

RESPONDING TO FACILITATE COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes a model and an exercise for responding to potentially conflictual situations in a way to turn an encounter into a collaborative problem solving process. The focus of the model and the exercise is to obtain and demonstrate a clear understanding of another person's perspective in order to be able to mutually agree upon the issues prior to jointly resolving the problems. The model entails reflecting the feelings and content of the initiator's message, probing to obtain a deeper understanding, reflecting further and clarifying one's interest, prior to engaging in a collaborative process to resolve the issues.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this exercise are multifold. One is to have the students understand the distinctions between framing a potential conflict as a problem to be solved, rather than a battle to be won. Another is to learn a model that would assist them in changing a potential win-lose conflict into a collaborative problem solving opportunity. A third objective is to apply the model and in the process improve the students' communication and conflict resolution skills.

PRIOR TO THE EXERCISE

Prior to engaging in this exercise the students will have received lectures and applied concepts relating to listening responses (Whetten and Cameron, 2011) conflict styles (Kilmann and Thomas, 1977) and focusing on interests and not positions (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1981). They would have also practiced initiating the resolution of a conflict in a way to facilitate collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to explaining the model and conducting the exercise, the distinction between framing a situation in terms of a problem to be solved versus a battle to be won is discussed. This is important in most circumstance. However, when faced with an emergency situation the tendency is to attempt to get the other party to do what you want them to do. This is often because you are convinced that your way is the best way of proceeding. When one wants to impose their solution or way of doing things, the orientation is to

do whatever is needed to win the battle. In the process, obtaining the other party's insights and knowledge is usually lost and the solving of the problem, if accomplished, is often neither collaborative nor close to optimal.

A sound approach to problem solving is provided by the rational problem solving model. This approach and the strengths and weaknesses of it are discussed. This is followed by discussing the difficulties associated in getting another person to want to solve the problem with you. The model is then explained and the relationships between the model, rational problem solving and getting the other to work with you to solve the problem are discussed.

A MODEL FOR RESPONDING TO FACILITATE COLLABORATION

The model is presented as a five-step process. However it is emphasized that it may be considered, in a more simplified form, as two-steps. First get the other person to be willing to solve the problem with you, which are the first four steps and then resolve the issue with that person. It is the first four steps of the model that is practiced in this exercise. The model is presented as follows:

1. Demonstrate that you've heard what the other person has said and if appropriate, his or her feelings. Do this by reflecting the feelings and the essence of what was said (**Reflect**)

2. Demonstrate you want to better understand his/her perspective. Do this by asking a question relating to what he or she had said. (**Probe**)

3. Continue seeking to learn the other's perspective by listening and reflecting back what you have heard and asking questions. (**Reflect and Probe**)

4. Let the other person know your underlying objectives. That is, what you would like to achieve regarding the issue and/or the relationship. (**Interests** - not positions)

5. Take a **Problem Solving Approach**

Work to get the other person to problem solve with you.

Reach agreement on the issues/interests/problems

Develop alternatives

Collaboratively evaluate the alternatives

Reach agreement

After discussing the model, it is presented in a summary form as follows.

Reflect

Probe

Reflect/Probe

State Interests (not positions)
Problem Solve - Collaboratively

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MODEL, RATIONAL PROBLEM SOLVING AND COLLABORATION

Prior to presenting the “responding to facilitate collaboration” model, the rational problem solving process, shown below is presented. Following the discussion of the collaborative model the relationship between the two models are examined.

- Define the problem
- Gather information
- Develop alternatives
- Evaluate alternatives
- Decide upon “best” alternative (determined by the criteria used to assess the alternatives)
- Implement and follow-up

The discussion demonstrates that the first four steps of the collaboratively responding model are designed to move primarily toward the very first step of the rational problem solving model. That is the purpose of the reflecting, probing, reflecting and stating interests is to be able to jointly develop a common understanding of the problem to be solved. It also gathers information. However, it is emphasized that before attempting to solve the problem, both parties should agree as to what is the problem.

INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENT

Prior to the class in which they conduct the exercise the students are given an assignment to write up a conflict they had with someone, preferably in a work setting. They are to present what happened, their interests, the setting and the relationship between themselves and the other person. They are also required to do the same thing from the perspective of the other person. The students are advised to present the interests of the other person as they most likely would be and that these would probably be somewhat different than their own. This serves as the background information for the other person when conducting the exercise.

EXERCISE – GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL TASKS

The exercise is first demonstrated in class with students who either volunteer or are “volunteered”. The student who is to practice the role of the responder provides the description of his or her conflict situation, from the perspective of the other person, to the person who will assume the role of the initiator. This is done in front of the class so everyone knows the situation. The initiator then tells the responder why he or she has a problem with the responder. The initiator is told to do this in a way that

shows he or she is upset or angry with what the responder did or failed to do.

The initiator then tells the responder why he or she is displeased with him or her. The responder then is to reflect back the emotions and the content of what he or she heard from the initiator and to ask a question relating to what was said. The responder is then to listen to the initiator’s reply and again reflect back what was heard. This is followed by the responder stating his or her interests.

After completing this, the class is asked to provide feedback to the responder. First, the class is asked whether the responder initially reflected back the emotions and content and then probed. If the responder did reflect and probed, the class is asked to describe how well it was done. The professor needs to be prepared to answer these questions. Taking notes during the exchange facilitates this. The class is then asked the extent to which the responder reflected back the answers to his or her questions and clearly communicated his or her interests. Again, the professor should be prepared to provide feedback as to what was said and how well it reflected back the initiator’s message as well as how well the responder clarified his or her interests.

The in-class demonstration of the model should take approximately fifteen minutes per role play. After the completion of three to five in-class demonstrations, the exercise is conducted in groups of three. In some courses, depending upon how they are structured, this may mean that the role plays are conducted in the following class. Each person is to perform the role of an initiator, a responder and an observer. The instructions provided for each role is as follows.

Observer: take notes on how well the responder reflected, probed, reflected and stated interests—in that order (steps 1- 4)

Observer: provide feedback to responder after the responder and initiator practiced the model, then

Initiator: provide feedback to the responder

Responder: take notes, do not defend/explain; responder may ask questions for clarification purposes

Responder: write-up what you:

Did to facilitate problem solving

Learned

Will do the next time you are in a similar position

Before engaging in the role plays the class is informed that some of the responders will be asked to report back their answers to the three questions they have been asked to write-up.

At the conclusion of the role plays the learning from the exercise is reviewed by discussing the answers from these three questions. This is done either by asking for volunteers or selecting individuals to report their conclusions to the class.

DEBRIEFING

The debriefing occurs during the presentation of the respondents' write-ups. What they say they learned and their plans for how they will do things differently are reinforced. When appropriate, alternative ways of applying what they learned are discussed. The potential benefits of using the model and of framing a conflict as a problem to be solved, rather than as a battle to be won are also reiterated.

REFERENCES

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- Whetten D. and Cameron K., 2011 *Developing Management Skills*, eighth edition. Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ