Increasing Advisor Effectiveness by Understanding Conflict and Conflict Resolution

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On a daily basis, advisors encounter various types of interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. Through this article, the reader will better understand conflict, its positive and negative impacts and the approaches of the actors experiencing conflict, and the means whereby conflicts arise, escalate, and come to resolution in advising situations. Particular emphasis is placed on describing the neurology of conflict escalation and de-escalation. Practical tips for seeking resolution in stressful encounters with students are included within the discussion of de-escalation processes.

KEY WORDS: life skills, stress management, student anxiety, tools for advising

Introduction

> "To attain interior peace, one must be willing to pass through the contrary to peace."
>
> —Swami Brahmanada (2005)

"You're suspended." As any academic advisor speaks these words, the tension experienced by both the advisor and the student escalates dramatically. The events immediately following such a conflict event, however, are far more significant than the event itself. The advisor's response to the rising tension could determine whether the student commits to overcoming this destructive challenge to his or her self-esteem or chooses to disengage entirely from pursuing an education.

Fortunately, such intense life-altering encounters are not experienced on a daily basis by most advisors. However, milder forms of conflict are encountered daily. Students often come to advisors when they experience difficulty in completing assignments, interacting with instructors, deciding on a major or career, or in understanding and interacting with the academic bureaucracy. Any of these conflicts can greatly influence a student's decision to remain in school. Furthermore, these issues sometimes create conflict between the student and the advisor.

Rather than becoming an actor in the conflict, the advisor most often becomes a mediator of intrapersonal conflict or conflicts between the student and the institution or its representatives. As a consequence, advisors must acquire a basic understanding of conflict and conflict resolution. They need to have a clear understanding about the definition of conflict, an awareness of both the positive and negative affects of conflict, the role of perception in determining the type of conflict that is experienced, the neuroanatomical foundation of conflict, and the means whereby negative conflict may be reduced. Once this level of understanding is attained, advisors are more able to utilize conflict resolution methodologies effectively to foster learning and growth in themselves and their students.

What is Conflict?

To understand and resolve conflict, one must first understand the definition of conflict. For many, the word *conflict* connotes a negative encounter that arises from a disagreement between individuals or a person's dissatisfaction with others or the environment (Costantino & Merchant, 1996; Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001; Litterer, 1966; Schein, 1992; Smith, 1966). However, definitions that focus on the negative aspects of conflict are rarely useful because they create a perception that conflict should be avoided. In addition, these definitions often limit conflict to interactions experienced between people or between people and the environment; in these cases, intrapersonal conflict, which is the type experienced within the student and one of the most significant forms experienced by advisors, is overlooked.

Rahim (2001, p. 16) defined conflict as "an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organization, etc.)." While this definition still places some emphasis on the negative aspects of conflict, the words *incompatibility* and *dissonance* provide a more neutral description of the term. In addition, this definition encompasses a wide variety of conflicts including process and person-environment dissonance as well as intrapersonal conflict. Thus, this definition can be applied to any situation in which students' expectations do not match reality or in which students perceive the existence of barriers to their goals or desires. This scope is an important feature of the definition because "one of the major causes of 'people problems' in families and organizations is unclear, ambiguous, or unful-

filled expectations" (Covey, 1991, p. 202). Assisting students to acquire clarity, overcome ambiguity, and address unfulfilled expectations is a major part of an advisor's daily work. Hence, many advising situations are naturally characterized by this definition of conflict.

Positive and Negative Impacts of Conflict

As Costantino and Merchant (1996, p. xiii) declared, "Conflict is like water: too much causes damages to people and property; too little creates a dry barren landscape devoid of life and color." Hence, conflict is a necessary and "normal human condition that is always present to some degree" (Schein, 1992, p. 72). "The point is not to avoid conflict completely, but to resolve disagreement and resentment before it spirals into an out-and-out fight" (Goleman, 1995, p. 266).

A large body of research has confirmed the positive impact of certain types of conflict (Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997). As a result of these and other similar studies, conflict is often classified by its beneficial or detrimental outcomes. Conflict that has been found to have a positive influence on performance is referred to as *functional* (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001), *substantive* (Rahim, 2002), or *constructive* (Swenson, 2000). Conflict resulting in negative outcomes is described as *dysfunctional* (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2001) or *destructive* (Swenson, 2000).

The identification of conflict as either *affective* or *A-type*, or *cognitive* or *C-type* has been another common method for distinguishing different types of conflict (Swenson, 2000). Unlike the outcome-based classification systems, the proponents of the typology method focus on the different ways individuals respond to conflict.

Affective conflict involves an emotional response "rooted in anger, personal friction, personality clashes, ego, and tension" (Swenson, 2000, p. 218). As a consequence, it is has been found to impact negatively both group and individual performance (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Jehn, Chadwick, & Thatcher, 1997), cooperation (Amason, 1999), decision making (Swenson, 2000; Tjosvold, 1993), cohesiveness (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Swenson, 2000), loyalty (Rahim, 2001), commitment (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Rahim, 2001; Swenson, 2000), satisfaction (Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Rahim, 2001), and resiliency (Rahim, 2001).

Contrariwise, persons experiencing cognitive conflict exhibit a depersonalized, rational approach (Swenson, 2000) and seek to "separate the people from the problem" (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991, p. 17). Cognitive conflict typically "consists of argumentation about the merits of ideas, plans, and projects" (Swenson, 2000, p. 218). Researchers have found that this type of conflict is directly related to improved decision making, commitment, individual and group performance/productivity, satisfaction, and cohesiveness (Jehn, 1995; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Rahim, 2002; Swenson, 2000). In addition, positive conflict facilitates learning and change (Rahim, 2001, 2002; Senge, 1990; Tjosvold, 1993; Trenholm & Jensen, 2000). However, even these positive aspects of conflict can be neutralized by the existence of, or a shift toward, affective conflict (Amason, 1999; Jehn & Chatman, 2000; Rahim, 2002).

For advisors, an awareness of these positive and negative types of conflict is critical. Armed with this knowledge, advisors can recognize the difference between cognitive and affective conflict and learn how to manage both. They can also learn to recognize and respond to the need, at times, to instill conflict into an advising or administrative situation; for example, lack of conflict can create groupthink and negatively affect decision making. Finally, advisors can maintain an accurate perception of the role of conflict in counseling students, relating to coworkers, and administering programs.

Conflict and Perception

Maintaining an accurate perception of the role of conflict is critical for advisors because, as Fisher et al. (1991, p. 22) explained, "Conflict lies not in objective reality, but in people's heads." In other words, the paradigms, perceptions, or mental models that one has about conflict and conflict situations influence how one responds in potentially difficult settings. In fact, change in perception regarding the nature of a conflict has been documented as a major dynamic of the escalation and de-escalation cycle (Thomas, 2000, p. 236). This is because mental models "shape how we act. [For example] if we believe people are untrustworthy, we act differently from the way we would if we believed they were trustworthy." Therefore, if a student's mental models lead the student to believe that she or he is being threatened, the student's brain instigates a stress response (Khoshaba & Maddi, 2003; Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999). This response is more likely to trigger an emotional (affective) reaction than a cognitive reaction. This is true even if other people involved perceive the situation in a constructive manner because each person has a different threshold regarding conflict (Ferch, 1998; Rahim, 2002).

As a consequence, advisors must not only be aware of their own perceptions in conflict-laden situations, they must also be aware of and be sensitive to the perceptions and threshold levels of the students with whom they are working.

Awareness of mental models is derived from understanding their origins and knowing how to access them. Mental models are partially rooted in one's experience (Hodgkinson, 2003; Stone et al., 1999). Squires and Kandel (2000, p. 167) explained, "We feel a particular way about a kind of food, a place, or some supposedly neutral stimulus like a tone because of the experiences we have had in association with particular foods, places, and tones." Thus, one's past experiences with conflict in one's family, work and school settings, the media, and so forth will partially determine one's responses (Hodgkinson, 2003; Tunnicliffe & Reiss, 2003). Some additional sources of mental models include implicit rules learned about processes (Stone et al., 1999, p. 34) and genetics (Weber, 2003).

When advisors understand the background and experiences of students with whom they work, they are better able to assist these students when they experience conflict. A positive history of interaction with a student also creates a better environment for dealing with large conflicts that the student may subsequently face.

The Neuroanatomy of Conflict

Howard (2000, p. 388) explained that "one's perception of an event or situation as goal deterring is crucial in determining its actual effect as a stressor." Once the situation is perceived as a stressor, the person may feel either fear or anxiety. While these two responses are defined differently—fear refers to "actual or threatened dangers" whereas anxiety infers "imagined or unreal dangers"—the neurological responses are similar (Howard, p. 388).

According to researchers, fear and anxiety take two separate pathways through the brain (Goleman, 1995; LeDoux, 1996, 1997; Squires & Kandel, 2000). The first pathway involves a shortcut from the thalamus to the amygdala (Jensen, 1998). The amygdala is a simple structure, and according to Wade and Tavris (1996, p. 380), it is "responsible for evaluating sensory information and quickly determining its emotional importance." Hence it is largely responsible for one's conflict perception (Davidson, Putnum, & Larson, 2000).

The pathway from the thalamus to the amygdala is shorter than the second pathway through the cortex. In the shorter route, "signals reach the amygdala quickly and alert the fear system while the cortex is still evaluating them" (Squires & Kandel, 2000, p. 168). This rapid response initiates the body's sympathetic system so the person can respond quickly to the perceived threat.

While the amygdala is enacting this immediate, reflexive response to the perceived threat, the cortex is evaluating the same information more slowly and thoroughly so the person can evaluate the reality of a threat. If no threat is perceived, the cortex signals the amygdala to reverse the stress response and the individual begins to relax. If the mental models stored within the cortex confirm the existence of a threat, the cortex signals the amygdala to continue to prime the body for fight, flight, or freeze (Howard, 2000; Jensen, 1998).

Because the anger response is conducted primarily along a similar neural pathway as is fear and anxiety, when a body is in fight mode, the anger joins fear and stress as an ally in the escalation of conflict (Berthoz, Blair, Le Clec'h, & Martinot, 2002; Davidson et al., 2000; Robbins, 2000; Stuart, 1993). As a consequence, when a student becomes stressed or feels threatened, the amygdala sends out emotional signals that, if not overridden by the cortex, cause a strong, negative, emotional response that may manifest itself as fear, anxiety, or anger. This emotional shift within the student will likely trigger a similar emotional reaction in the advisor.

Once a student is responding emotionally, a pair of vicious cycles begins. The first cycle is related to the automatic nature of the response. When the amygdala perceives a threat and activates the sympathetic system, it flushes the body with chemicals in preparation for action (Jensen, 1998). Even if the cortex overrides this initial response, these stress-producing chemicals do not immediately leave the system. As a result, they leave the individual in a state of what Goleman (1995) called *edginess*. In this state of edginess, individuals are more sensitive to possible threats. Goleman (p. 61) stated that as a consequence,

> every successive anger provoking thought or perception becomes a minitrigger for amygdala—driven surges of catecholamines, each building on the hormonal momentum of those that went before. A second comes before the first has subsided, and a third on top of those, and so on. . . . Anger builds on anger.

As this cycle builds, edginess and arousal increase dramatically. Once agitation reaches a high level, the parasympathetic response may take up to 48 hours to restore the body to its original state of calm (Jensen, 1998). Therefore, if the student, or the advi-

sor, has experienced a number of other recent stressful events, the emotional response is likely to be more dramatic than if he or she has been having a relatively low stress day or week. If advisors catch themselves or students overreacting in a conflict situation, they should consider the other stressful events that have probably contributed to a high level of edginess prior to the current stressful event.

A second vicious cycle is initiated in the middle of this build up of edginess. As the sympathetic system arouses the body in response to the stress and anger cycle, the body provides "feedback . . . that creates signals in the body that return to the brain" (LeDoux, 1996, p. 291). These signals are "recorded by the systems that produced the response in the first place" (LeDoux, 1996, p. 294), which include the amygdala. The signals are processed as additional stressors and the sympathetic system is further aroused. The result is a second upward spiral of emotional escalation.

As these two cycles increase the body's emotional levels, a more primitive portion of the brain may be affected. Located deep within the recesses of the brain, in what is often referred to by some as the *reptilian* or *hindbrain*, is the reticular activating system or RAS (Howard, 2000). Starr (1997, p. 559) described the RAS as it "extends from the uppermost part of the spinal cord to the cerebral cortex." This location and connectivity allows the RAS to function as a switching station for the brain. As Howard (2000, p. 39) explained, "When we become emotionally charged, as in the fight-or-flight response, the RAS shuts down the cerebral cortex, or learning brain." When this occurs, "instinct and training take over" (Howard, p. 39). In a conflict situation, this process limits the capacity of an individual to think rationally and solve problems. Therefore, unless the cortex can be reactivated in a person in such a state of high reaction, resolution is impossible. The cortex can be engaged when the body relaxes and the threat dissipates or when the individual is forced to shift into a problem-solving mode. Under these cues, "the RAS switches the cortex back on and allows creativity and logic to return to center stage" (Howard, 2000, p. 39; Wade & Tavris, 1996). When thinking logically, individuals are more able to "tolerate frustration, delay gratification of impulse, and to plan and organize behavior in meaningful ways" (Khoshaba & Maddi, 2003, p. 18).

Advisors must understand these cycles and systems, because through knowledge of these processes, emotion-laden conflict situations may be transformed. In a positive result, affective responses are switched to cognitive responses.

Managing Conflict

According to research regarding how the human brain processes and manages conflict, cycles of escalation can be overcome by persons using any of the following techniques: removing the stimulus, fractionating the problem, using manual/mental override, facilitating higher level thinking, working within the closed system, and working with the open system.

Remove the Stimulus

As a first step, advisors can help students change their perception of a conflict and thereby thwart the escalation cycles (LeDoux, 1996). By seeking to understand why a student feels threatened by the situation and eliminating misconceptions about it, advisors can often help students remove the threatening stimulus. Many students who are experiencing some form of difficulty, whether it is undecidedness regarding their major, poor academic performance, or social anxiety, do not understand the potential impact of their difficulties, nor do they recognize the options available for overcoming their problems. By providing an advisee with accurate information, an advisor can greatly reduce the student's perception of the situation as threatening or stressful. Altering the perceived role of the student in the conflict, inviting her or his empathy, or engaging the person to trust the advisor are techniques that can aid in changing the perception of the stimulus (Covey, 1989; Fisher et al., 1991; Goleman, 1995; Ogilvie & Carsky, 2002; Rahim, 2001; Senge, 1990; Thomas, 2000).

When working with advisors, many students perceive themselves as inactive participants or victims of the circumstances in which they find themselves. By actively involving students in the process of identifying solutions, advisors encourage students to take responsibility for their own problem solving. By explaining policies, procedures, and options available without prescribing specific actions, advisors can assist students in becoming active participants in their own education.

Inviting students' empathy often begins with advisors empathizing with them. By seeking to understand how students feel about the difficulties they are encountering and why they feel the way they do, advisors show sensitivity to the students' perceptions of their experiences. Once the advisee feels understood, the advisor can explain his or her feelings about the situation. Such openness and concern invites similar empathetic responses from students.

The best way to engage the trust of students is

to demonstrate sincere willingness to help. Often students who become angry or fearful about their problems will relax as they realize that an advisor is willing and capable of helping them overcome the challenges. By focusing on helping students overcome difficulties, advisors can lead students into trusting relationships.

Another way to remove the anger- or fear-producing stimulus, by reversing the first cycle of escalation, is to cool "off physiologically by waiting out the adrenal surge in a setting where there are not likely to be any further triggers for rage" (Goleman, 1995, p. 63). If an advisor feels that a conflict is becoming too heated, she or he may wish to find some reason to pause the conversation temporarily. The advisor can leave the office to "get some additional information," take a few deep breaths, and strategize before returning. While such departures should be brief, a few deep breaths can drastically diminish stress levels and facilitate a more appropriate response. A break may also help the student to relax. However, strategic interruptions will not work to lessen the escalation if "that time is used to pursue the train of anger-inducing thought, since each such thought is in itself a minor trigger for more cascades of anger" (Goleman, p. 63). Hence, advisors should avoid and discourage others from venting anger as part of a calming down process (Stone et al., 1999).

Advisors should also realize that their own stress levels, as a result of previous stressors, might influence their ability to remain calm during difficult conversations. Therefore, if more stressful encounters are predictable, the advisor should schedule them either early in the morning or right after a relaxing lunch hour. Scheduling a potentially stressful encounter in the late afternoon or early evening, after a stress-filled day, or directly after another stressful experience decreases the likelihood of an effective response.

Fractionate the Problem

The second method for overcoming an upwardly spiraling conflict situation is to fractionate the problem. Using this strategy, an advisor breaks the large problem "into small easily manageable units" (Trenholm & Jensen, 2000, p. 324). Because many high stress or anger responses are the result of numerous and compounding small stressors and threats (Goleman, 1995), the advisor can help students alter their perceptions by identifying each small stressor and addressing them individually. The advisor can begin the fractionating process by inquiring why the situation is inspiring such a deep emotional response. For example, an advisor might say, "I can tell this situation is very stressful for you. What is it about this situation that particularly concerns you?" or "Are there other things that are contributing to your stress levels at this time?" Exploratory questions, such as these, can help the student relax so that the advisor and advisee can develop a plan for overcoming the student's challenge.

Be Positive

Advisors can break the stress and anger cycles by using the brain's natural override system. As Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002, p. 45) explained,

> A brain scan of someone who is upset or anxious shows high activity in the amygdala and the right side of the prefrontal area in particular, among other areas. This picture depicts an amygdala hijack. . . . But when the scan shows someone in an upbeat mood, the key circuitry runs from the left prefrontal cortex down to the amygdala.

In other words, the left prefrontal cortex can override the amygdala's emotional responses as long as the individual is consciously seeking to control his or her emotions (Stuart, 1993). This override involves "seiz[ing] on and challeng[ing] the thoughts that trigger surges of anger. . . . [Obviously,] timing matters; the earlier in the anger cycle the more effective" (Goleman, 1995, p. 62). Engaging the student in exercises that involve positive thinking or active problem solving can help to reestablish the prefrontal cortex dominance of the emotional brain. Solution-focused counseling is an exceptional method for getting persons to get the prefrontal cortex in control of emotions.

The basic premise of solution-focused counseling is that "individuals have a reservoir of wisdom learned and forgotten" that they can use to overcome the problems they face (O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989). Using a solution-focused strategy, an advisor helps the student to tap into her or his experience reservoir and draw out information necessary to overcome the current conflict. Because this technique focuses on the strengths and abilities that the student already possesses, it is innately positive, and therefore, it triggers the kind of positive thinking that is needed to diminish the conflict. Some of the more common questions advisors use in solution-focused interactions are as follows:

- "How will your life be different when you have solved the problem?"

- "What is the most positive outcome that you can realistically envision happening? What would it take for this to occur?"
- "What is different about the times when you do not have this problem?"
- "Have you ever solved a similar problem or overcome a similar challenge in the past? How did you do it?"

As the student responds to these questions and identifies possible solutions to the conflict, advisors should "apply a generous portion of positive reinforcement through cheerleading and compliments" (Burg & Mayhall, 2002, p. 83). The encouragement further reinforces the student's shift to positive thinking.

Engage Higher Level Thinking

When individuals become highly stressed, primitive levels of neurological activity within the RAS may override cortical areas (Howard, 2000) leaving individuals so flustered that they may have difficulty speaking coherently about their experiences. However, by asking probing questions, advisors can help individuals to communicate their sentiments, share their perspectives, and think about their problems. Speech communication (Howard, 2000) and "major cognitive activities, such as problem solving" (Gazzaniga, 1998, p. 53), are under the control of the left cortex. Therefore, if a student communicates and engages in problem solving, he or she will be activating the cortex, which can eventually override the more primitive emotional systems of the brain.

If, however, individuals allow their emotions to override their higher level thinking, the escalation cycle resumes or continues. This typically occurs when individuals seek to vent emotions, which "actually fuels anger rather than dissipating it" (Ogilvie & Carsky, 2002, p. 384).

Using the Open and Closed Systems

Advisors can also help themselves or their students relax by working within the body's internal or closed emotion system. A closed system has "boundaries that are fairly rigid and impenetrable and that limit the kinds of interaction that take place with the environment" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 34). Although the human body as a whole is not a closed system, the mind-body feedback process resembles a closed system in many ways.

The body provides feedback to the brain regarding the person's emotional state, and this feedback can either further escalate stressful emotions (LeDoux, 1996) or reverse it. According to Howard (2000), the sympathetic system is brought to a level of arousal as a result of the excessive release of epinephrine. Participation in "noncompetitive aerobic activity" reverses this effect (Howard, 2000, p. 405) and calms the body and the mind. Relaxation and breathing techniques are also effective, physical, stress relievers that reverse the escalation of the body's closed system (Goleman, 1995; Goleman et al., 2002; Howard, 2000; Khoshaba & Maddi, 2003). Advisors can use these and similar techniques to calm themselves, coworkers, and students.

Emotions also operate within open systems, which are characterized by permeable boundaries and complex inputs (Birnbaum, 1998). This "open loop system depends largely on external sources to manage itself" (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 6). As Goleman et al. (2002, p. 7) explained,

> Scientists describe the open loop as "interpersonal limbic regulation," whereby one person transmits signals that can alter hormone levels, cardiovascular function, sleep rhythms, and even immune function in the body. . . . The open loop design means that other people can change our very physiology—and so our emotions.

In a recent study of older (60 years and older) couples, researchers documented the transference of depression among spouses (Goodman & Shippy, 2002). In another study, researchers determined that the affective relationship of one parent to a child impacts the relationship between the other parent and the same child via emotional contagion (White, 1999). Similar studies have been done in athletic, industrial (Goleman et al., 2002), healthcare (Omdahl & O'Donnell, 1999), and social settings (Gump & Kulik, 1997) to prove the existence of this transference of emotion via nonverbal channels of communication.

For two reasons, research on emotional contagion is significant to advisors who are dealing with affective conflict situations. First, advisors need to be aware that those with whom they are working will impact their emotions. Second, advisors may also impact advisees through conscious regulation of their own emotional states. In other words, if the advisor can remain calm or upbeat, the positive emotions generated by the advisor will not provide fuel for the student's negative emotions and may even help calm the student. Even if the student remains unaffected, the advisor's personal control will have positive impacts on her or his own well-

ness, state of mind, and later interactions with other students, coworkers, and peers.

Use Humor

Researchers have found that humor improves problem solving, increases the efficiency of the immune system, enhances respiration, and reduces stress (Howard, 2000). When a person laughs, endorphins, which act as natural painkillers and pleasure enhancers, are released into the person's system (Howard, 2000). In spite of the benefits of humor, advisors should be careful in using it because the wrong kind of joke at the wrong time will only worsen the conflict. The best time to use humor is when tensions begin to ease. An infusion of laughter at the right moment "can stimulate creativity, open lines of communication, [and] enhance a sense of connection and trust" (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 14).

Conclusion

Because many of their daily encounters with students involve some form of conflict, advisors can benefit tremendously from learning about conflict and conflict resolution. By understanding conflict and recognizing the multiple ways they encounter it on a daily basis, advisors are better able to see how conflict is often a catalyst for learning and growth. As their knowledge of conflict deepens to include an understanding of the role of perception in determining one's response to conflict situations, advisors are better able to recognize how negative conflict arises and how it can be overcome. As advisors learn about the neurological processes that lead to conflict, they come to understand why they and their students respond to conflict as they do, and this understanding allows them to deepen their capacity to empathize with students who are stressed, worried, or angry. These advisors are then able to recognize that while conflict is natural, it can be overcome so that students can pursue their educational goals.

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