Organizational Systems for Dealing with Conflict & Learning from Conflict

Introduction (Mary Rowe, PhD, for the Bloch, Miller and Rowe articles, Chart and Case)

Ideas about conflict are compelling topics for those of us who in work in organizations. We think about workplace justice, alternative vs. appropriate dispute resolution, and how to help leaders and teams deal effectively with the concerns and conflicts that preoccupy them. We think about *organizational systems for dealing with conflict and learning from conflict.* The present authors prefer this concept to the conventional term "conflict management systems" (CMS) although, for simplicity, we also use the conventional term.

It is not clear to us that all conflict can or should be "managed" — managed by whom? One of the major questions in this series of articles is: who should decide how to deal with a conflict? In particular, the Bloch, Miller and Rowe articles explore *appropriate* dispute resolution within an organization: who determines what is "appropriate" in this complex world, and on what basis?

The need for shared norms in complex cases. Multi-issue, multi-cohort, multi-context, cross-boundary, cross-gender, multi-ideological, multi-cultural, multi-generational, multi-law-regulation-policy conflicts are now common in organizations. Many organizations are also structurally complex. The workforce may work within virtual structures and under widely differing contractual arrangements; employees are of very unequal power, and often do not share norms and values. Organizations now must work hard and consistently if they wish to be effective in teaching values, standards, policies and rules. This work begins with setting standards.

David Miller writes that multi-cultural organizations need *standards of conduct that apply to **all** persons in the organization; the standards should be linked to the mission of the organization; standards are essential when adhering to them is required to accomplish the mission*. Miller writes that standards are required for a workforce to understand what is "appropriate" behavior and appropriate conflict management.

The need for options. *Implementing* standards, policies and rules is not easy in conflict management. In real life it is often ineffective to think about a complaint or conflict just in terms of its "issues," without regard to what the stakeholders want. Different stakeholders seek different ways of dealing with a conflict: some do nothing, some leave the situation, some make matters worse, some seek formal complaint channels, and others seek informal resolution for their complaints and conflicts.

It is a common belief that different issues suggest or require certain specific methods or venues for dealing with those issues. (Think, respectively, about how to deal with criminal behavior, other illegal behavior, offenses against the

organization's policies, offenses against personal values, and the complaints people have with administrative services.) However, despite the common belief that the issue will determine the method of conflict management, in the face of an *actual* conflict or complaint, many employees and managers simply act in accord with their own beliefs, rather than following the apparent norms about how a given issue should be addressed.

In reality, there is *no single, effective way to decide which problems should go to which conflict management options, because people so often vote with their feet*. Both managers and disputants often 1) ignore a complaint or conflict, or 2) think they alone own it, and 3) may want to deal with it in ways that are different from ways that would be chosen by the other stakeholders.

New laws and standards, combined with very diverse values held by people in conflict have, therefore, led to the need for options in conflict resolution and complaint handling. Providing a variety of options in turn suggests the need for a systems approach.

A relatively simple way to think about conflict management options within a system is to define them in terms of dealing with conflict on the basis of *interests, and rights, and power*, (please see the Chart attached). In reality, of course, interests, rights, and power overlap to some extent, within almost all options. And, in reality, all conflict management offices use some interest-based, rights-based and power-based ideas to deal with problems. However for simplicity we will use these rubrics, in discussing elements of conflict management systems.

So, different issues and differing values lead to the need for options, and having options suggests building a system. As it happens, it is not a simple thing to develop a *coherent* system. There is a fundamental issue about "who owns" a conflict or a complaint. Who has the right to choose which option or options to use?

As a first example, a multi-issue, multi-cohort case may present a problem within a systems approach. A given case may seem relevant to many different offices and functions on the Chart attached. Each office might think it should "own" the case, because it appears to "own" one or another of the many issues in the case, and it provides one or more functions relevant to the case.

As a second example, supposing the individuals engaged in conflict do not take the problems to any manager or office on our Chart? Conflict managers and dispute system designers sometimes talk as if "all" disputes might surface into the system. In real life most concerns and conflicts most of the time are addressed by the individuals involved, (or these parties suffer in silence). Resolution by the parties involved may often be a good thing—think for example of a well-functioning team. However, does this mean that in real life individuals

are part of a "conflict management system?" What are the implications for system design?

Design and implementation In his paper, Brian Bloch illustrates the process of designing and building a system "to deal with conflict and to learn from conflict." He records how he added interest- and rights-based options to an organization that previously did not provide those options, in order to meet the needs of individuals and groups. (Bloch, Miller and Rowe in their articles all wryly attest to the fact that this process is often less than elegant and that there is much to learn. Conflict management systems "happen," however much we try to design them.)

As it turns out, taking a "true" systems approach to dealing with conflict within an organization is difficult, for many theoretical and practical reasons. These articles outline some problems in conflict management system design:

• Conflict management systems are difficult for managers and employees to understand. Different managers often feel naturally attuned to one or another option in the system, but various disputants may be drawn to other options. Added to this confusion is the fact that most employees and managers do not understand all the relevant policies and procedures—let alone how each option in the system actually works. Sometimes it is not even obvious which offices would be considered part of a given CMS.

• A system must try to balance the rights and interests of the organization, of its different conflict management offices—and of all the individuals involved in a conflict. These needs are sometimes at odds with each other. (A classic dilemma of this kind is illustrated in the Case attached.)

Mary Rowe discusses the important contributions that an organizational ombudsman—a zero barrier office—offers in dealing with major dilemmas of systems that are meant to deal with conflict and learn from conflict. Indeed, the key role of the organizational ombudsman[1] is discussed in all three of these articles on conflict management system design.

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[1] http://www.ombudsassociation.org/standards/ provides the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for an organizational ombudsman. In these articles we use the term ombudsman for the practitioner and "Ombuds Office" for the office. Like our professional association, the IOA, we respect the use of various forms of these terms.

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