

## **Supervising Group Conflict** *A Discussion Starter by Cal Brand*

I've had some conflict around this presentation. I felt good about being invited to get this discussion started, and pretty anxious about addressing my peers. And we've had a lot of nice weather lately which has left me conflicted: should I play golf or work on this paper. There is conflict everywhere. Some of it is internal, some relational – as when one person wants to get the gender exclusive pronouns and another wants to stick with traditional language. The root meaning of the word is a clash between persons or objects.

Conflict comes in many forms. It can be **lethal** or **damaging**. It can be **prolonged** or **brief**. It can be **emotional** or **intellectual**. It can be **hostile, sporting, playful, intimidating, clarifying, resolving, or advancing of relationship**. And responses or attitudes about conflict are also quite varied. Some of us can be **oblivious** of conflict, getting right along with business. Others are quite **avoidant**, finding ways of distracting, mollifying or staying clear of conflict. Still others are naturally **wary** of conflict. Some folks manage to be fairly **tolerant** of conflict, while others find conflict **interesting**. I know folk who are **welcoming** of conflict, and, I have actually been accused of **provoking** conflict from time to time. We might propose that it is a good thing to be able to have each of these responses according to different situations, though it is a stretch for me to think that being **oblivious** to or **avoidant** of conflict are helpful responses from a CPE supervisor.

In an organization and a training process that values diversity, we are guaranteed to have many “differences” - differences of opinion, assumptions and expectations, culture, history, and identity, belief, temperament, perceived or real status and power, taste and preference, religious or spiritual conviction, etc., etc. One may choose to ignore differences and thereby try to live in some kind of pseudo-harmony (the antonym for conflict is “Accord”). Or we may try to acknowledge our differences in the interest of some common pursuit – a form of “tolerance.” Or we may increase our capacity for and engagement with diversity through conflict – allowing the shells to be broken open and contents examined.

Before proceeding I want to go way back to the early 70's when George R. Bach and Herb Goldberg published Creative Aggression. They proposed making a distinction between aggression and hostility. Aggression, they said refers to actions taken to impact or have an effect on reality. Hostility, on the other hand, refers to actions taken to hurt or cause damage. Reading this was helpful to me in thinking about conflict. If aggression is intended to impact

or effect someone or something, then it necessarily belongs to a consideration of conflict.

Both “conflict” and “aggression” are words we all have feelings about, and those feelings are crucial to the topic: “Supervising Group Conflict.” As a reader of position papers and member of colleague groups, I frequently hear that one of the supervisor's tasks is to provide a “safe” place in which students can become more effective pastors and learn about themselves. Where does such a goal leave conflict and aggression. If we have a kind of knee jerk reaction that conflict and aggression are dangerous, not safe, then it will create a conflict in us when conflict occurs in a group we are supervising. If we perceive one person as “the villain” and another as a “victim,” we may feel it necessary to intervene.

On the other hand, as a society we are devoted to watching conflict – now it's mostly football. What's that about? Some of us get depressed when the season ends. It occurred to me out on the golf course, that there's a lot of conflict there as well. If two things clashing together = conflict, then every time I strike the ball I'm in conflict, though I seldom have the desired effect on reality. The ball seems to have a mind of its own and seldom displays the effect intended by the impact. And thinking of the love of conflict, what can we say about our present government! O well, there it is.

Bach and Goldberg are helpful in drawing a distinction between what we might call constructive or helpful conflict, and destructive or even violent conflict. I think we could all agree that the latter form of conflict, conflict which becomes violent has no place in a CPE program. This would be an example of Bach and Goldberg's definition of hostility. I can recall only a very few examples of conflict of this sort in a CPE group – but I will come to that later. For now, I'd like to encourage a neutral attitude toward conflict – like most things in reality it is ambiguous. It is a necessary dimension of community formation and group function. More often than not it is helpful, even when it has some aspects that hurt. I found myself thinking about the conflict involved in child birth. For the mother, it appears that the body is in terrible conflict with itself. It is quite painful, but most of the time it is life-giving.

Rules are a means we have developed to reduce or eliminate some forms of conflict. We are most familiar with this while traveling by car. There are a host of rules designed to minimize the possibility of having a clash of vehicles. We also use rules in CPE. Some of these are made explicit during the early days of a group's life. Some are only discovered when an unspoken rule is broken, or there is a threat of violation. For example, we try to reduce the conflict over getting together by making a rule about punctuality, length and place

of sessions. While we may not articulate the rule against physical violence, any suggestion that a physical fight might occur will invoke the prohibition.

Finally, I want to mention that conflict can be a way of avoiding intimacy. Peers and/or supervisor may have one or more “topics” around which there is conflict. However, these are not resolved and live on as a kind of laundry list of things to disagree about if threatened by intimacy.

## GROUP

It is a sign of progress when a group can bear some conflict. In fact, by some definitions, a collection of persons has become a group when, among other things, it can acknowledge and work through conflict. But there are several rather tricky dimensions to the way groups have conflict. For one thing, each member of the group brings her or his own history with conflict. Some will be quite conflict averse having experienced painful and/or abusive conflict in their family or schooling. Some will actually enjoy a good fight, the way my 10 year old playmates and I used to get into wrestling matches each afternoon in Roger's front yard as we left the school bus. And some of us grew up in homes where there was a lot of conflict but little damage done. It was the normal way our families got along. Others will bring a mixed history and neither seek nor avoid conflict.

In the group we as supervisors have to be prepared for difficulties when conflict, or the threat of conflict emerges. Hopefully, we have identified any students who will have an especially difficult time with conflict and developed strategies for helping these students feel safe enough to remain present – if not enthusiastically engaged.

I recall my second unit of CPE. Being a person who learns a great deal through the clashing of differences and rather enjoys conflict, I found a great playmate in the person of Dan DeArment. Though older and farther along, he loved to argue at least as much as I did. Our peers put up with us most of the time, though once in a while someone would join in the fray or tell us to *give it up*. Our supervisor, Bernie Pennington, was a pretty introverted guy who relied heavily on extended observation and brief comments. He basically just let Dan and me go at it till we tired and/or sometimes got something resolved.

Culture diversity also affects how groups deal with conflict. While the reasons and intentions vary, students from some cultures feel bound to avoid conflict. I recall the first unit I observed as an S.I.T. One of the peers was from Hong Kong. He wore such a placid and

composed facade that about midway through the unit, one of his peers, George Fitchett, confronted him saying, “I don't have a clue what's going on with you. When I meet you in the hall I don't know if you'll offer me a piece of candy or pull a knife.” This led to an awkward and difficult conflict as the others offered agreement and the Asian student attempted to explain that in his culture it was necessary to present a calm, well controlled countenance. While he never became a Zorba in expressiveness, he did make the effort to be more present to his feelings. In this case, the supervisor-in-training, Jerry Johnson, intervened on behalf of the Asian student, damping down the frustration of the others while drawing out the student from Hong Kong.

Sometimes the supervisor is the focus of conflict and this presents even more and different dynamics for the group. Some peers will feel threatened to see cross-generational conflict. Others will be overjoyed and vicariously join the fight. How the supervisor negotiates this situation will inevitably serve as a model for how conflict is dealt with in the peer group. Recall the TA *parent-adult-child* model and consider that some of us learned conflict is OK with same generational others, but not with cross-generational others.

I have noticed, as I am sure many of you have, that at the end of the unit when evaluations are shared, it is quite common for them to express appreciation and even gratitude for experiences of conflict. For the most part, these same individuals would not have listed “experiencing conflict” as one of the things they were looking forward to from the unit. In fact, some who have heard CPE tales from others will begin with apprehension that there will be conflict.

I have also noticed a difference in how conflict is viewed and experienced according to completed CPE. SESs are far more comfortable with conflict than first unit students. In fact, what we would call Level II students and SESs seem ready to practice engaging in conflict as part of their learning, while introductory students tend to avoid conflict wherever possible.

## SUPERVISOR

Of course, the supervisor is part of the group and contributes to the group's capacity for working through conflict – or not. There are many differences among us – age, gender, culture, training, and personal history. As noted above, I am inclined to appreciate conflict and at times even provoke it. For others of us, conflict may be viewed as a distraction from addressing learning goals like *cereal box battles when its time to get ready for school*, or as

as potentially dangerous. We may understand that conflict is one of the paths to intimacy, but we may be as ambivalent as our students about going there. Then, there is always the possibility of vicariously appreciating someone else's conflict. We probably all do this sometimes – we wish a particular student would be confronted about this or that, then lo and behold, one of the peers does just that. Students are quite gifted in sniffing out what might please us.

It does seem to me that it's part of our task to prevent vicious conflict. I can only recall one experience after which I felt this had occurred. It was a committee appearance for admission to supervisory training. Without going into details, we, the committee, became almost like a pack of dogs smelling blood as we challenged this man. Someone should have intervened, but that didn't happen. The applicant was quite discouraged and confused by what had happened to him. Even after forty years, I still feel regret about that experience.

Many of us have heard stories of CPE in the early days when in some centers “group therapy” was a regular part of the program. Many of those stories are replete with accounts of *grillings* and *hot seats*. This was still part of the CPE environment in the 60's when I was an intern. I am thankful that I never suffered such invasive conflict.

I have been saved by conflict frequently over the years. When I went to meet the committee for Acting Supervisor in 1971 I had no idea what to expect. Unfortunately, I got pretty quickly into my head – I could usually hold my own in an intellectual discussion. Then, out of the blue, Vern Flesner remarked, “he must have gotten lazy at some point and sent in his hand written notes.” Well, “lazy” touched a hot button and I moved out of my head and into some good, angry energy. The process warmed up and we were much more engaged after that challenge. Conflict was my helper.

I recall the first and only time I had to leave my seat to interrupt conflict that seemed about to become physical. It was in my first full time summer group in Chicago. We had two students from each of two seminaries and a third from another. The two pairs were ride-sharing, and incidentally, de-briefing their experiences of the day. The group was so flat and placid I got curious and asked why they seemed to have so little business with one another. One of them explained their travel arrangements and conversations. We made an addition to the group covenant that these discussions would cease – group business would stay in the group. Within a week, two from the same seminary were in a terrible conflict – I don't remember the subject. Suddenly they were both on their feet, glaring at one another with

clenched fists. At that point I got to my feet and told them to sit back down. Fortunately, they did so, and after a few deep breaths they began to work through their differences in a way that turned out to be healing.

And I can only recall one time that a student threw a chair. This time the conflict was essentially internal to the student. She had made some halting attempts to tell the group about a particular struggle she had with being self-disclosing. Just before she got to the point of sharing the abuse she had experienced as a 10 year old, she stood, grabbed her chair and hurled it into the far corner. We were startled to say the least. After the outburst she seemed near collapse. One of her peers collected a chair for her and I asked her where we should go from here. With tears and a quavering voice she said she had gone as far as she could for now, but hoped she could finish one day. She received support and encouragement from her peers and the seminar ended.

I already knew where she was going. After several attempts in individual supervision, including a couple of scary hyperventilation experiences, she had disclosed the whole, awful story to me. She was convinced that this terrible secret from her family had been a principal barrier to her having intimacy with others, and she was determined to work it through with her group. I believe that the group's acceptance of her anger and pain in throwing the chair was a great help in allowing her to eventually achieve her goal.

Well, these were fairly dramatic examples of supervising group conflict. Over the years there have been countless small, less scary conflicts in groups I have had the privilege of supervising. Some possible orientations to conflict would include observing with interest - observing impassively - joining with one "side" or the other - refereeing - joining with your own agenda - interrupting to defer - interrupting to end - interrupting to clarify - shaming - silencing the voices - encouraging - inviting wider participation - rising from chair - calling security. I believe I have been, to some extent, "de-sensitized" to conflict and come to view conflict as just one of the several ways people relate. As with other ways of relating and engaging, I believe the most effective strategy is to be a companion on the journey, to stay present, expectant, and not alarmed.

This de-sensitization has not numbed my emotional awareness. I typically "feel" conflict before actually seeing it out in the open. Sometimes the feeling is one of excitement, some times dread. I don't like to see others struggle or experience pain, but so long as the conflict remains a part of working through differences, or trying to be understood, or naming

an elephant on the table; and is not driven by a desire to hurt, demean, or scapegoat, then I try to be a reliable and trustworthy mid-wife. When the baby screams, we have new life.