Can We Agree to Disagree? Faculty-Faculty Conflict

Book: *Mending the Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Strategies for Conflict Management in Higher Education*

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What makes academia different?

The academic setting is characteristically different from that of the private sector. Faculty members work much more autonomously and with a great deal of independence, essentially in direct control of their own work environment. In addition to this independence, there is a more team-based approach to setting policies and implementing program changes. Bringing together strong personalities with varying philosophies and expecting them to agree on changes may increase the potential for discord to arise. Add to this the tenure factor. Once a faculty member obtains tenure, the possibility for an incentive to reach agreement with others may be diminished without consequences. In addition, upon receiving tenure, faculty members are more likely to remain at their current universities, thus setting the stage for clashes to become long-standing conflicts. Academia is an environment that strongly values free thought and critical thinking, and can lead to debating differing philosophical stands on issues. Traditionally, this is encouraged; however, it may become disruptive to the operation of a department. Add to this mix the competition between departments for resources and different schools of thought held by individual departments. Within a department, roles may become blurred between research-oriented and teaching-oriented individuals. Whereas in the private sector there is more of a rise to the top hierarchy, in higher education there is more of a rotation through management roles. This affects relationships among department members as the power dynamic and authority figure are ever-changing, thereby distorting roles. While all of these characteristics have the potential to provide a rich environment for academic intelligence, it is easy to see the potential for conflict if eccentric behaviors, hidden agendas, and individual suspicions are thrown into the mix.

The changing climate

The academic climate is changing. What exists now is a loss of predictability about one's job. Budget reductions, which have become a reality, hinder morale and increase competition among faculty members. There exists an increased need for accountability as to workload, which leads one to justify his or her productivity, thus providing the potential for criticizing one another. Threats to tenure and job security are also at stake. Our society has become more bureaucratic in nature with an increase in red tape and inflexibility. The fear of the possibility of litigation exists when trying to resolve faculty-faculty disputes. The student population has become much more diversified, which may present more challenges for teaching faculty. More non-traditional students are present at universities, along with students with physical and learning disabilities that need to be taken into consideration. With increased funding cuts, higher expectations for teaching are placed on research universities. The loss of predictability about one's job and expectations increases the stress faculty members may be feeling, thus decreasing their ability to navigate demanding situations and increasing the potential for conflict with their peers.

Signs of conflict

Berryman-Fink (1998) quoted Anderson, Foster-Kuehn, & McKinney (1996) as defining conflict as a situation arising when interdependent individuals who perceive incompatible goals interact in order to

gain something of value to them (p. 147). If individuals were able to continue autonomously, there would be no reason for conflict to occur. Conflict arises when individuals find themselves needing one another in some way. Berryman-Fink identifies four predictable factors that may cause conflicts:

1. It is human nature to blame others.
2. Those in conflict usually display a strong need to be right.
3. Listening problems are to be expected as communication skills break down.
4. A strong belief in the primacy of reasoning and rational thinking, thus suppressing emotional content.

Dimensions of conflict response

Berryman-Fink (1998) also identified six dimensions about responding to conflict.

1. *Conflict avoidance/conflict involvement*: Some people will avoid conflict at any cost, while others seem to thrive on engaging in conflict.
2. *Hard/soft*: A continuum with one end being aggressive and unyielding and the opposite end being gentle and unassertive.
3. *Rigid/loose*: A continuum from a very established set of rules to use to handle conflict to the other edge characterized by flexibility and improvisation.
4. *Intellectual/emotional*: This continuum runs from being very calm and detached to being emotionally intense.
5. *Escalating/minimizing*: This refers to the tendency to perceive conflict as large with the outcome tied to one's ego vs. lessening the seriousness of the conflict episode.
6. *Compulsively revealing/compulsively concealing*: This refers to how much people share their attitudes or feelings. The continuum is from being open and blunt to avoiding any sharing of emotions.

Dangers of ignoring conflict management

Berryman-Fink (1998) highlights the dangers of suppressing or failing to manage conflict situations. Conflict will probably continue to grow beneath the surface and lead the disputants to avoid one another. In addition, a lack of trust may develop, the frequency of complaints may increase, low morale may be displayed, poor attendance at academic functions may occur, and competition may increase between the parties involved. There may be an increase in absenteeism and use of sarcasm, and productivity in the department may be decreased. It is important that faculty groups recognize the impact conflict can play in their department. Further, by embracing conflict as a way to directly and effectively deal with differences among individuals, it is possible to enhance the workplace environment.

Administrators' roles

It is important for chairpersons and deans to comprehend their role in establishing the workplace environment regarding conflict. They are instrumental in influencing the culture of the groups they lead, and in setting the standard for teamwork and cooperation among faculty members. It is imperative that conflict be resolved through discussion and meeting the needs of the unit over the individual interests involved. A clear message must be sent emphasizing that there is no tolerance for destructive conflict within the unit. Policies must be applied consistently, and it is most important that chairpersons and deans assess the appropriate time for intervening in conflict. In addition, Berryman-Fink recommended

conflict management workshops for faculty, thus providing a framework within which all may deal with conflict.

When to get involved

If administrators must get directly involved with a conflict, it is important that they be conscientious about their information seeking, clarifying, and communicating skills. How do you know when to get involved? Most important, intervene if the disputants are unable to resolve their conflict themselves and if it is affecting the morale of others. Other occasions for intervention would be when the potential exists for students to be harmed or if there are possible litigious consequences.

Strategies for Conflict Management

Berryman-Fink outlined five strategies many institutions use in managing conflict.

1. Informal facilitation
    a. Standard interpersonal communication skills:
        i. Listen well. Be a patient and careful listener.
        ii. Paraphrase statements for clarification.
        iii. Use assertiveness in stating one's goals and question others directly and diplomatically.
        iv. Attempt to build empathy in all parties for other's goals and feelings. Many individuals need to express themselves, feel heard, and believe that someone else understands their view. This can go a long way to diffusing conflict.
    b. Process/Procedure:
        i. Have each party identify the offense/hurt from their own perspective. The facilitator should encourage each party to give objective, concrete descriptions and use careful listening skills.
        ii. Encourage parties to clarify their intentions. This helps distinguish between intentions and desired outcomes.
        iii. Have parties discuss what they wish had happened. This begins to set the tone for understanding and resolution between the parties.
        iv. Assist the parties in focusing on options and offers of resolution.
        v. Summarize the agreements and provide oversight to assure they are carried out.
        vi. Play an important role in modeling and setting the process for conflict resolution.
2. Negotiation
    a. This is characterized as "friendly rivals."
        i. The emphasis is on the exchange of proposals and counterproposals to find a mutually satisfying settlement.
    b. Process/Procedure:
        i. Point out joint decision-making opportunities, with an emphasis on decision-making
        ii. Encourage the use of "we" vs. "you" or "they" language.
        iii. Point out common interests and grounds, thus placing the focus on interests and goals, not on individual positions.
3. Mediation
    a. This negotiation is facilitated by a neutral third party who has no authoritative decision-making power in the conflict.
    b. This person should be a trained mediator.

4. Ombuds Program
    a. This involves a person who is a combination of an informal facilitator, negotiator, and mediator.
    b. This is an independent high-level person whose job it is to receive complaints, question both parties, conduct fact finding, and help parties look at many perspectives in order to generate possible options. He or she makes recommendations and work with disputants to solve the problem.
5. Arbitration
    a. This involves a neutral third party who makes decisions when the parties in conflict cannot reach resolution.
    b. This is a more formal process, but is less involved than a court proceeding.
    c. There are two types:
        i. Binding arbitration: Both the institution and faculty member must abide by the arbiter's findings.
        ii. Advisory arbitration: A recommendation is made by the arbiter, and may or may not be accepted by the parties.
    d. This usually involves hiring an attorney.
    e. Arbitration is not used often in higher education, but may help when all other attempts at resolution have failed.
6. Grievance
    a. Normally, universities have a grievance policy in place, with which department administrators should be familiar because they play a crucial role in the grievance process.
    b. Steps normally include an informal resolution attempt as the first step. If that fails, then an ad hoc committee is appointed to hear the dispute and make a recommendation for resolution.
    c. Faculty-faculty grievances are rare except for areas of sexual harassment, discriminatory behavior, or violation of academic freedom.

As stated earlier, conflict is and always will be a part of academia. It is important that all faculty members feel free to express their opinions and debate issues, ever-mindful of the appropriate way to do so. It is imperative for department chairs and deans to encourage the use of healthy conflict management skills through modeling, educating, and encouraging faculty in the use of appropriate and professional behaviors. For those who display resistant or immature behavior, proper sanctions should be clear and applied as detailed in policy. Disagreement about resources, ideology, and priorities is ever-present. Administrators are encouraged to be familiar with conflict models, in addition to developing skills in how to manage conflicts in an appropriate manner to enhance morale and productivity.

Berryman-Fink, C. (1998). Can We Agree to Disagree? Faculty-Faculty Conflict. In Holton, S.A. (Ed.), *Mending the Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Strategies for Conflict Management in Higher Education* (pp. 141-163). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

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