Kari Murto

LEADING THE PROCESS

TOWARDS THE PROCESS CENTERED DEVELOPING OF WORK COMMUNITY
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PUBLISHER: KARI CONSULTING OY JYVÄSKYLÄ, FINLAND 2016
Translated by Hannele Häkli
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ISBN 978-952-68502
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The Finnish original book
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PROSESSIN JOHTAMINEN KOHTI PROSESSIKESKEISTÄ TYÖYHTEISÖN JOHTAMISTA
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FOR ANNUKKA AND MIIKKA
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5.3. Handling conflicts in a community

Conflicts between people are most harmful to the community, and at the same time the most difficult problems to deal with.

When Chris Argyris (1981) studied American companies of different sizes, he found that there is regularly discrepancy between what the managers say and what they do. According to the upper managers, the efficiency and productivity of decision-making depend on the amount of creativity, the ability to take risks (putting oneself at stake), flexibility, and mutual trust. They emphasized repeatedly how important it is to bear the responsibility for full-bodied development of their own as well as of their colleagues’ abilities. They considered interpersonal problems as most difficult ones. Even though the managers in their speaking regarded the maximization of creativity, risk taking, flexibility, and confidence as most important, they seldom acted according to these principles.

When he studied the cause of contradicting speech and actions, Argyris found out that the company managers comply with the following three basic values in their decision-making:

1. Concentration on finishing the task only, on getting the job done. Seldom, if ever, did they pay any attention to the analysis of the group’s actions and efficiency. This was not done even when the efficiency of operations suffered from conflicts between the group members.
2. Emphasis of intellectual rationality and rejection of emotional expressions. The managers regarded only intellectual conversation as “real work”, whereas expressing feelings or talking about them was regarded as immature or as something else than working. This came up in utterances such as “let’s stick to the point” or “let’s not get personal”.
3. Control that comes from above seen as the most efficient means to influence human relations. Respect for control is implicitly included already in the hierarchy and authority relations of the organization structure.
The importance of the values Argyris described, is remarkable to the operation of an organization. If individuals internalize the values of intellectual rationality and getting the work done, they consciously emphasize the intellectual side of problems. More or less consciously they repress interpersonal and emotional sides, especially those that seem less important as regards to performing the task.

If conflicts between people are put aside, the problems connected to them will come up elsewhere, for instance as intellectual or technical problems. Under these circumstances, individuals will not learn to handle their emotions and mutual relations in an open and constructive way. They rather learn to develop personal and organizational defense mechanisms, that will suppress emotional expressions of their own and of the others. This leads to the rejection of also such ideas and thoughts that might bring up the repressed emotions.

The rejection of interpersonal conflicts probably impedes the utilization of the community’s creative capacity. People learn to stick to safe limits, which reduces their openness towards new ideas and values. They do not dare to try anything new nor to take risks. The fear for putting oneself at stake grows. Unnoticed they will end up in a vicious circle, which suppresses creativity and vitality.

Well then, how should we handle conflicts and problems between people in a work community? Traditionally their handling is the manager’s job when the parties are unable to solve them themselves. The superior has to intervene at least when the conflict seriously starts to harm the whole community. Conflicts can take various forms, but in the following I shall deal with it with an example of a conflict between two workers, and how it was handled in a superior-centered and community-centered way.

Let us presume that there are conflicts and tensions between work community members A and D, and as they continue they start to come to a head and harm the actions of the whole community. If there are no regular common meetings in the community or if they do not work, there is no chance to handle the conflict together. When the situation culminates, both parties usually start
to recruit supporters behind them. The community becomes cliquish, and communication between the cliques diminishes and distorts. In this stage at the latest, the superior is forced to intervene in the situation. He can ask the parties to come over to him to discuss and clear the situation (figure 15).

Figure 15. Conflict between A and D has lead to the formation of cliques (A, B and G vs D, C and E), only F has been left outside. The superior is trying to clear the situation by discussing with A and D outside the rest of the community.

In a culminated conflict situation and in a clustered community, the discussions with the superior seldom solve the situation permanently. If either one of the parties feels defeated, he and his supporters will bring the matter forward in the official way, to his superior’s superior, to the management board, or they will leave it in the hands of the trade union. This kind of handling estranges the conflict from its original context and expands it by bringing in new interest groups. At the same time, chances to genuine conciliation become smaller, gaps between the clusters become deeper, and economical and psychological costs of the conflict increase. Individual and communal costs will increase also, if the defeated party starts
to proceed with the matter in an unofficial way, for example acting behind people’s backs and making threats.

I am by no means saying that discussions between superiors and the parties of the conflict could not ever produce a working and lasting solution. But I do think that the community centered model for settling conflicts would be more certain in attaining settlements that would satisfy the parties and the community, and, in addition to that, in attaining a more secure work community. The starting point of communal handling of conflicts is the principle that conflicts have to be solved there where they have arisen. However, the communal settlement model is no miracle cure that would help to settle all conflicts.

In practise communal handling requires the existence of a cooperation forum and experience in using it. If common meetings are summoned only when problems occur, people do not feel them safe and they can not take advantage of them. Mutual trust and cooperation skills have to be established in a persevering manner, preferably starting with peaceful conditions. If the work community is used to common meetings, it is natural for anyone to bring the conflict between A and D under discussion. The parties of the conflict as well as other community members can present their opinions and views of the situation and its background. The importance of the conflict and its effects on the parties and on the whole community become apparent.

In the open discussion the parties have to reflect their views and interpretations to the views of those who are outside the conflict, and thus they get educational feedback. A settlement that has been reached in open common handling leaves very little room for speaking behind people’s backs and for the formation of cliques.

The real reasons for personnel conflicts do, however, not always arise from the work community, even though they appear there. Each member of the community in his personality brings his own human relations models to the work community, and implements them also when he drifts into conflicts. Settling conflicts that are connected to these...
kinds of transference relations rather than to objective circumstances, can be very difficult. I shall try to describe a conflict that is primarily based on transference relations with a simple example. Transference here refers to transferring earlier emotional relations that have been experienced in earlier important relations (to one’s parents, to brothers and sisters, to teachers and so on), to present relations for instance at work.

Designer Paul N. was the oldest of the three children in the family, and the only son. Paul’s father was very stern and demanding towards Paul, but he hardly ever gave him commendation or acknowledgement. Instead, Paul felt that he pampered the two younger sisters. They had always had it easier, the parents did not expect as much from them, but they had nevertheless always got a “bigger piece of the cake”. The mother was in a submitted position in the family and she did not have the courage to defend Paul in the father’s presence, even though she behind his back had tried to make it up to Paul in different ways.

Due to his family background, Paul has not learned to trust in the impartiality and fairness of authorities. He has had repeated conflicts with his teachers and superiors. Since Paul is constantly suspecting that his superior is partial, especially that he favors female colleagues, he is constantly driven into conflicts. Discussions with the superiors and the colleagues have not been able to convince Paul. He is not able to take an objective stand to proposals that come from his superior. That is why superior-centered efforts to settle the conflicts have not been very helpful.

Community centered handling of conflicts also gives Paul’s colleagues a chance to see and to get to know the situation from different angles and not only as Paul himself describes it. Paul also has to accept correcting feedback from his work mates, who until now have only heard his version of the story. Gradually he will have to start checking his own views and interpretations, since no one is supporting them anymore, not even behind backs. This kind of confrontation that comes from the community and from the peers works in the long run in an educa-
tive and therapeutic way and also brings up positive features in Paul. However, a work community is not a treatment community and its resources are not adequate to help with more difficult personality disorders. That calls for outside expertise.

Offhandedly it is, however, difficult to say when conflict situations in a work community are caused by someone’s personal pathology or transference relations, when by objective defects. In the scape goat phenomenon the point is in placing communal pathology or evil in an individual or in a group, and then you try to protect yourself from it or attack it by different kinds of maneuvers. In the foregoing I presented an individual’s inability to recognize his own pathology, whereas the scape goat phenomenon manifests a community’s inability to do self-examination and to face its own pathology. In both cases, to make a diagnosis and to fix the situation call for objective outlook from outside. To assist communal pathology you can use an outside consult or personnel from different units that can give objective feedback to individual units in the organization meetings.

In order for communities to work with such efficiency and responsibility they need to have well working communal forums. To develop these cooperation and discussion forums requires skill and perseverance, as I so many times have said. Moreover, their efficiency has to be under constant surveillance, because even a well working community meeting can in an instant go astray from its basic task or gradually become a spiritless self-repeating ritualistic routine. How could we guarantee that the forums will not become spiritless ritualistic routines, “bad kind of routine”? 