

Winter 2008

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## Recommended Citation

Cook, V. S. & Johnston, L. M. "Where Does Conflict Management Fit in the System's Leadership Puzzle?" *American Association of School Administration Journal of Scholarship and Practice* 4, 4; (Winter 2008).

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## Where Does Conflict Management Fit in the System's Leadership Puzzle?

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Superintendents are faced with conflicts every day. The conflicts arise around issues of personnel, community roles, funding, politics, and work/life balance. Good leadership involves an understanding of how to deal with conflict, whom to involve in the conflict resolution, how to set up structures and processes that ensure conflict doesn't reoccur, and the ability to use conflict in a positive manner.

This pattern of solid leadership is required at a time when school systems are easy targets for legislators, the community, parents, and have casually been labeled as a modern day social problem since a "A Nation at Risk" was accepted by president Reagan in 1983 (Bracey, 2003).

In 1995, Kowalski (1995) investigated the conflicting situations that affect the decisions made by superintendents. Kowalski's list included the conflict of resources, values,

education research, counsel from school personnel, socio-economic conditions, school board member opinions, counsel from teachers, community politics, union pressures, and concern for personal success. In a parallel study, Cook (2005) identified similar job stressors that created conflict in the community college presidency.

Skills related to finding resources in financially strapped districts, personnel consistencies, politics at the local and state levels, and the development of board members' efficacy were all noted as necessary for successful leadership tenures.

Superintendents look to current literature to assist with the development of positive conflict resolution skills. These skills are not only preferable for current superintendents, but necessary for positive career development of future superintendents.

Several authors have examined the various types of conflicts that leaders typically encounter. The Sphere of Conflict model, proposed by Moore (2003), offered five types of conflicts: Data, Interests, Relational, Structural, and Values-based. Brief descriptions of these types of conflicts and possible interventions are worth an explanation here.

### **Data-based conflicts**

Moore (2003) has suggested the following definitions regarding these conflicts. Data-based conflicts are those that are caused by lack of information, misinformation, different interpretations of data, different views of what is relevant, or different assessment procedures. Possible interventions in data-based conflicts include deciding which data are important to examine and agreeing on a process of collecting and accessing data.

### **Interest-based conflicts**

Interest-based conflicts are caused by perceived or actual competition, or interests based on content, substantive, procedural, or psychological criteria.

Possible interventions in interest-based conflicts include focusing on the interests and not the positions, agreeing on objective criteria, looking for integrative solutions that meet the needs of all the parties, developing tradeoffs that satisfy particular needs, and mutually searching for ways to expand options and/or resources.

### **Relational-based conflicts**

Relational-based conflicts involve strong emotions, misperceptions, stereotypes, poor communication or miscommunication, and/or repetitive negative behavior. Possible interventions in relationship-based conflicts include controlling expression of emotions through ground rules, legitimizing feelings,

clarifying perceptions, building positive perceptions of the other, improving the quality of communications, blocking negative and repetitive behaviors, and encouraging positive mutual problem solving techniques (Moore, 2003).

### **Structurally-based conflicts**

Structurally-based conflicts are caused by destructive patterns of behavior or interaction; unequal control, ownership, or distribution of resources; unequal power of authority; geographic, physical, or environmental factors that hinder cooperation; and time constraints. Interventions in structurally-based conflicts include defining and/or changing roles, replacing destructive behavior patterns, reallocating the control of resources, establishing a fair decision-making process, modifying the means of one party influencing the other, changing the physical or environmental relationship, modifying external pressures, and altering time restraints (Moore, 2003).

### **Values-based conflicts**

Values-based conflicts are those where people have different criteria for evaluating ideas or behaviors, exclusive intrinsically valuable goals, or different ways of life, ideology, and religion. Interventions in values-based conflicts include avoiding defining the problem in terms of values, allowing the parties to agree to disagree, and creating a super-ordinate set of values and goals for the organization (Moore, 2003).

The value of understanding how these types of conflicts function and occur becomes readily apparent to the observer. Research (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Weick, 1976) has indicated that education organizations tend toward a loose coupling of positions and processes within organizations. This concept of

loose coupling of positions and processes provides a model that limits the connection between the superintendent, the principal, and the teaching staff.

This limited connection allows for natural conflicts to occur. Exploration of these connections allows us to move to the next step toward solving those conflicts and creating the environment for a positive systems leadership approach. In addition, research reported by AASA (Chapman, 1997; Glass, 1992) included a number of stressors that new superintendents identified as significant job indicators. This research indicated specific conflict stressors as similar among the participants including:

1. high visibility
  2. diverse constituencies
  3. employees who were incompetent or charged with sexual assault
  4. pressure from right-wing political groups
  5. becoming acquainted with the district and community
  6. deciding who to trust
  7. lack of people in whom to confide
- (Czaja & Harman, 1997).

As superintendents review interventions for conflicts with which they are faced, it is useful first to determine the type of conflict they are dealing with. Generally speaking, data, interest, and relational conflicts are the easier conflicts to resolve: structural and values-related conflicts often involve an alteration or change in someone's worldview in order to mitigate the dispute.

Drastic worldview changes are very rare and often involve a major event in someone's life. It is more likely in the case of structural and values conflicts that people would come to recognize the validity of the other person's point of view rather than adopt it or markedly change their own.

Each case a superintendent faces will require a different set of tools and interventions. The superintendent should be ready to modify their activities according to the situation.

These modifications will depend on several factors: the extent to which the conflict has enveloped the organization, the timing of the superintendent's involvement, the capacity of others in the system to deal with the conflict, the procedures others have utilized before the problem reached the level of the superintendent, the complexity of the issues in the conflict, media involvement, and which parties need to be involved in the final resolution of the issues.

In viewing the role of the superintendent in the overall school system, it is important to note that the superintendent should structure a systems-leadership approach that will enable conflict to create positive change within the system regardless of the type of conflict.

A strong visionary approach to the school can be examined through a review of specific leadership literature. Rosborg (2003) noted that the problems that beset schools must be approached in a confrontational manner. The canny superintendent will understand that their organizations are constructed of multiple systems that feed into the overall organizational structure.

Knowledge of how to both educate and inform the constituencies of the school district is critical to success. Empowering those at the lowest levels of the organization to handle disputes as they occur will not only increase their effectiveness, but will free the superintendent to deal with the more complex issues facing the school or community as a whole. Specific knowledge of how to handle

various types of conflicts adds to the leader's toolbox and strengthens the skills of all those in the organization. This process will lead to fewer conflicts arising.

Equally important is the superintendent's approach to a work-life balance. Conflict between work responsibilities and a healthy lifestyle are similar to other highly stressful occupations. Accountability to a partner or friend, an example of a possible relationship-based conflict, is necessary to maintain a high level of work-life balance. Mayo Clinic staff (*Work-life balance: Ways to restore harmony and reduce stress*, 2006) provided excellent information on managing a work-life balance that will help manage the stress of a superintendent.

Wheatley (1999) included the concepts of taking stock in one's own place within the universe. This "centeredness" or knowing of oneself will allow the superintendent who may be struggling with work-life balance to find equilibrium. Leaders who effectively deal with work-life balance do not project unnecessary personal stress on to others in the workplace.

In a qualitative study (Durso, 2006), superintendents from two northern California K-12 districts participated in addressing the perceptions of life-work balance and subsequent conflicts identified through the expectations of their careers and their personal lives.

Incongruence between core personal values and expectations of the job performance created an environment in which job enrichment could not occur. Only through the balance achieved between the expectations and the individual's perceptions of core personal values being met was job satisfaction achieved (Durso, 2006).

The correlation of job satisfaction with

actual job performance was not, however, readily identifiable in this study. One conclusion may be to view the job of superintendent as a system. A system built on stratification of approaches to conflicts and perceptions may allow a superintendent to align personal values with the expectations of the position.

Applying a systems thinking approach to the superintendency may suggest a return to the garbage can metaphor of an educational organization (Cohen et al., 1972). This metaphor indicated that educational systems are only loosely connected. Each department or interest group relies on this loose connection to add to the overall perception of connection through disconnection of ideas.

Decisions are made based on assumptions that do not necessarily address a specific problem and may be counter-productive to the overall organization. However, this may be only partially true.

In reviewing the systems thinking process, one must look beyond the educational organization of the past and review the needs and expectations of the educational organization of the future (interest-based). In doing so, we move from the loose coupling concepts espoused by Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) and by Weick (1976) into a tightly interconnected organization defined by systems thinking (Wheatley, 1999), rather than data-based thinking alone.

Sterling (2003) provided extensive research in the area of systems thinking in education. Sterling's work reflected that systems thinking in educational change processes is crucial. Additionally, Sterling concluded that a participative learning environment (values-based) must be present to create a sustainable environment where teaching and learning occur.

Sterling's concerns addressed current assumptions that are held about our education environments that may create internal conflicts as we engage in a systems thinking process, but will inevitably provide an environment where needed change may occur. At the very least, systems thinking will provide leaders with a framework to decide the type of conflict being dealt with and how best to handle the conflict.

Best practices in using systems thinking must include a process of learning for the

organization. Each member of the organization must be introduced to the concepts of both systems thinking and conflict resolution, and learn how each system is interdependent upon the other. Each system and process must be re-engineered to reflect the mission of the school district. Best practices in systems thinking and conflict resolution encourage the development and education of each member of the school community and the accountability of each member toward school success (NCREL, 2004).

### Author Biographies

Vickie Cook's research interests include the effects of intergenerational learning in the classroom and workplace and the effects of literacy on lifelong education. She has published work in *Journal of Postsecondary Leadership* and *NCPEA Connexions*, as well as others journals. She received the 2006 research scholarship grant from the Illinois Council on Continuing and Higher Education for her research exploring Illinois Family Literacy projects. Cook has made numerous presentations at national, regional, and state conferences including 2006 presentations at the Teaching Professor Conference, Illinois Family Literacy Conference and National Association of Secondary School Principals Conference within a Conference. She has conducted leadership seminars for commissions of the Illinois Community College Board, Illinois Adult & Continuing Educators Association, America Association of Libraries, and other educational groups. She is an assistant professor in the department of educational leadership at the University of Illinois in Springfield.

Linda Johnston is the director of the Center for Conflict Management and the masters in science in conflict management at Kennesaw State University. She serves on the executive committee of both Hands Along the Nile and the International Peace Research Association (IPRAF). She administers the Senesh fellowship program for the IPRAF. Her current research interests include racial and ethnic conflict, conflicts in health care, conflicts in sports, narrative and discourse analysis, and world view conflicts. Her most recent work included a year-long fellowship with Hands Along the Nile to develop dialogues between Egyptians and Americans, administering a state department funded grant to develop a peace institute at Tavrishesky National University in Ukraine, worked with the Alternative Dispute Resolution Association of Barbados, and conducted workshops in the Republic of Georgia. Johnston co-authored a report on the viewpoint of employers on the current status of jobs in the field of international conflict resolution and authored a chapter on "Narrative Analysis in Doing Research: Methods of Inquiry for Conflict Analysis" (Sage Publications, 2005).

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