Hiding in Plain Sight: How Mediators Can Build on Employee Efforts at

Managing Conflict

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Background

The study of organizational conflict management systems has traditionally focused on deliberate, formal, organizationally sanctioned changes, as described by Constantino and Merchant (1996). Often, formal processes begin with an analysis of conflict patterns in the organization, followed by the design of a conflict management system to address the problems identified, the requisite members buy-in to the plan, those who will participate are trained, members are informed of the plan and at some point the system is evaluated and fine-tuned (Slaikou, 1998). Although professionals often choose to focus on formal channels for their change efforts, they may be missing a valuable asset in their efforts, the presence of informal processes and how they can help or inhibit change efforts.

Blau and Scott (1962) were among the first organizational scholars to note that organizations comprise both formal and informal dimensions. Their work stressed that the informal character of an organization must be apprehended in order to understand its basic structure and processes. Managers may resolve conflicts at the structural level of an organization, but the results are short term. The deeper processes of the organization, reflected in off-the-record discussions, informal partnerships and coalitions, and work-around processes will continue as before. In a very real way, the organization is like an iceberg, 10% which is formal structure and processes, which exists above the waterline and 90% of informal structure and processes, existing below the waterline.

Pondy (1989) argues that organizational conflict is indigenous and inseparable from the interaction of its members. According to this perspective, managers may try to resolve conflicts by adjusting aspects of those structures, such as reward systems. These efforts are highly visible

but they don't address the deeper level of conflict that exists in and between the organizational members. Other studies have focused on the concept of "employees behaving badly:" such terms as workplace deviance, organizational-motivated aggression, and employee vice emphasize employee activity from management's perspective (Vardi and Weitz, 2004). This study considers what conflict management outcomes are intended by employee behavior, both negative and constructive.

Despite the perspective of organizations as conflict ridden, most studies in the conflict literature focus solely on what managers do publicly to enact and resolve conflict. Kolb and Bartunek (1992) write that the proliferation of publications about organizational conflict is accompanied by prescriptions for managers. However, those scholars find that formal studies were not helpful in helping them interpret or explain their field research. They conclude that there is a gap between prescriptions in the literature about how to handle conflict management and what organizational members actually do about conflict. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) summarize decades of reports about how organizational members address conflict in Britain and the United States. They assert,

> It is consistent and unremarkable that ordinary employees are likely to exercise what modest powers they have in ways that they think fit, and to continue to define their interest and identity as being, in some ways, distinct from those of their employing company (pgs. 2-3).

There is significant merit in professionals focusing their efforts on formal organizational processes. However, informal processes both support the formal processes and fill in the gaps that may exist between desire for change and actual change. In fact, Nader and Todd (1978) point out that many people resist full cooperation in formal processes. They may subtly sabotage

change efforts and fail to implement agreements if they believe that they will surrender power or if the outcome is not perceived as equitable. Though voices of discontent may appear quiet to organizational leaders, voices hidden from these leaders exert a strong pressure on organizational functions though informal processes.

Definitions

Formal processes: Procedures and policies created by organizations to deal with conflict, such as Human Resource grievance procedures, mediation, or REDRESS used by the U.S. Postal Service. These processes tend to be permanent and well defined sets of procedures. Employees are informed about them and encouraged to use them.

Informal processes created by organizational members: Processes created by individuals to deal with conflict. Organizational members (employees or nonprofit volunteers) of an organization, without authorization, behave repeatedly in ways that modify conflict. Consistent responses to conflict result, roles are taken by certain individuals, and members behave as if there are rules for resolving conflict The result of such behavior may be either constructive or destructive. These procedures are known to employees and volunteers but not announced to management.

When feedback to managers or formal organizational systems receives an inadequate response, organizational members may turn to informal tactics to reduce their stress. Kolb (1985) points out that members have incentive to use informal or "masked" processes because they avoid direct confrontation, allow business to proceed smoothly, and preserve relationships within organizational norms. Masked processes can occur in many forms ranging from complaining or gossiping to mobilizing against decisions behind the scene. Chart 1 summarizes three categories of informal processes that commonly occur in organizations.

Chart 1 Informal Tactics

Passive	Confrontive	Private Action
Gossip in groups	Mobilizing coalition	Assuming unofficial role to fix problem
Avoidance	Veiled Threats	Engage in work-arounds
Complaining	Work through agents	Underground information sharing
Non compliance	Tough stance	Private meetings to air differences

The goals of passive tactics are less about changing how things are done and more about enlisting emotional support for perceived inequity. Gossiping or complaining generally draws sympathy from coworkers or confirmation of views that might be viewed as deviant by managers. Avoidance and non-compliance rarely initiates change.

Confrontive tactics may feel like an oxymoron in characterizing informal processes, but some behaviors are designed to be confrontive behind a veil of anonymity. Frequently, members of a staff may deputize one of its members to speak to a leader about decisions they perceive unfair. Working under the veil of a task force can provide hidden resistance. A tough stance against implementation of a decision avoids confrontation with the decision maker, while

mobilizing resistance against the decision. Veiled warnings may suggest caution to a decision maker, but behind the scenes the warnings may be understood as threats.

Private action tactics possesses the twin goals of empowering staff while resolving the conflicts that may be harming organizational effectiveness. This set of tactics looks for informal ways to address problems through information sharing, devising work-arounds, or creating informal agreements that lay outside of normal structured processes. For example, in a large information-processing organization, members created a website for warning employees about disliked leaders or ineffective procedures. Access to the website was limited to a narrow audience. The site provided underground discussion about tension and conflict in the organization and how to handle difficult managers. In work with organizations, the process of informal processes is frequently indicated by staff references to "work-arounds." Employees find unauthorized ways to manage tension in the organizational system.

Bartunek et al. (1992) point out that informal processes may appear irrational to outsiders because they lack the deliberate thinking and planning expected of formal processes. However, to creators of informal processes the tactics will appear the best response at the moment. Emails to colleagues or complaining sessions in the lunch room seek validation in opposition to stress created by change or enlist support for resistance. Speaking to colleagues gives voice to dissatisfaction and creates a sense of power in a situation in which someone might otherwise feel powerless.

Hidden tactics often create hidden coalitions. The presence of these coalitions can become visible during decision making processes when many members join together in expressing resistance to a course of action. Often, staff members in private will not openly oppose one of these coalitions in order to avoid becoming a target.

Employees may be ingenious at devising ways to avoid unnecessary organizational conflicts. For example, senior faculty members in a large urban institution of higher education were tasked with advising students. The Dean asked that faculty call all of their students during the second and third weeks of class to ask them how they were doing. This created tension for faculty with large classes. To counteract what was believed to be a useless policy, many of the faculty met in private meetings to discuss how to handle the problem. The Dean's resistance to feedback inhibited the willingness of staff to openly discuss opposition to the decision. The faculty agreed to accommodate the Dean's expectation, but not through time consuming phone calls. They chose to send emails asking the students how they were doing with classes (Self help tactic). Faculty avoided open conflict with the Dean, who appeared to have no opposition to the practice. It turned out that the Dean was only passing down a policy that was given to her.

Why Do Informal Conflict Management Processes Arise?

In order to better understand informal conflict management processes, we should ask why they arise. The examples below suggest several reasons that employees or members initiate processes on their own. One reason for the emergence of a conflict management system is that formal methods of resolving conflict prove inadequate. For instance, Lipsky, Seeber and Fincher (2003) report that U.S. corporations use ADR processes "on a contingency basis" as opposed to general policy (p. 86). The authors find that while many of the large U.S. corporations have experimented with ADR processes, less than 20% claim to use them frequently or very frequently (p. 83). Formal methods may be nonexistent, unknown to members, or known to be unsatisfactory.

Speaking at the 2006 meeting of the Association of Conflict Resolution (10.27.06), Dr. Lipsky noted the awesome barriers to the institutionalization of formal systems: top management turns over so often that a formal system doesn't have time to become a permanent part of organizational procedures; the costs of a formal system are clear, the benefits harder to determine; there is an absence of benchmarks to designate success; people hesitate to use the system for fear of reprisal. Replying to a question about why formal systems experience strong resistance in corporate settings, Lipsky noted that the tradition of litigation is strong and that some organizational stakeholders are wary of conflict management systems. For instance, Human Resource personnel sometimes see a formal system as an evidence of their failure. Given the lack of success instituting formal systems in corporate settings, observers anticipate that informal methods will prevail.

A second reason for initiating an informal conflict management procedure may be that members find their needs are not being met by the formal organization. In a senior residence community in a large city, the security of residents was supposedly insured by a caretaker on duty 24/7. However, faced with rising costs, building management began to cut back on the caretaker's hours until he was actually part-time; management assigned him tasks that often took him away from the door. As a result, visitors who sought access to the building found themselves standing outside the locked doors for long periods. Both residents and visitors began to complain but facility managers said that they had no intension of hiring a door monitor.

Conflict escalated as residents complained and discussed how they might unite as a group. Initially, there was no response. The seniors changed their tactic to one of self help. Since most of the seniors were retired, they decided to take turns monitoring the door during the day. They kept a list of residents and only opened the door to those with identification and "valid"

reasons for visiting residents. Unfortunately, the self-help tactic failed when one of the door monitors let in someone who did not belong. The manager shut down the processes devised by residents.

However, the story doesn't end here. The conflict once again escalated with complaints about the building manager. One of the residents wrote an anonymous letter to one of the city officials complaining about how residents were being treated (private action tactic). Now, what was hidden became public. The mayor requested that the facilities manager create formal processes to address resident complaints.

Another reason for the occurrence of informal procedures relates to organizational culture. The authors have spent considerable time working in and consulting with church organizations; church conflict is not likely to be expressed openly. It appears that members of congregations are typically reluctant to directly oppose their leader's approach. In a number of religious organizations where the authors have consulted, complaints and disputes are aired "offline," most typically in the parking lots after the meeting when the minister has gone home. This happens so often that, among ADR (Alternate Dispute Resolution) professionals who serve religious organizations, it's known as 'the parking lot meeting.' Informal processes give voice, power, and status to people who lack influence in the organizational structure. Informal processes balance the effects created by structural hierarchy.

Church conflict involves avoidance in other countries as well. A social worker in the Caribbean reports, "If there are complaints to the pastor/priest about a church member who is leading a committee, the pastor typically avoids dealing with the complaint because to do so might require confrontation that might distance or alienate the member. Often the pastor is so busy that he is grateful for anyone who willingly takes over pastoral responsibilities. He might reason that he

cannot afford to lose that person or find a replacement for his leadership and is likely to explain away either the event or its importance" (Nathaniel, 2006). So many activities of churches depend on volunteers; it appears that both members and leaders find informal ways to complain and dismiss conflicts.

Informal approaches also seem to flourish in authoritarian organizations. In one West Indies republic, there are both formal and informal methods of conflict resolution within the Police Department. The formal methods include making an official complaint to an immediate supervisor, approaching the Police Welfare Association for intervention, and disciplinary action. With only such heavy-handed methods available, it is common for officers to manage conflicts through avoidance. Rather than use the public, formal system, officers are more likely to abuse their sick leave, refuse to carry out official duties, such attending court. Arriving late to relieve a disliked officer is not an uncommon way of expressing conflict. There are many requests for transfers and vacation leave. As might be imagined, such passive aggressive behavior does not lead to conflict resolution or healthy working relationships. The police force is known for its internal tensions and negative performance (Rodney, 2007).

In addition, organizational change is happening at an accelerating pace. As members are required to accomplish more, faster, with fewer staff and resources, they search for and identify ways of resolving time-consuming conflict. For instance, one of the authors was conducting training with a federal agency that was tasked with a number of quarterly reports to management. One of the participants complained about the number of hours he had to spend each quarter writing the most burdensome of these reports. Another member of the agency raised his hand, saying, "I haven't filed that report in years—forget it!" In this case, employees had an informal agreement (forget the report) that reduced both intrapersonal conflict for the harassed employee

and interpersonal conflict between him and management. As might be expected, none of those

present continued to file the report.

Finally, organizational members may engage in informal methods to relieve the tedium of

work. It is reported that many instances of computer hacking and the deliberate insertion of

computer viruses were instigated by bored employees. Sprouse (1992) reports that the actions of

such employees, such as putting bubble bath in the water fountain, and cutting wires to the

Muzak system when unwanted songs were repeated. A Toys R Us floor manager manufactured

and sold his own version of Ken dolls: in a clown outfit, whipping a tied up Barbie. Such actions

suggest bored employees are capable of quite unorthodox approaches to the problem of boredom.

Informal processes occur in organizations where members believe that their voices are

not heard or respected by leaders. Informal processes occur when change exceeds ability to

effectively respond, resources are limited, or where leaders are ineffective. In some cases, the

goal of hidden processes may be to reduce tension, relieve boredom, or to improve

organizational effectiveness. In extreme cases, they may serve as the vehicle to undermine

people or processes that are believed to impede accomplishment of organizational goals.

How Do Informal Processes Work?

Member sponsored informal processes are typically organized "under the radar," away

from the eyes and ears of management. For example, a nurse/ADR consultant tells us that in

many health care facilities, employees post information about their organization on the inside of

bathroom stall doors. In a large information management and publishing company, employees

actually publish their own underground newspaper, reminiscent of the clandestine "samizdat" of

Russian dissidents. A human resource professional in the city government of a southern state

reports that when she wants to find out what's wrong in her organization, she asks a smoker. They spend time talking together outside where they are unlikely to be overheard and tend to be a reliable source of information. Information about informal processes in organizations moves through employee networks in a variety of employee-invented ways.

On occasion, informal processes create conflicts in that they pit one organizational goal against another. During 2007, counselors with the National Veterans Association volunteered to help disabled soldiers at Fort Drum in upstate New York write narrative summaries about their disabilities. The help provided by the counselors was so successful that veterans from Fort Drum received a higher level of benefits than at other bases in the United States. However, this informal process was unknown to Army leaders in charge of the budget from which the benefits were paid. During a financial audit, Army leaders discovered that Fort Drum veterans were getting paid more than other veterans and sent in a "tiger team" to figure out why. Once the informal process was uncovered, the Army eliminated discussion of the disabilities by Veterans Administration counselors. In this instance, the goal of reduced expenditures overcame a goal of increasing benefits for disabled soldiers (Shapiro, 2008).

In organizations where management operates in a top-down manner, it is not unusual for informal systems to take the form of passive aggressive behavior of workers toward bosses. In one corporate setting, management applied strict disciplinary measures rather than problem solve with employees involved in a fractious dispute. The unhappy employees slowed down the industrial process and were absent as much as possible. They used avoidance to manage a conflict that management had thought to resolve through "tough action." In the example of the police department given above, similar avoidance tactics were noted. In union settings, such reactions are frequent enough to be named: 'slowdowns' and 'work to rule'.

In other situations, managers may attempt to make organizational changes in more "enlightened" ways and still encounter passive-aggressive resistance. For example, after the passage of legislation prohibiting corporal punishment in schools and institutions, workshops and seminars were offered to childcare providers. The majority of these workers still believed in using force on the children in their care. The informational sessions were not persuasive; the workers seemed to believe that the new measures had stripped them of their authority. In retaliation, they took a "hands off" approach to discipline, simply allowing the children to run wild (Non-compliance tactic). They referred all behavior problems to management. With over 200 children institutionalized in 10 facilities, "the workers' refusal to exercise their responsibilities virtually crippled the organization. In a kind of vicarious rebellion, they used the children's acting out behavior to demonstrate their displeasure (Nathaniel, 2007).

Not all informal systems operate on the basis of passive aggressive behavior. In the political realm, many media commentators have remarked on declining collaboration and growing incivility among national legislators from different parties. Some remember that in the 1980s, Tip O'Neil (a Democratic and Senate President) and Dan Rostenkowski (a Democrat and Speaker of the House) used to end their day by walking over to the White House and sharing a whiskey with President Ronald Reagan (a Republican). The leaders holding these roles found that despite their political differences, better progress in legislation generally, and in good government specifically, were the result of informal conflict management.

Implications for Practitioners

Sometimes ADR professionals are called into situations that are not only "under the radar," but the problem identified by management is inaccurate. For example, a consultant was called into assist with conflict resolution that was described by administrators as racially based. An older

African-American manager of pharmacy was not able to command the respect of his all white, primarily young female pharmacists. The presenting problem was that the female pharmacists hardly spoke to him and took their requests for information directly to physicians in the organization. Bypassing the institutionalized channel of communication created confusion among physicians about who was in charge and whom to contact when they had formulary questions.

Research by the consultant showed that the pharmacists in this most likely to go around their boss were a group of young Pharm Ds (Ph.D. Pharmacists), whose degrees were more advanced than his. As it turned out, the conflict did not have racial overtones, but consisted of a "power over" move on the part of some new employees who either didn't know or didn't care how communications should flow. The system was adjusted partly by privately reeducating the Pharm Ds and giving them a better sense of the organizational culture. For instance, they were informed that no member, especially their boss, was required to address them as "doctor." In this health care organization, as in most medical settings, only physicians are referred to as "doctor." Violation of this cultural rule is one example of the Pharm D's lack of cultural sensitivity and/or exaggerated sense of empowerment relative to their boss. Change was also facilitated by confidential communication between the medical executive and the physicians, directing them to respond only to the manager of pharmacy and not individual pharmacists. Communication began to flow again through the prescribed channels, thereby realigning this unit with organizational culture and sanctioned procedures.

In this example, a few new employees who used their power to change communication systems changed the organization's communication system. This system was beneficial to the small group, but not to the organization as a whole. There was 3rd party intervention between the consultant and the Pharm D group but it was conducted off site and in private. The intervention

consisted of training, coaching, and the redirection of communication so that it was consistent with organizational policy.

Facilitating informal ADR processes involves several key components. Practitioners must be aware of the possibility of informal conflict management procedures and ask questions in confidential interviews to determine whether they exist, and if so, what problems they address and who is involved. As noted in the examples above, managerial definition of conflict will not necessarily be helpful and in some cases be downright deceptive. Interviewing and anonymous feedback from employees will usually surface systems and processes that are operational.

When naturally occurring processes are identified, practitioners may determine that they will be congruent with constructive conflict management. As David Lipsky said, "Informal processes can be the foundations for the design of formal systems" (10-27-2006). The fact that informal processes have spontaneously arisen and continued within an organization suggests that they are compatible with the goals and values of organizational culture. Sensitivity to organizational goals and values will facilitate the interveners understanding of how to build on and expand constructive systems.

Informal systems that are out of alignment with organizational goals may be best addressed in informal, confidential sessions. Those who are perpetuating a disruptive system may need coaching to perceive their long-term interests.

In order for ADR practitioners to be successful, there are several critical prerequisites. First, organizational leadership must be open to recognizing and building on informal processes. It may help to remind the leaders that grievance procedures and human resource interventions are costly in terms of both time and energy. Informal processes are less invasive and often more productive. Second, employees must believe that the environment is safe for open disclosure of

information vital for constructive processes. Informal systems often persist due to the perceived risk of speaking openly.

Third, the ADR professional must identify and support a respected member from an organizational staff to serve as a champion for informal processes. This person can identify key contributors to collaborative processes, model constructive behavior, and communicate insights to those in management. Some groups select a steering committee to surface solutions to problems that will be compatible with formal processes in the organization.

Conclusion

If conflict management processes are lacking or inadequate, employees may address conflicts informally. Without budget, authorization and even awareness of management, frustrated organization members devise processes that attempt to resolve conflict. This study has examined some of the reasons that informal processes arise, who may be involved, and how some of those processes operate. It is an exploratory study, with examples drawn from a variety of organizations. While some trends appear in these varied examples, much more confidence in understanding informal processes may be developed from studying specific behaviors such as "Work-Arounds" and "Work to Rule." Perhaps case studies of individual organizations involving interviews with members who have played significant roles in informal systems would be helpful. Whatever the approach, this is an area of interest, both theoretical and applied, for the field of organizational conflict resolution.

The study has made suggestions for ADR practitioners who may find value in better understanding informal processes. Some such systems do have constructive results and ADR practitioners may build on them to design formal systems that are sanctioned by management. At other times, results are unfavorable, unjust or out of alignment with organizational authority.

Here ADR practitioners will typically do best to counsel individuals with key roles in the informal processes about how to better resolve conflicts.

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