Managing Disputes to Prevent Conflict

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October 2008

A recurrent theme of *In The Neutral Zone* is dispute prevention. This article contains strategies for dealing with contentious issues that leave you feeling unfairly treated, angry, misunderstood, and/or victim of an injustice. First, we discuss what makes a sports conflict unique; second, explore how disputes differ from conflicts; and, third, map an ordinary incident looking for patterns that reveal opportunities to prevent disputes.

1. Sports conflicts differ

Usually, interest-based conflict resolution features "expanding the pie", that is, creating innovative win/win solutions, where the decision can satisfy everyone's interests by brainstorming options the parties to the dispute had not considered before. However, when the issue concerns decisions such as, for example, team places and number of cards, not everyone who wants pie will get a piece. Then the situation is constrained to a "fixed pie" that is win/lose, or 50/50 compromise at best.

Because sports has complex layers of rules, hierarchies of decision-making organizations, limited funders, set deadlines, intense scrutiny, few spots on the team roster, and a naturally competitive culture, sports-related issues have an organic inclination towards the "fixed pie" type of dispute. When there are budget and places for a team of three, there are few ways to make the pie feed four.

The classic 1981 *Chariots of Fire* demonstrates both fixed and expanded pies. It had a typical "fixed pie" because of unchangeable race dates and distances. Teammate Lord Lindsey traded 400 and 100 metre races with Eric Liddell, so that Liddell could run on Thursday, not Sunday. Had Lindsey not been willing or able to swap, Liddell had lose/lose options of not running or breaking the Sabbath, which were both unpalatable to him. The solution was an "expanded pie" because Lord Lindsey had a medal, which met his interest, and he had an interest in Liddell competing for King and country. Everyone's interests were met by expanding the pie within the fixed boundaries. Obviously, this solution could not expand a 'seeded' pie.

2. Definitions

A definition of dispute is a challenge over the truth, or competing ideas. A definition of conflict refers to the parties' intentions or needs, such as "competing interests, different identities and/or differing attitudes" (Schellenberg 1996: 8). Rex (1981: 3) defined conflict as "action which is oriented intentionally to carrying out the actor's will against the resistance of" others.

Let's use a very linear and simple example to explain the distinction. If a coach reprimands an athlete and the athlete accepts that, there is no dispute. If the reprimand feels unfair, the athlete challenges the coach creating a dispute if that is how the coach responds. If they put this incident into a framework of ongoing personality and stylistic differences and make the reprimand about everything the two of them ever had differences about, it is a conflict.

A characteristic of nesting discrete disputes within larger conflict systems is that, thereafter new disputes pile up more quickly. If one discrete dispute incident is settled but the conflict remains, the next dispute will erupt more easily. Once in a conflict, they are less likely to give each other

the benefit of the doubt, are more likely to attribute bad intentions to the other, and be far more likely to make negative assumptions about each other. This is sometimes referred to as 'bad blood' between people or teams or schools or countries, based on history of ongoing unresolved conflict and a pattern of discrete incidents that feed the conflict with dispute fuel.

3. Mapping conflict systems

A simple map of interactions, using the coach/athlete example above, can explore the interactions in the context of preventing conflict.

There is no dispute.

Athlete might accept the reprimand because: athlete admits wrongdoing; coach is too powerful to contradict; athlete feels reprimand is trivial in the bigger picture; coach speaks in a way athlete does not take seriously; athlete does not respect coach's opinion, and so on. In each possible option, the athlete makes meaning of the coach's words and decides, consciously or unconsciously, how to react. The dispute is prevented because the athlete mentally normalizes the reprimand as less important than, say, training or getting along.

The athlete challenges the coach.

Once athlete engages coach, it is coach's turn to decide what meaning to put on the interaction. The dispute may emerge or not, depending on the respective meanings they put on each other's words and attitudes. Decisions about meaning are not made in isolation. They are grounded in history, character assessment, judgment of effort, value to the team, and other factors. The prevention strategy at this level is to ask yourself: What assumptions am I making without verifying their accuracy? How are my feelings about the person affecting how I perceive the person's words and deeds? What are my words, deeds and attitude contributing to how this interaction is unfolding? If I change or manage how I feel and react, what else would change?

They put this incident into a framework of ongoing differences.

Because coach and athlete have a history, a dispute over the reprimand will recall each time the other has been perceived as irritating, overbearing, wrong, or an obstacle to success. Their words are no longer about the reprimand, but call up experiences such as: "you always", "you never", "last time this happened", "you promised", "when will you ever", and reconstructions of other times that expectations were disappointed. The reprimand takes on the meaning they make of their entire relationship. The incident that caused the reprimand is replaced with allegations of character flaws, inadequacies in abilities, and judgments about the other one's lack of ethics and honour. The prevention strategy at this level is to ask yourself: what am I attributing to the person that has nothing to do with this incident? Is how I feel about our relationship affecting my response to the words the person is saying now? If my best friend said exactly the same things what would I assume s/he meant?

Every new dispute incident piles up in the context of the ongoing conflict.

Things may seem calm until the next incident, at which time the fuse is shorter, recovery time to equilibrium is longer, hurt feelings are deeper, and mistrust is stronger. The next time coach makes a decision athlete takes it personally. The next time athlete stumbles coach perceives it as lack of commitment. The prevention strategy at this level is to ask yourself: is my judgment about this situation being affected by left over feelings from the conflict? Do I perceive this as being done to me rather than something that just is? What is my responsibility, if any, for the situation?

You can address disputes before they become conflict systems. First, talk to yourself honestly about what is really going on and how you are interpreting it to fit your image as the innocent party. Whether it is coach, teammate, trainer, or other person, the question is not who is right or

wrong - each believes s/he is right and the other is wrong. The better question is what meaning are you, a human with feelings, making of what is going on? Change the meaning you attribute to the situation, and your perception of the qualities you attribute to the other person can also change.

4. Conclusion

The process of making attributions about others, and assuming what they intended, is the meaning you make to meet your needs and interests. If you understand the options you have and are mindful of what occurs within you, you can devise a personal dispute prevention plan. That may not resolve the dispute or conflict, but it will give you a basis for discussing the situation with the person you thought you could never talk to. That talk might resolve the issue.

Rex, J. (1981). Social Conflict: a conceptual and theoretical analysis. London and New York, Longman.
Schellenberg, J. A. (1996). Conflict Resolution: Theory, Research, and Practice. Albany, N. Y., State University of New York Press.