Everyone Can Win:
Creative Resolution of Conflict

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In the past few years, we have seen and heard a great deal about the "win-win" concept of conflict resolution. Has the idea really changed the way in which we approach situations of conflict? The author contends that we have changed very little; too often we do not act as if we really believe that everyone can emerge a winner. We either dig in our heels, ready to defend our own proposed solution, or we expect that everyone will have to give up something in order to reach a compromise.

This article proposes that synergism, rather than compromise, is the only creative means of conflict resolution. Some case studies from the field of volunteer program management are offered as illustrations. Each focuses on the question, "What do you really want?"—a question that management consultant Mike Murray (Creative Interchange Consultants, Arlington, Texas) offers as the key to conflict management which unlocks creative solutions.

CASE ONE: WHO REPORTS TO WHOM?

A few years ago, I became part-time director of a small volunteer chore service. Its first director had also been the founder—a dedicated woman who had seen a need and responded. She had organized church members from throughout the community to do household chores and minor repairs for the elderly, the disabled, and those with meager financial resources. When the founding mother moved away, the program experienced a crisis.

I arrived on the scene when a second director had come and gone and the organization was in debt and disarray. Complete collapse had been averted by a determined board of directors and a retired clergyman who was staffing the office on a volunteer basis, trying to match service requests with volunteers but in reality performing many of the chores himself—chores which should have been assigned to volunteers. Much needed to be done, and quickly, to give new life and form to the program.

A high-priority task, the board agreed, was to develop an organizational plan with clear job descriptions for everyone—director, board members, chore volunteers and office volunteers. The retired clergyman agreed to become the volunteer office manager and I drafted job descriptions.

At the next meeting of board and staff, we discussed the job descriptions one by one. They were approved as presented, until we came to the one for the position of office manager. As we studied it, the man who had offered to take the position (I shall call him "Joe") became tense and uneasy. The chair of the board noticed, and asked, "Is this the way to see the job, Joe?"

"Pretty much," was the reply, "except for the part about 'reports to. . . .'" It was my turn to become tense, for the description said, logically enough, "Reports to the Executive Director." If the staff did not report to me, I could not function as a director. I began to figuratively dig in my heels.

At that point, Mike Murray's question came to mind. "What do you see as the ideal arrangement, Joe?" I asked.

"Well, I've been reporting to the board every month," he said, "and that has worked really well so far. That way, I'm there at the meeting to answer questions about the statistics I prepare for them."

And the light dawned. Joe had no prob-

lem with the issue of administrative authority or accountability. What he really wanted was to attend the board meetings—amiable and enjoyable breakfast sessions—and explain his statistical report. The interchange and sociability were among the job benefits for him.

I tested my insight. "Would it help," I asked, "if we reworded the job description to say 'responsible to the Executive Director?' You can surely attend the board meetings to explain your statistics."

"Surely," replied Joe. "That makes perfect sense. The buck stops with you. I just think I'm the best person to interpret the figures every month, because I'm closest to them."

We could feel everyone relax, and with good reason. Everyone won. The organization had a clear structure and a picture of accountability. As director, I knew that the structure was understood. And a faithful volunteer worker was assured he was still welcome at a monthly meeting he anticipated with pleasure. Had we stubbornly defended our solutions, someone would have lost. Had we compromised, who knows what sort of convoluted organizational plan might have resulted?

CASE TWO: WHERE ARE THE FORMS?

A volunteer-staffed crisis line I directed initiated a reassurance program, making reliable daily calls to elderly persons who lived alone. Some calls were made from our telephone center, but many volunteers phoned from their homes. They called two or three clients each morning for a brief, friendly chat and a security check.

The program funding source required that we have documentation of the calls. We worked out a reporting system that we thought was simplicity itself: each caller had some blank forms and filled out one for each client; there were lines to make brief notes every day; and at the end of the month the forms were to be brought or sent to our office. The only problem with our reporting system was that it did not seem to work. We received very few completed forms.

The first few months of the program, we tried various tactics. Reminders were published in our newsletter. We sent self-addressed envelopes. Still the rate of

return was low. Yet, when the program coordinator made her monthly phone calls to the volunteers, she found that they were doing their jobs.

Again, Murray's question came to mind. Instead of trying to outguess the volunteers, why not ask them what they wanted? The next month, the coordinator phoned each volunteer, and, after gathering the data needed, asked, "What would make it easier for you to send us completed forms?"

The answer was almost unanimous: Sending *completed* forms would be no problem! The resistance was to sending us *incomplete* forms. Since clients were often hospitalized, or had visitors for a few days, or went out of town, calls were not needed for those periods. Therefore, volunteers noted that the forms, with their 31 lines each, sometimes had blank lines at the end of a month, indicating days when no contact was made. What volunteers really wanted was to wait until the forms were complete before sending them on. Anything else seemed a bureaucratic waste of paper, postage and time.

Meanwhile, at the office, we asked what we really needed and discovered our need was twofold. We wanted monthly call figures to report to the board of directors and documentation by the end of the year for our funding source. Since the program coordinator called the volunteers each month to pass on information, listen to concerns, and express satisfaction, she could very easily also collect call totals at the same time. The forms would arrive in due course. We could all win—all get what we really wanted and needed.

CASE THREE: OPEN HOUSE AT THE OFFICE

This account was shared by the long-time director of a volunteer-staffed crisis telephone service. The director's office and the telephone center where volunteers worked had been in separate buildings, but both were moved into new quarters, occupying adjacent office suites. In the new setting a new pattern quickly developed. Many of the volunteers, as they finished their shifts, stopped in to visit the director. They discussed a variety of topics, but they tended to stay for quite a

while—up to a half an hour each—taking a big chunk of time from the director's busy day. Clearly, something needed to change.

The director's initial reaction was to guess what the volunteers might want. Thinking they wanted an opportunity to debrief, she recommended that volunteers arrive early for shifts so they could listen to one another. And, to provide more opportunity for discussion of common concerns, she scheduled some brown-bag lunches with announced topics for discussion. Both innovations were welcomed, but the visits to the director's office continued unabated. What did the volunteers want?

Finally, she began to ask them. As visitors arrived, she greeted them warmly and then asked, "What can I do for you?" The responses were strikingly similar: "Nothing in particular—I just wanted to touch base," or "I just wanted to say hello."

The organization had scores of volunteers, many of whom had not met one another. But they all knew the director, who had interviewed them initially, had directed their training, and had helped to commission them for service. She was the common link, and she was right next door.

A solution then became obvious. The director began to visit the telephone center—briefly—during each volunteer shift. It was a busy place, and no one expected her to stay long. In a very few minutes, and on her schedule, she made the important connection with each member of the volunteer staff. The brief breaks and pleasant contacts actually increased the director's energy and efficiency. The volunteers felt connected and recognized. Everybody won.

CASE FOUR: A CAUTIONARY TALE

After moving from one community, I received two letters—one from the person who had replaced me as director of a volunteer program and one from an office volunteer, or rather a former office volunteer. She had just resigned in anger, and her resignation was the topic of both the letters.

"You must have been a saint!" wrote the director in frustration. She described how busy she had been; feeling it important to make contacts, she had scheduled meetings with people from many other community agencies and programs. The office volunteer constantly interrupted the meetings, held in a conference room, with messages and questions that could easily have waited. She seemed to show no judgment about when—or, indeed, whether—to intrude. Tensions had grown until the new director had ordered the volunteer (in front of an audience of visitors) to refrain from interrupting meetings. An angry confrontation and resignation followed.

"I felt like a piece of furniture," explained the ex-volunteer in her letter. Because she had handled many of the calls to the office and dealt with many of the letters, she liked to meet the callers and correspondents in person. Also, like most of us, she enjoyed the sense of worth and status that came from being introduced to agency executives and community leaders. A task-oriented person, the new director had taken her visitors directly to the conference room, not stopping by the office for introductions. The volunteer, feeling anonymous and invisible, had asserted her presence and importance—evidently in inappropriate ways. Everyone lost the confrontation which resulted, mostly because neither person had asked (of herself or of the other), "What do you really want?"

ANALYSIS

When people are in conflict or seem to be working at cross purposes, there are three basic assumptions that can be made: someone must lose, everyone must compromise, or everyone can win. The first assumption leads to entrenchment and defensiveness or aggressiveness, so that everybody generally ends up losing. The second leads to everyone's settling for less, so that everyone is a partial loser. Only the third frees creative energy so that an entirely new solution can be built synergistically—a solution that can incorporate the best of all proposals.

The requirements for a creative solution include the following:

- Separate your goal from your proposed solution. There can be many paths to the same end. When we

become overcommitted to our solutions rather than to our goals, the other paths become obscured.

- Listen to and for what others want and need. Ask them what they want and need. Incompatible proposals need not mean incompatible goals, as I have tried to illustrate in the case studies.

- Expect something new to emerge from the search for a solution. We seldom "find" what we are not looking for, but what we get may be even better than what we expected.

- Shift the emphasis from outguessing, outmaneuvering, and persuading to listening, cooperating, and co-creating. The goal is not to get others to say "yes" to your plan, but rather for everyone to say "yes" to a creative solution.

All of this is not to say that the world is devoid of win-lose situations (or even lose-lose situations), that compromise is never viable nor needed, or even that every problem has a good solution. Rather, it suggests that within an organization—which by definition is a group of people who share some common goals—creative conflict management begins with the belief that everyone can win, and with the question, "What do you really want?"

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