

## Why Leaders Should Encourage Conflict, Part I

Two students in a heated exchange that escalated to aggression, a parent complaint about a teacher who spoke 'rudely' to her child, or a faculty member who was gossiping about an administrator she didn't like- the most undesirable aspect of most school leader's day. So why in the world would we want more of it?

Navigating conflict among students and faculty is a most critical task facing school leaders today. Done poorly, the result can be adverse impact on school culture which ultimately erodes the organizational health of the school. Done well and it can be an essential building block for student success and a strong school climate.

Few school leaders are taught the complex dynamics of constructive differencing, the art of leaning into conflicts as an exploration of differences. Instead, we tend to sublimate disputant's energy through traditional conflict resolution strategies that endanger deeper rifts, rifts which have even been linked to catastrophic school violence.

As leaders of learning communities, we have a responsibility to keep the school safe and to prepare students in an era of lower frustration tolerances, decreased ability to delay gratification, and fewer skills to deal with conflict than ever before. This doesn't mean however subduing quickly each conflict that arises because of time limitations. In the long- run we will save time by creating a culture that deepens conflict in a way that promotes learning about oneself and others.

The instinct of school leaders including classroom teachers, may be to divert conflict, either feeling ill prepared or not having the adequate time/resources to engage. This is antithetical however to the mission of any learning institution, whose very nature is to stimulate differences in opinion, theory, philosophy, feeling, attitude, and action. Contrasting differences forms a foundation for learning, so long as we explore intentionally and constructively.

So how do we apply this sensible construct to the completely aggravating disruption of your time from two adults on your faculty who can't agree on the use of a projector? You become aware of the dispute because students and faculty are talking about it, and you beside yourself that two adults can't figure this out on their own. After you take an exasperated breath, recall that what conflicts are about and how they are navigated are both instrumental for strong school culture.

## **Why Leaders Should Encourage Conflict, Part II**

Differencing is important because it directly impacts how we get our needs met and consequently the threat to not having those needs met. The fear around not getting our needs met (love, belonging, fun, freedom, safety, etc....) will influence the way we negotiate with others, and forms the basis of our identity. If basic needs aren't being met, we learn to expect less from the world, resulting in compromised learning.

Differencing also involves the ability to be discerning and critical around new information. We want students to chew their food before swallowing, the same way we expect them to consider data before assimilating. Contrasting ideas is the way students learn how to accomplish this feat, both internally and externally with others.

Negotiation around our needs and deliberation of ideas requires the skills of conveying and receiving information about ourselves or the world, with curiosity and acceptance. On both a thinking and feeling level, we require conflict to explore differences, to appreciate the way we have come to perceive, understand, or experience something in the hope of expanding our myopia. If the teacher from the Part I example realizes they were being selfish not out of greed, but out of fear, they will better appreciate their choice to behave.

One of the significant barriers to be able to negotiate (needs/feelings) or deliberate (ideas/data) is how secure we feel as a person. Depending upon the safety of the environment we live and work in, our comfort as a unique person, and the depth of our affiliations, we may tolerate the risk that comes with being on the outside looking in.

Learning how not to be threatened by differences promotes depth of relatedness and learning. The capacity to tolerate the distress of being unlike others is the driving force for cliques, subgroups, and even gangs who all thrive on sameness. Promoting an increased tolerance for distress and a sense of curiosity are two of the essential ingredients in constructive differencing.

If we return to our two feuding teachers who each want the projector, we want to consider why each has resistance to being 'wrong'. Both are adamant about their rightness, unwilling to yield for fear of not getting their needs met. As a leader, we will find instant success in helping them access this fear or at least recognize the importance of feeling safe.

## **Why Leaders Should Encourage Conflict, Part III**

When leaders position themselves as judge and juries, making decisions based on who is right, they risk creating more complex problems. It may seem more expedient finding solutions or promoting resolutions, hastening a return academics, but in actuality, it creates larger problems. Resolving disputes

by mediation is risky, unless we are familiar with the dynamics of conflict and organizational change, and how a resolution will work both short and long term.

Mediation is risky because we invariably lend our own judgment to the equation. People can easily sense when we are aligned with or against them, sometimes applying past experiences and even paranoia to this formula. Mediating tends to be topical and outcome focused, meaning that little learning is taking place, substituted for immediacy of tension relief. Now we have two disputants who not only judge one another but the outcome and the person doing the mediating.

As leaders, we learn to recognize judgment as a topical way of relating that keeps people insulated. If we remove judgment, we will help those in conflict focus on their process as opposed to outcomes. We prevent ourselves from aligning based on who seems righter to us, maintaining our focus on how as opposed to what they are negotiating. By removing judgement, we also lessen the risk of producing winners who gain power and losers who cry favoritism and fantasize about retaliation. Now we avoid the polarizing effect of taking sides, the biggest pitfall of most school leaders.

Lastly, you want to be aware of what conflict stirs up for you. If you grew up in an environment where conflicts were squashed, someone was overpowered, coercion was a primary tactic or fear an avoidance were common- then your role as a facilitator will be influenced by these old scripts and the role you took on when you were young. Reflecting upon your own comfort/discomfort with conflict will tell you where work is needed to help you be a more constructive facilitator of differences.

Leaders that model and encourage 'constructive differencing' as a mode of conflict, will create strong cultures where faculty stay longer and students learn more. There may be no single issue which is more vital to the creation of safe schools than this one, as it ties so closely to social/emotional growth as well as intellectual development.

Now, thanks to you as an encourager of meaningful conflict, the two teachers took ownership of their actions by realizing their needs, and there was no more projecting.

At TeacherCoach, we focus on blending personal growth with professional development, as work on these two areas will create a more whole educator. For more in depth exploration of constructive differencing, take a listen to this podcast: <http://janebluestein.com/2012/constructive-differencing-with-dr-jared-scherz/>