcome of the second dialogue was very positive. Our interaction, and the free exchange of ideas, built our love and trust in each other. Andre knew that what he said, and his happiness, mattered to both mom and dad. As a result, this conflict remained a simple conflict (Beebe, pg. 228) and we were able to find agreement where we could. It was much more positive than the first discussion.

### **Conflict Resolution Styles and Challenges, Dialog A & B:**

The conflict resolution style of competition, one in which we each had a conflicting need to control and "win at the expense of the other person" (Beebe, pg. 237), dominated the first dialogue. I wanted to move and Andre wasn't going to change my mind. As he realized that nothing he said was going to be able to change the course his parents had chosen to take he called me "stupid" and our choice "lame". By dismissing his anger with my flippant, no-nonsense, you-can't-win-this-one response, I did not improve the situation. This disconfirming dialogue was destructive to our relationship. The things we both said to each other and the attitude of indifference we showed towards the other person's feelings through our disconfirming responses, especially when I cut him off without allowing him to finish venting his frustration, were powerfully corrosive to our relationship (Beebe, pg. 150). I discovered that the competition resolution style is not conducive to building a nurturing and trust-based relationship.

By opening the second dialogue with a different choice of words we were able to change from the conflict resolution style of competition to the collaboration style. Instead of saying “we have decided” I let him know that the decision was still up for discussion by using words like “we would like to,” and “what do you think?” Andre was able to offer a different perspective than one I had previously considered and by so doing he was able to help us keep the conversation very positive (Beebe, pg.177). I had to stop myself from making snide remarks or poking fun at some of his responses. My natural reaction when I feel conflict beginning to escalate is to make a joke or laugh about the situation. That type of response, known as an invulnerable response, would not have been helpful (Beebe, pg. 295). By focusing on being other-oriented, I was able to see what Andre needed. Together we were able to arrive at a positive solution for him. As a result of this solution, our relationship was strengthened instead of being torn down by the hurt feelings that arose out of the first discussion.

### **Application:**

Developing healthy and strong interpersonal relationships requires a lot of work. It requires that we step back from our emotional noise (Beebe, pg. 128) and consider the feelings of the person with whom we are speaking. It requires that we take into account the needs of someone besides ourselves. I have struggled with this challenge over and over again in my life. Conflicts arise, but if I stop and try to imagine what the other person may be thinking or feeling, it will help me to shift from a conflict style that is destructive to a collaboration conflict style which brings happiness to both parties.

### **Conclusion**

Yes, interpersonal relationships require a lot of work, but that work is absolutely worth it. Interpersonal relationships give us the courage to get through the hard times. And there will be hard times in our lives. There will be conflicts that arise. But if we apply and use the five steps to resolve our conflicts through collaboration as these challenges arise then we will find greater happiness in our interpersonal relationships. “Interpersonal communication is like breathing; it is a requirement for life” (Beebe, pg.2). I would add that our interpersonal relationships are not just a requirement for life; they are the very essence of life.

### **Works Cited:**

Beebe, Steven A., Susan J. Beebe, and Mark V. Redmond. *Interpersonal Communication Books a La Carte Edition*. 7th ed. Boston: Pearson College Div, 2014. Print.