

## Conflict and Its Usefulness by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

### Practitioner question

There is someone in your training group whom you fear and dislike. You don't like conflict very much and have not spoken about this. How might you prepare yourself to address this conflict? An answer suggested by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

### Conflict and its usefulness: an introduction

There is generally acceptance that our physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional energies cycle through high and low periods, having an ebb and a flow which impacts both mood and productivity. Similarly we also have cycles which impact our interpersonal relations, moving through harmony and conflict, stillness and intense ambivalence. Harmony sounds positive and something to strive for, implying peacefulness and pleasure. Trying to maintain this state evokes conflict with those forces causing disturbance. And, the harmonic state, once it becomes static, can be experienced as a bit boring and lacking in excitement. In order to be in a more adventurous mood we are presented with situations which pose challenges and risk. Conflict begins to surface, and requires both self examination and periods of indecision. To resist conflict and stay in the harmonic state reduces the opportunities to engage life fully. Our self esteem requires that we experience our own courage, and that we accept the interdependence which is part of belonging, and being connected to others.

A person who hates conflict, and hides from it, needs to have a success experience with the positive impact of conflict. What interferes with this success experience are conflicts which are unruly, sheer ventilation without regard for the other person, and being overwhelmed by emotional and physical outbursts without support and safeguards in place.

### Preparation for Conflict

As an individual it helps to write down the resources you believe you have for handling conflict.

As well, you might make a list of the resources you still need. For example, (1) I am able to weigh the truth of a statement about me.â€• (2) I am willing to ask for time to reply.â€• (3) I know someone who will stand by me during a conflict with another person.â€• A group leader may also ask that the entire group identify the resources the group has for handling conflict. Part of this discussion may involve stating the norms the group has for ways people address one another, listening skills, and physicalization. The group also needs to address if they trust the skill of the facilitator for maintaining safety and for facilitating an open, forthright discussion without avoiding the primary concerns.

Identifying worst fears can also help with preparation. Asking oneself, "what is the worst thing that could happen?", and then creating possibilities for handling these worst case scenarios will help reduce ambivalence.

### Warmups to Conflict

(1) Group triangle - The group picks an issue of concern. "Being late" A triangle is taped on the floor. One side is positive, one side is negative and one side is neutral. The group is split into three groups and each person spends a short period of time on each line with their group, speaking about the positive nature of being late, the negative response to being late, and the neutral position about being late. The entire group is facilitated to role play their position fully and to engage the other opposing sides.

(2) Multiple role reversal - This time two sides are identified. Each side is allowed to make statements and to engage the other side. The facilitator calls for a role reversal and the entire side switches their position. The one by one, a person steps into the middle and speaks aloud their soliloquy of the way this arguments is impacting him/her. Anyone who wishes may step to their side and join them in their position.

(3) Contrived argument - Everyone in the group is in pairs. The two people are to convince their partner that he or she is the better person, the more worthy of praise. Then, the argument is reversed and the two are asked to begin trying to convince their partner that he/she is the better person, more worthy of praise. After this has taken place, the partners discuss these short interactions focusing on which arguments were convincing, which arguments were easier to maintain. The exercise closes by both persons resolving anything which feels incomplete.

### Creating a safe support for conflict within a group

It is important for the well being of a group to have conflicts surface, especially if the concerns are tying up energy that could be expended on other group issues. A person who brings a conflict to the attention of the group is vulnerable, particularly from people who do not want conflict, or want something else to happen in that moment. A facilitator will recognize the need to take the pulse of the group and attend to the issue of readiness. At the same time, the person raising the concern needs to be supported with acceptance and respect. If the issue involves someone else who is a group member, whether present or not, this person may need time to check inside and identify their feeling and response to being part of another person's issue. If the person is not present it may be opportunistic to address the issue without having to "worry" about their feelings or input; however, involving the group member directly is preferred. This will give both persons the opportunity to experience support from the group. Having to delay, until all parties are present, also sets in place a norm, that if you miss a group session for some reason, your position in the group will be protected until

your return.

A group will also need to accept that the role of support for a person engaged in a conflict, is not meant to be experienced by the group members as "taking sides". If this seems to be a real fear, then the role of support can cycle through the group, with each person being asked to come up and make doubling statements of support for each person engaged in the conflict. In fact the parties engaged in the conflict can step out of the spotlight entirely and other group members can mirror the action, acting "as if" they are the persons having the conflict. This choice also offers the co-protagonists role relief and the opportunity to observe the conflict from a more neutral position.

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