Engaging Conflict & Building Consensus

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Why is this relevant to enrollment officers?

• Our institutions are complex
• We are the “hub” of a multi-spoke wheel (AACRAO, The Registrar’s Guide, Ch. 3)
• We know more stakeholders than the average departments on campus.
• We understand the big picture of university academic governance.
Three Types of Conflict Most Often Facing Universities

• Interpersonal – conflict is *dyadic* which means it’s two people in tension with each other.

• Intra-organizational – conflict between people and entities within a nominally cohesive unit where there are structures, rules and regulations.

• Social Conflict – conflict involving distribution of power and resources; inequality; resistance.
Approaches to Conflict

• **Avoidance**
  • Quick
  • Avoids confrontation
  • Breeds resentment
  • Breeds apathy
Approaches to Conflict

• **Accommodation**
  • Can breed resentment
  • Can breed apathy
  • Can compromise values
  • Can violate policies or best practices
  • Get “steam-rolled”
Approaches to Conflict

- **Go-It-Alone**
  - Challenge in complex organizations
  - Depends on power structure
  - Risks relationships
  - Risks Preemption by superiors
Approaches to Conflict

• **Compromise**
  • Can be zero-sum (fixed pie)
  • Requires concessions
  • Everyone feels like a *loser*
  • “Let’s just come up with something that makes *nobody* happy.”
Approaches to Conflict

- **Collaboration**
  - Allows open communication
  - Non-competitive
  - Partnership
  - Usually protects relationships
  - *Takes time!!!*
Elements of Conflict

• Party (Parties)
  • People or groups with “skin in the game”
  • Individuals
  • Departments
  • People high
  • People low
  • For complex conflict, many parties; not always recognizable
Elements of Conflict

• **Issues**
  • Things over which people have differences
  • Concrete
  • Identifiable
  • Examples: policies; procedures; personnel; budgets
  • More examples: facts; methods; goals; job descriptions
Elements of Conflict

• Positions
  • Definable perspectives
  • Usually explicit and concrete
  • Familiar to people (usually no surprises)
  • Often measurable
Elements of Conflict

• **Interests**
  • Fundamental things that matter
  • Can be abstract
  • Typically undergirds positions
  • Not immediately transparent
Positions versus Interests

Positions
• “This method is tried and true.”
• “Not our job.”
• “The policy says ________.”

Interests
• consistency
• equity
• autonomy
• respect
• belonging
• protecting relationships
Interplay between *issues* and *relationships*

• Issues and relationships interact to influence our approach to conflict.

• The more we strive to protect relationships, and de-emphasize issues, the less we will “go to the mat” about something.

• The more we care about issues at the expense of relationships, the more we’re willing to compete, and “win at all costs”.

• If we place a high value on relationships and issues, *collaboration* is essential.
What to do about it?

Negotiate…Strategically!

It’s “just” a problem that needs to be resolved!

• **Strategic communication process**
  • Strategic – thoughtful; predictable; planned; cautious
  • Communication – information-sharing; transparency; oral; written
  • Process – structured; predictable; focused; goal-oriented
How to move forward?

• **Strategic Negotiation Process options**
  • Dictatorial – not much negotiation; communication is guarded

  • Evaluative – people share wisdom; results in transparency; maybe white paper.

  • **Facilitative – let stakeholders drive the outcome**
Process-Based Consensus Building (Facilitative)

- Roles of a facilitator/moderator/mediator
  - Discussion convener
  - Active listening
  - Creating curiosity
  - Educating
  - Optimist
  - Negotiation coach
  - Role model for constructive dialogue/discussion
  - Translator!
  - Process protector
  - Scapegoat?
  - Guardian of the solution
Process-Based Consensus Building (Facilitative)

- Convene
  - Are you in the right position? Do you have stature? Be assertive; don’t breach your swim lane.
  - Identify stakeholders
  - Manage expectations
    - Identify problem/concern
    - Announce desire to resolve
    - Plan a meeting
  - Draft an agenda with input
  - Share agenda in advance
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Possible agenda items
  • Current policies/procedures
  • Past practices
  • How we got to where we are today
  • “Industry” standards
  • Financial implications
  • Personnel implications
  • Roles/responsibilities (past and present)
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Opening
  • Make sure everyone knows everyone
  • Build capital
  • Be assertive
  • Set ground rules
  • Make sure all possible stakeholders are involved
  • Follow your agenda and keep control of the agenda [Don't debate the agenda.]
  • GO!
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Communication
  • Move through your agenda; describe the agenda item (issue?), collect feedback, and gather input.
  • Air out the laundry!
  • Take notes
  • If everyone seems to have an opinion, go around the room and give each person a finite time limit. [Nobody speaks twice until everyone has spoken once.]
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Communication
  • Reframe issues
  • Identify interests (out loud)
  • Watch for misunderstanding, and name it!
  • Identify options
  • Separate the identification of options for the selection of options
    [Brainstorming!]
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Negotiation
  • Seek agreement where it exists.
  • Agree on broad interests; then narrow the issues to pinpoint sources of dispute. Park it and move on.
  • Flesh out options
  • Ask questions like a counselor! (How, What, “Say more about…” “Explain…” “Let’s discuss…” “What if?” Why not…?”)
  • Highlight the “fallback” solution.
  • Get it on paper
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Powerful questions (for escalated conflict)
  • How could we have handled this better?
  • What did I contribute to creating this conflict?
  • What does this situation ask me to let go of or accept?
  • How would it be possible for both of our versions of what happened to be correct?
Process-Based Consensus Building

• “Zinger” questions [USE WITH CAUTION!]
  • What have you done to create the very thing you’re troubled by?
  • What is the refusal or “no” that you’ve not yet communicated?
  • What are you holding on to that is now time to release?
  • What is the resentment you’re holding on to that the rest of us don’t know about?
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Written Agreements and Resolutions
  • Use single-text negotiating
  • Use written resolutions
  • Use iterative processes
  • Keeps people from saying, “But I thought we said…?”
  • Should be functional and workable
  • Should guide operational staff
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Reaching Consensus
  • “A consensus agreement is one that all stakeholders participating in a consensus building process can accept.” (S. McKearnan & D. Fairman, Ch. 8, Consensus Building Handbook)
  • Not about “happiness”
  • “What can you live with?”
Process-Based Consensus Building

• Closing
  • Can you live with this?
  • Polish the written agreement/resolution
  • What if it falls apart? Contingency plan.
  • Reconvene if necessary.
  • Plan to start over, if necessary.
Process-Based Consensus Building

Recap of process
1. Convene
2. Open Discussion/Overview of Problem and Process
3. Communication/Exchange of ideas
4. Negotiate Issues
5. Close the Process

- Separate the **people** from the **problem**
- Focus on the **interests**, not **positions**
- Look for “mutual gain” solutions
- Agree to use objective criteria to solve a problem.

- Core concerns (interests?) that stimulate emotion and create conflict
  - Appreciation – “They don’t even notice me.”
  - Affiliation – “I’ve been cut out.”
  - Autonomy – “That’s my job.”
  - Role – “What am I even here?”
  - Status – “I know all about this; why don’t they ask me?”
Final gems of advice

• Prepare, prepare, prepare
• Don’t rush
• It’s not about what makes people “happy”
• Help people save face
• Process and relationships are at least as important as content.
• Separate the *identification* of options from the *selection* of options. [Give people freedom to brainstorm.]
• Ask hard questions
• Protect confidentiality
Final gems of advice

• Make sure everyone’s interests are accepted as legitimate and acknowledged

• Openness, authenticity, and appreciation are better foundations for communication than secrecy, rhetoric, insult, and demonization.

• Avoid condescension in yourself and oppose it in others

• If necessary, get help!
  • Faculty expertise?
  • HR Department
  • Outside consultants
Let’s Practice!

NOW WE ALL NEED TO BECOME A LITTLE MORE OPEN WITH EACH OTHER
Questions?

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