<u>Ombudsperson Commentary</u>: Perspectives on conflict theory and academic life

The first annual report of the University Ombuds Office provides a profile of activity that is remarkably similar across reports from other college and university ombuds offices. Perhaps this is to be expected; conflict is an inherent feature of university life. Universities are driven towards multiple and often competing missions, are populated by several constituencies with differing relationships with the university, exhibit formalities of shared governance while maintaining a hierarchical, even monastic, organizational structure, and are under perennial financial duress. Colliding goals among campus constituencies and university missions can breed complicated interest-based conflicts that are not always well suited for formalized grievance procedures typically found in academic institutions.

Faculty, staff, administrators, and students coexist on campus and seek their collective and individual needs in an environment predicated on open criticism to ideas and competition. Indeed, the confrontational aspect of academia attracts, and may even indoctrinate a tolerance (if not desire) for conflictual discourse and communication.[1] At the same time, we acknowledge our work is rooted in collegiality, shared governance, and consensus building and our administrators usually place a premium on maintaining harmony among those they lead and serve. The seeming incongruity between confrontation and collegiality provides fertile ground for conflict among members of most all university communities.[2] And still, superimposed on the unique enterprise in which we are engaged, are sources of conflict that can be present in any other social setting or workplace.[3] In reviewing this years report (or thinking about problems in one's own unit), classifying issues as *relationship conflict* (How we get along), *task conflict* (How we get things done), and *process conflict* (How we decide to get things done) can give us a starting place for discussing solutions.

Another lens by which to consider the information in this report is to distinguish between disputes resulting from conflict over *resources*, conflict over *needs*, and conflict over *values*. Financial constraints, particularly this year, have dominated all facets of our work life. Conflicts occur in response to the distribution of resources and the process by which resources are allocated. Conflict over needs involve social and psychological factors such as self esteem, autonomy, power, and respect. Needs, and their relevant priority, vary between individuals and are generally more hidden sources of conflict. Conflict over values is still less tangible and touches our understanding of the purpose and goals of our university, unit, or department.

It may also be helpful to perceive conflict as arising out of the collision of competitive, cooperative, or individualistic motives.[4] The work cultures in which we hope to thrive may ultimately promote competitive-individualistic behaviors and minimize cooperative behaviors at the expense of our idealized value of collegiality.[5] Faculty, in particular, often work in isolation and are rewarded for individual achievements. At times, distribution of rewards and resources can be explained or be interpreted as a zero-sum game where assigning a larger piece of the pie to one group or individual results a correspondingly smaller piece for others.[5]

The allegiances accentuated by faculty, staff, students, and administrators may influence the potential for conflict in academic life. As the university becomes more culturally and ethnically diverse, the campus becomes home to numerous sets of race, gender, religious practices, social norms, and communication styles. These differences, though celebrated, also introduce uncertainty in many of our person-to-person and group interactions. Similarly, professional allegiances can be unrecognized or misunderstood. Commitment may be strongest towards the advancement and well being of narrow academic or professional disciplines rather than that of one's home department, unit, college, or university. We can easily find ourselves valuing relationships with peers from other institutions more highly than relationships in our own department and elsewhere on campus.

For many individuals and units, the prospects for successful conflict management may seem dim given an environment so conducive to conflict. The notion of academic rigor itself even suggests that attempting to manage conflict could be detrimental to the successful practice of education and scholarship. Indeed, conflict can be a constructive influence on innovation and progress.[6,7] However, as many visitors this past year have explained, destructive conflict can stifle the potential success of any group. Constantino and Merchant in their book, Designing Conflict Management Systems, described unique symptoms of groups suffering from destructive conflict that might benefit from examining sources of conflict and new approaches.[8] These symptoms include internal competition, visible disputes, sabotage, inefficiency, low productivity, low morale, and withholding knowledge.

Mary Rowe, an eminent ombudsperson and scholar, has explained that consequences of unaddressed conflict can be equally destructive to individuals.[9] Resignation, absenteeism, going slow, complaints, legal suits, gossip, anonymous attacks, fear of loss of privacy, loss of dignity, fear of retaliation, and labels/name calling are typical results affecting individuals. These individual concerns can be more acute for women, minorities, and other nontraditionals who experience a greater risk of being stigmatized as troublemakers rather than as self-confident professionals when surfacing concerns.[9] Positive outcomes reported by groups in higher education following effective conflict management include the effect of better group cohesion on unifying organizational mission, group preservation by preventing escalation of hostilities, a period of productivity associated with the stability that follows conflict, innovation, and incorporation of problem solving skills into the function of the unit.[10] Periodic self examination for symptoms of destructive conflict and contemplating the benefits of effective conflict management approaches seems a worthwhile exercise for any campus unit or office. The Ombuds Office is one of many resources on our campus where a discussion about the sources and substance of conflict is welcome.

References

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