



What might effective conflict facilitation in organisations as Co-Counselling look like?

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Often it seems that conflicts in organisations and communities, such as Co-Counselling, are between two people and indeed that can be the case. However, it could also be that a conflict between two people is actually the tip of an iceberg. It could be that it is the most visible part of a struggle between two or more groups, each with their own realities and their own understandings of what is important. One of the first jobs of the professional conflict facilitator is to identify whether a conflict is between two people or between two groups with opposing viewpoints. Is it a personal fight between Rev Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams or is it a fight between sections of the nationalists and the unionists? In this article I want to explain what I believe to be good conflict resolution. It's not an easy job and I've called it 'professional' because the job demands a high level of skills and is a difficult job to do successfully.

What is good conflict facilitation?

Good conflict facilitation involves trying to engage the co-operation of all parties involved, with the ultimate aim of trying to eradicate sources of conflict and rebuilding the bridges and trust between them.

Alternate realities

This is one of the key concepts in professional conflict facilitation. The facilitator tries to non-judgementally understand each party's reality from their own perspective. He or she also tries to identify which events in the outer, physical world have contributed to the sense of conflict for that party. This is similar to the task of the counsellor in person-centred counselling who tries to empathetically and non-judgementally understand the client's reality from their own perspective. The difference is that the conflict facilitator must attempt to do this with two or more parties. Identifying events that have been the source of conflict in the past provides an insight into what issues and events may be the source of conflict in the future. In other words, at this stage the facilitator tries to identify what needs to be learned from the past in order to develop a better future.

The summary report

Based on a real understanding of the conflicting 'alternate realities', the facilitator writes an overview of all the core issues that sparked off the conflicts in the past and that are likely to spark off new conflicts in the future. You could call this an 'agreement about the core disagreements' in the conflict. The parties involved are consulted to make sure that they recognise their 'alternate realities' in the report. It is this feeling of being acknowledged and respected that will entice the parties to co-operate with the facilitators and stay in the conflict resolution process.

Hopefully the report will give the conflicting parties insight into each other's perspectives and also allow onlookers some understanding of the different sides of the conflict. In this way a good report can sometimes help to build bridges and mutual understanding between conflicting parties and onlookers, where before there was only mistrust.

A really good summary report, however, also contains something extra: an overall framework for moving forward. And here is the most superb trick a skilled conflict facilitator can pull out of his or her hat to move the most entrenched positions. Each party will have positions on first analysis from which they will apparently never move. Positions where they say ‘I will not under any circumstances &ldots;’ The facilitator’s job is to explore with each party under what conditions these positions could move into negotiable ones. For example, the ‘we will have nothing to do with the Irish Republic’ becomes negotiable with the ‘we will never have anything to do with the British’ position.

A good summary report is firmly focused on the future: its ultimate aim is the co-operation of the conflicting parties in order to eradicate the sources of the conflict and to rebuild bridges and trust. The Framework proposal in Northern Ireland is an excellent example of this. The different perspectives of the parties were summarised and a framework for negotiations established. A crucial element of this was that all parties felt acknowledged and respected in their ‘alternate realities’

The challenges to a conflict facilitator

Working with ‘alternate realities’ is a hugely demanding task for the facilitator. In a therapy situation the counsellor has only to understand one ‘alternate reality’, and that can in itself be a difficult task. In a conflict, however, there are not only more than one alternate realities, but the facilitator also has to understand how these realities interact with each other.

Enlisting and keeping the co-operation of all parties is one of the biggest challenges faced by facilitators. The facilitator needs to develop a co-operative relationship with each of the parties, who are no longer willing to co-operate with each other. On these alliances a bridge is formed via the facilitator through which the parties can eventually come together to co-operate with each other in talking and thinking about mutually beneficial ways out of the conflict.

This starts with the facilitator gathering information from each party about their ‘alternate realities’. The facilitator really needs to build a trusting relationship with each party, in which everyone feels safe enough to express their views as fully and honestly as possible. Where one party is concealing something, the facilitator must find ways to encourage that person to speak out. The facilitator must be prepared to hear each side’s views in confidence if necessary and then provide an analysis in the summary report which gets to the heart of the issues involved, without sharing exact information that parties wanted to keep confidential.

The summary report needs the continuous co-operation of all parties to make sure that the core issues are described in such a way that each party will feel acknowledged in their truth and ‘alternate reality’ and that the report indeed is an agreement about the disagreements.

If the ‘summary report’ doesn’t meet these criteria, it will probably escalate the conflict. The ‘camps’ will get even more entrenched: the camp that is seen as favoured by the report, will be even more convinced that they are right; the camp that felt disadvantaged or disrespected by the report is likely at best to end co-operation with the conflict facilitators or at worst to go on the defensive or on the attack as the best defence.

The job of the conflict facilitator is so complex that he or she can easily get seduced into simplifying the conflict before they have really understood it. They are at risk of taking on the role of judge or of taking sides, and when this happens the conflict is simply repeated and the facilitator loses the co-operation of one or more sides. This is why conflict facilitators need to be ‘professional’. Professionals are aware of these pitfalls and will try to avoid anything that can destroy their co-operation with the conflicting parties, i.e. which can be seen as repeating the conflict, being partial or judgmental.