

A Systems Approach to **CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**



An angry parent confronts Superintendent Stan Paz of El Paso Independent School District as he makes a getaway following a stormy school board meeting. Photo by Billy Calzada/El Paso Herald Post

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For most people, conflict engenders a negative image. Whether operating within the family structure, a social situation, or the workplace, people see conflict as divisive, and tend to avoid it.

Conflict, however, is not inherently bad. Within the school organization, it is to be expected. There always will be disagreements about whether to put more money into curriculum or into building maintenance; about the need for classroom aides and the

ideal class size.

Managed well, these conflicts lead to healthy, constructive dialogue.

Early Attention

By dealing with conflict at early stages, it remains manageable. People can gain a better understanding about one another and the issues at hand. Provided with skills to help them work toward agreement, the conflict can lead to better organizational paradigms.

Many school districts, for example, have become painfully divided over the inclusion of special-needs students into the regular classroom. Regular teachers have felt "dumped on," special education teachers attacked for "pawning off their students." Left alone, this conflict intensifies, eventually pitting parents and teachers against one another.

Much of this could be avoided with early discussions among the teachers, clarification of *all* students' needs,

agreement on the support needed for successful integration, and the development of a process endorsed by both special education and regular education teachers. By managing conflict, additional conflict is prevented.

The best resolution to a conflict situation is a win-win solution.

Furthermore, conflicts often are symptoms, not causes, of organizational problems. If a school system is fraught with teacher strikes, tensions between teachers and parents, or fights among students, this is symptomatic of broader and deeper organizational problems that must be dealt with systemically if they are to be dealt with effectively.

Perhaps most importantly, to manage conflicts in schools, it is necessary to understand the interrelationships in the school system and how behavior at one level of the school hierarchy, or between levels, ripples throughout the entire system.

For example, look at how a school committee handles conflict with the superintendent and how the superintendent in turn deals with his or her administrative team. Patterns of behavior established at one level of the school organization have serious implications for resolving conflicts at other levels.

Unless conflict is looked at systemically and these patterns are acknowledged, specific disagreements may be resolved, but the underlying issues will continue, and new, symptomatic conflicts will emerge.

Systematic Approach

We propose the following seven-step systems approach to analyze and act upon conflict that emerges in a districtwide or school-based program or initiative:

No. 1: Review how the organization's vision is impacted by the conflict, and what steps need to be taken to get them into alignment.

No. 2: Identify the formal and informal leadership of the initiative, and how it is affected by the conflict.

No. 3: Identify key participants and their roles in this situation.

No. 4: Develop a strategy to modify the organizational processes and pro-

cedures affected by the initiative so they are in line with the organization's vision.

No. 5: Determine how the culture and history of the system impacts on the initiative and either fuels or mitigates the conflict.

No. 6: Decide on an implementation plan that factors in the first five steps.

No. 7: Establish a monitoring and evaluation process.

A school district could apply this process to defuse potential conflict in any initiative. What follows is an illustration of how this can be done, using the budget process as an example.

Budget Conflicts

When we speak of conflict in a school system, all roads lead to the budget

"... conflicts often are symptoms, not causes, of organizational problems."

process. As school budgets shrink, the budget process becomes the battlefield.

A suburban school system in Massachusetts recently applied this seven-step process to revise their budget process in a manner that increased the focus on educational goals, outcomes, and student achievement.

The school system decided to break the budget paradigm of separate camps battling for their distinct piece of the pie. Almost universally the tension between school systems and their surrounding municipalities creates many short- and long-term problems. Instead of staying within this paradigm, the district's school committee, finance committee, selectmen, superintendent, town manager, and their senior staffs met with facilitators to work through the seven steps.

At each stage of the process the potential for conflict and the breakdown of trust existed. An agreed-upon vision of the budget process never had existed among the three town boards. No one in school ad-

ministration or in town government had faith that the budget could meet both town and school needs. The schools and the town competed for minimal resources. Town departments competed with each other.

The prevailing culture of distrust too often became the subject of newspaper coverage. Monitoring and evaluation meant annual survival with hopes for new money conflicting with the harsh reality that it was not forthcoming.

• Clarifying the vision.

In step one we clarified the vision for the school system, by focusing on curriculum and instruction and student achievement as the driving forces.

This focus needed to be integrated with the overall needs of youth in the town. The group determined that the vision could focus on the educational needs for the community, recognizing that students could include citizens aged 9 to 83 if properly supported by resources. As the group discussed the vision with the school committee and superintendent, it became clear that if they operated in isolation, as they typically did, they were set up for a game of chess that they lost year after year. The stated vision was not consistent with the current budget process.

• Identifying leadership.

In step two the group identified the formal and informal leadership for the budget process. The formal leadership was the school committee. However, the budget process had informal leadership from the superintendent and the town manager. Often the two had been pitted against each other in a battle for recognition and resources. Their cooperative effort was critical to meet the established vision.

• Clarifying participants' roles.

Step three involved the clarification of the key participants and their roles in the budget process. Principals, school councils, administrators, and parent-teacher organizations were identified. Each administrator would develop a zero-based budget. The PTO and school councils would identify needs and potential alternative sources of revenue.

Since we were looking at the town's resources, the town manager decided town departments would use the same process to move toward an equitable effort for the town and the schools. This process would help town personnel become less resentful of the fact that the school department would receive a higher percentage of the town's budget dollars.

• **Organizing processes.**

Step four looked at those organizational processes affected by moving toward an established vision. If the budget process was to be a cooperative effort, a change would be required in the budget timeline. The role of the district's finance committee would need to change to that of a mediator.

As part of this process, the superintendent would need to become more knowledgeable about the town's budget process and the town manager more knowledgeable of the school system's. Each budget process would

still be autonomous. However, the involvement by key leaders would occur at strategic points agreed upon by all parties. Changes would be made in the town charter to accommodate this process.

• **Exploring history.**

Step five explored the culture and history of the budget process. This exploration uncovered a lack of confidence by the community and school personnel in the credibility of information. The budget process created a lack of respect for town government and the school committee.

The leadership on both sides needed to understand that the community was filled with special-interest groups vying for resources and ideology. They needed to understand the culture and viewpoints of these groups to develop a strategy cognizant of the special interests while maintaining focus on the town as a whole.

• **Implementing change.**

Step six moved to implementation. The school system leadership realizes that curriculum and instruction needs to drive the change process. A strategic planning committee will be formed to integrate educational reform initiatives into a three-year plan for curriculum and instruction. This plan could be used to drive plans in areas such as facilities, finance, organization, marketing, and public relations.

The community needs to become more aware of the educational direction of the school system to become ultimately supportive in resource allocation. The revision of the budget process is at the heart of this new understanding. The action plan completely revised the budget process.

All key boards and leaders decided it was time to change. They believed if the process could be done cooperatively, more time and energy would exist for long-term financial planning to raise the revenue side of the ledger for everyone. Trust was the key and it would take everyone's investment in the town and the future to change age-old habits.

Timelines for producing budgets were changed to allow for more contingency planning and greater accuracy of information. Communication strategies were adopted to help the community, town departments, and schools understand the process and its vision. Facilitation from the outside would help mediate conflicts and encourage teamwork.


Everything could not be changed overnight. It would take time to overhaul the process. A subcommittee will be formed with school and town representatives to begin long-range planning. The key change, which would become a future theme, was instituting cross-functional planning from the town and the schools. Three cost savings proposals on the table for years were passed to share resources between the school and town libraries, technology, and facilities.

• **Measuring results.**

Step seven, monitoring and evaluation, ensures that our efforts to manage conflict and competition and build cooperation stay alive. The


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 school committee and superintendent will set several measurements, including:

▶ A clear delineation of the educational goals and outcomes that would be easily understood by the community with benchmarks for measurement of progress.

▶ A decrease in expenses that would not compromise educational goals.

▶ An increase in alternative sources of revenue including strategic partnerships within the town and with other school systems.

▶ Support from the town on clearly established educational needs that would be understood by the town leadership.

▶ A long-range financial plan to meet school system needs.

▶ Positive news coverage about town selectmen and finance commit-

tee on their handling of the school system's finances.

Proactive Plans

The town is experiencing early success. One selectman called this process the "most productive time in this town's history."

This budget process could occur in any town or city. Conflict cannot be dealt with effectively by simply dealing with the symptoms. Only a systemic approach can change the budget process.

In the above example, conflict management changed a destructive process to a positive unifying opportunity.

In coming months, each school system leader may be tempted, when facing conflicts, to resolve them quickly. Beware. These problems may be symptoms of a larger issue that will not be addressed by a quick resolution. It is

well worth the time and effort to spend several hours with an administrative team working through this seven-step conflict management process to determine a strategy for implementation.

By doing so, leaders not only prevent future problems but also save significant time and money on unanticipated costs. As the pressure increases on administrators to do more with less, while continually dealing with special-interest groups, a systematic process rather than a reactive response to situations will be far more effective.

The stakes are high for education and the margin for error is getting smaller all the time.

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