

DEMOCRATIC CONFLICT RESOLUTION *

Carroll R. Thomas, Ph.D.

Our tradition has not prepared us to live with each other as social equals. Consequently, we have not learned how to solve conflicts on the basis of equality. In any conflict situation we only see a choice between fighting -- with a chance of winning -- or yielding and losing. As long as there are differences in interests, intentions, and goals, there will be conflicts. Since conflicts are unavoidable, it would appear that the most important consideration is how we resolve them. Conflicts can no longer be settled by contests, or by force, as they once were. The winner can no longer relax on the strength of his or her victory, because the loser is no longer willing to accept the winner's superiority and submit to it. Consequently, all solutions achieved through the traditional forms of contest are short-lived, and the struggle goes on indefinitely without letup or peace.

Once the spirit of positive cooperation is broken the contest begins, and there is no end to it. Each opponent scores victories every now and then, but cannot enjoy them for long, because the loser soon strikes back; and the winner has to fight to re-establish supremacy. And yet, in each new conflict situation most of us continue using the same traditional approaches to which we have been conditioned. We either fight or give in or do both alternatively. We may decide to put our foot down and fight undue demands and mistreatment, but in the struggle become worn out and give in. Or we may consider it useless to put up a fight and to yield from the very beginning, until the demands become so unbearable that we then decide to fight. The vicious circle of fighting and yielding continues. Nothing really is gained through fighting or through yielding. Fighting violates respect for others; yielding violates respect for oneself. The procedure proposed then is not to avoid conflicts, but to learn to solve them peacefully.

In an autocratic society, the one who has the most strength and power makes the decisions, and the others have to accept the decisions, but this is impossible in a democratic society because no one accepts the other's supremacy or superiority. Fortunately, we can learn to solve conflicts -- not avoid them or fight over them -- by finding new cooperative agreements. An agreement is reached when everyone feels that he or she has gained something from the decision. Agreement is not compromise. Compromise is a situation in which everyone, giving up something, feels that he or she has lost (Dreikurs, 1959). There are thus four basic actions necessary for democratic conflict resolution: individuals must (1) create mutual respect; (2) pinpoint the real issue; (3) seek a new agreement; (4) create mutual decision-making and responsibility-sharing. These basic actions, formulated by Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs (1972a, 1972b; Turner & Pew (1978), have helped many people peacefully resolve conflicts: they can be used in the family, in the school, in industry, or in any other situation where people live and interact with each other.

Create Mutual Respect

When conflict occurs, don't fight -- don't give in; don't rebel -- don't conform. Show mutual respect: respect others by being kind and not fighting or rebelling; respect yourself by being firm and not giving in or conforming. Make responsible choices based on your best interests and the best interests of others.

Avoid power struggles if possible; withdraw from the conflict. "Take your sail out of the other person's wind." In other words, recognize and acknowledge the other person's power and help him or her to use it constructively. Appeal to the other person's good will, and enlist his or her cooperation. Stimulate positive cooperation from within rather than trying to force compliance from without. Grant the other person the legitimacy of his or her stand, and ask for help in finding a solution to the conflict. Fighting or giving in only increases the other person's desire to rule.

Realize that it takes cooperation -- negative cooperation -- to fight and that significant changes can actually occur in any relationship if one person is willing to make certain changes. Once one person changes his or her part of a conflict -- stops cooperating in initiating and/or maintaining the fight -- the other person is forced to change also. It actually takes cooperation to keep a battle going. Since conflict requires opposing forces, there will be no contest if one simply refuses to cooperate with the antagonist.

Pinpoint the Real Issue

We can fight about or over anything we choose; however, the thing we fight about is seldom the real issue. The real issue is always a disturbed human relationship. For this reason it is important to pinpoint the real, underlying issue or grievance -- to identify the real problem, the goals behind the conflict. The underlying issue will usually be a matter of one or more of the following:

- A matter of personal status -- "Why should I negotiate?"
- A matter of prestige -- "What will others think of me?"
- A matter of superiority -- "If I'm not on the top, I'll be on the bottom!"
- A matter of who decides -- "Why should others decide for me?"
- A matter of control -- "If I don't control others, they'll control me!"
- A matter of judgment -- "I know best!"
- A matter of retaliation -- "You won the last round: I'll win this one!"
- A matter of revenge -- "I'll get even with you this time!"
- A matter of responsibility -- "Why should I cooperate and contribute?"

The real issue is always a matter of who's first, best, smartest, rightist, superior, the favorite, in control, most prestigious; or of who has the most status, power, control and influence, or who must always win. Winning, however, may involve retaliation, getting even, hurting others, revenge, exploitation, avoidance of responsibility, withdrawal from others, or displaying inadequacy.

Because all conflicts involve real or imagined disrespect, inequality, competition, exploitation, and/or irresponsibility, in a democratic atmosphere conflicts can only be resolved on the basis of mutual respect, social equality, cooperation, contribution, and mutual responsibility.

Seek a New Agreement

Reach a new agreement, a positive agreement, a mutual agreement. Change the current agreement to fight and argue to an agreement to stop fighting and to find a solution to the conflict. Make a decision not to fight and stick to it. Stop cooperating -- negatively -- by fighting, and start cooperating -- positively -- to find a mutual agreement.

Carry on the following dialogue with yourself: “What can I do to make things better? How can I change? I’ll focus on what I’m doing, not on what others are doing. I’ll see my own part of the conflict. I’ll change my role in the situation. I won’t blame others.” This philosophy puts the responsibility where it belongs. There will always be conflicts because we initially see problems only from our own personal perspective. Only when we know our own, as well as the other person’s behavior, we are in a position to really change roles and establish a new, more satisfactory, agreement.

Stop fighting and demanding that everyone else change; decide for yourself and then change yourself. Stop thinking what the other person should do, and start thinking about what you could do. The only person who can really change is yourself. When you change your own behavior, your opponent also has to change. When you change your behavior, others are affected.

Explore every possible way of finding an agreement by “brainstorming.” In “brainstorming” everyone bounces ideas off everyone else. Every member expresses an idea, no matter how farfetched, and every possibility is written down. The recorder is more important in this process than the negotiator.

Because life is an ongoing, ever-changing process and nothing can stop its movement, things will change for the better or the worse even if we do nothing. There is always an alternative -- a better or worse way that things can be done. The worst way out of a predicament is through one person’s domination. The best way is through a joint effort to reach a new agreement based on mutual decision-making and responsibility-sharing. We can no longer stop others from doing what they choose to do, but we can change our own behavior and thereby influence them. We may create a cooperative situation in which others are allowed to change their behavior in a more constructive direction.

Create Mutual Decision-Making and Responsibility-Sharing

All problems are common problems; most of us are basically in the same boat! Some people have big problems; and some people have small problems, but all people have problems. Democratic leadership, then, is needed to bring people together to listen to each other, to realize the reality of common problems, and to share decision-making responsibility.

Everyone should be encouraged to participate in making decisions and sharing responsibilities. The “enemies” who usually aren’t given any responsibility had best also be included in the process. We need to decide together, help each other, listen to each other, accept

ideas and contributions from each other, and decide how to solve common problems. We need to ask, "What can we do together?" Agreement represents everyone's contribution, so everyone must have a part. When the majority decides, the minority violates the decision. Participation in decision-making gives everyone a chance to influence the outcome. If one person refuses to contribute to the decision, the others decide and the individual simply experiences the consequences of the decision. "Not to decide is to decide." Negotiation can take place later at the individual's request, if he or she doesn't like the decision. Nevertheless, the decision-making process can be used to stimulate agreement of all; group pressure can be used to support the agreement.

Through conflict resolution all who are part of the problem share in the responsibility of solving it. All have the freedom to try out new ideas, new methods, and new areas of learning. The task of the leader in this decision-making process is to release the members from the necessity of fighting or yielding or rebelling or conforming and to encourage participation in problem solving on responsible choices. Thus, leadership must be democratic -- not autocratic or abdicatic -- for this process to work.

Conclusion

The decision-making process, then, will utilize the following steps: (1) Recognition that there is a problem. (2) Presentation of all available facts. (3) Analyzation of the facts from everyone's point of view. (4) Consideration of all the possible solutions -- "brainstorming" of all possible alternatives. (5) Agreement on a plan of action. (6) Evaluation of the decision (Dreikurs, Corsini and Gould, 1975; Gould, 1977). When these steps are followed within the context of democratic conflict resolution, the possibility exists for an amicable and agreeable solution for all parties. It is thus an alternative which can be considered when potential conflicts surface.

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