

Committees and conflict resolution

The term conflict resolution refers to a set of practices, and a range of values, that are conducive to the solving of problems between people. While some of the values are idealistic, they are firmly attached to real experience. The values and practices of conflict resolution are relevant to each one of us, for we all encounter conflict situations, no matter what our profession or our status. What each one of us must answer, therefore, is not whether this subject interests us, but how well we are responding to the conflict situations in which we find ourselves.

Conflict resolution and complexity

Our need to become better managers of conflict emerges from the age in which we live. The spread of democracy, for instance, is one significant fac-

tor. Consider the difference between a society based on hierarchical values and authoritarian power structures, and a society based on a more egalitarian voicing of opinions. In a hierarchical society, the people in less powerful positions are not permitted to voice their problems: conflicts that are aired are 'solved' by the decisions of those at the top.

Dissatisfaction with the results of such practice has contributed to the changes now underway. With the spread of education has come the ability of the majority of the population not only to perceive what is troubling them, but the ability and the means to say so. There are more voices now, and more perspectives are being expressed. The complexity of modern societies means that several different perspectives may be valid at the same time.

It is not a matter of simply deciding who is right (for there may be no single right answer), but finding ways to ensure that everyone affected by a problem can share in a satisfactory solution. The alternative dispute resolution movement is growing within the legal community and alongside it, as a response both to the perceived limitations of the formal legal system, and in recognition of the fact that not all disputes require adjudication.

The essential findings about conflict resolution are these:

- conflict is inevitable but not inherently good or bad;
- when faced with conflict one can choose whether to ignore it or address it, but in each case there will be consequences;
- whereas some conflicts concern disputes readily resolved through appropriate dialogue, other disputes are in fact deep-rooted conflicts based on more complex issues of identity;
- there is no single best approach to conflict resolution, but any approach chosen must include good listening skills, empathy for the situations of others, assertive rather than aggressive speech and behaviour, and a willingness to resolve.

Some definitions

Disputes and conflict

(1993) has explained that disputes involve negotiable interests, while conflicts are concerned with issues that are not negotiable, that relate to ontological human needs that cannot be compromised. This helps to explain why some disputes cannot be resolved even when taken to the highest courts in the land. A number of years ago a significant article by Felstiner and others (1980) explained how disputes result from the transformation of an unperceived injurious experience into one that is felt (a perceived injurious experience) and acted upon.

In order for disputes to emerge and remedial action to be taken, an unperceived injurious experience must be transformed into a perceived injurious experience. The next step is the transformation of a perceived injurious experience into a grievance. The third transformation occurs when someone with a grievance voices it to the person or entity believed to be responsible and asks for some remedy. (Felstiner et al, 1980)

This helps to explain why some individuals or groups begin to place blame long after the particular incident or

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