

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Volume 2, Number 2, Feb 2002

New Directions and Issues in the Teaching of Conflict Resolution

By Roy Lewicki

Introduction

The state of the conflict resolution field is maturing. With 20 plus years of history contributed from multiple disciplines, cross-disciplinary dialogue on theory and problems, eclectic teaching method, and a rich panoply of instructional tools, we still don't know if conflict resolution teaching and training methods are really effective. This article explores the issues related to understanding the effectiveness of the process and content of conflict resolution (specifically negotiation) teaching and training. It asks whether or not the right approach to training is being used and if the training 'sticks.' It also questions how the content of the field is evolving and if teaching methods are tracking the evolution.

Experiential Learning

Current conflict resolution teaching and training relies on experiential learning. The most well known model of experiential learning model consists of four elements; we propose that effective training in negotiation is directed at each of the four elements. The first element is *concrete experiences*, such as role-plays, case studies and 'live' negotiations, in which students experience negotiation and conflict resolution processes first hand. The second element is *observation and reflection*, a period when students are asked to think about and evaluate the concrete experiences and convey their viewpoint via papers, journals and debriefing. The third element is the *formation of abstract concepts and generalizations*. Students can create their own theory of behavior in negotiation, or integrate existing theory and research. The final element is *active experimentation*, a time when students can use theory and concepts to set goals and experiment with new behavior. In summary, the experiential learning model provides a time for experience (concrete experiences), reflection on that experience (observations and reflection), abstraction from the reflection (formation of abstract concepts) and prediction of future events (active experimentation).

Effectiveness of Learning the Negotiation Process?

Most negotiation trainers and teachers use, formally or informally, the experiential learning model in designing their courses. 'Learning' is usually measured through traditional assessment mechanisms such as exams and papers, and sometimes even actual negotiation performance. But in spite of the numerous negotiation courses, we really whether or not students really learn to negotiate more effectively with this pedagogical approach, or with any other method! Thus, real 'training effectiveness' has never really been measured in negotiation!

One problem with trying to measure 'training effectiveness' is that the processes of negotiation and conflict resolution are not single skills, but actually a complex set of sub-skills such as defining issues, framing, listening, brainstorming, packaging, questioning, persuasion and argumentation. Perhaps a more correct approach to teaching/training would be to spend more time on teaching these sub-skills, rather than repeated efforts to teach the more 'macro' conflict management skills. This approach could be accomplished by breaking negotiation skills down into competency-based components and teaching each individual skill component. Technology, such as videotape and computers, could also be used to teach these skills. Competency elements could be pre-measured and post-measured to determine levels of learning, and then combined into complex conflict management scenarios.

No matter what kind of process is used, training also has to 'stick' over time in order to be effective. Measuring training impact consists of assessing concept understanding, concept application, concept execution and overall satisfaction with the training. More research needs to be done in order to fully evaluate what results correlate with the impact and staying power of negotiation skills training. This research could include before/after studies, control groups and oral articulation of improvement or change. This kind of research is currently being done in the peer mediation and cooperative education arenas, but not in negotiation.

Casual data collection shows that the most useful concepts negotiation students can learn is planning, understanding negotiator personalities, understanding mechanisms for analyzing alternatives, understanding power differences and timing. One study revealed that 40% of students said they would find competency-based instruction useful while 60% would find it dull and tedious. 50% of students wanted to see and debrief videotapes of themselves doing practice negotiations. 20% of students would find it helpful to see 'models' of effective negotiation behaviors on videotape.

Are We Teaching the Right Content?

The negotiation teaching/training paradigm has dominantly been based on transactional, economics-based perspectives on negotiation. Most of the instructional tools emphasize self-interest, joint outcome

maximization and rationality in a one-time, bounded context (e.g. buying a car or house). However, in reality, most of us negotiate within a long-term relationship--family, friendships, coworkers, etc. Greater attention needs to be given to developing models of how people actually negotiate within long term relationships, and how we can instruct students to do this more effectively.

In addition to what is being taught, the current theoretical/conceptual base of negotiation is grounded in a largely Western, white male point of view. While more attention has been given recently to gender and cultural differences, these ideas are only slowly being incorporated into how we teach negotiation. There is an assumption in the field that theory is universal and easily adapted to context. This assumption may not be true, and more work is needed on negotiation theory across the lines of gender and culture.

Finally, other trends need to be incorporated into negotiation research, teaching and training. The global environment has many actors, consists of many cultures and exhibits rapid economic and technological changes. This needs to be considered. Extended organizations and diversity are also part of the future. Therefore, the prospect of organizational alliances, remote workforces and race, gender and cultural differences must be worked into negotiation theory and practice.

The Future

The future of conflict resolution teaching and training will most likely focus on the following themes: 1) negotiation as the management of relationships, 2) negotiation as management of emotion, 3) negotiation as management of interdependent personalities and 4) negotiation as management of complexity.

References

Deutch, M. & Coleman, P. (2000). *Handbook of Conflict Resolution*. Jossey Bass.

Greenhaigh, L. & Lewicki, R.J. (Oct. 1998). "New Directions in Teaching Negotiations: From Walton and McKersie to the New Millennium." Paper presented at a Conference on Negotiation and Change: From Workplace to Society: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert B. McKersie. M.I.T.

Greenhaigh, L. (2001). *Managing Strategic Relationships*. New York: Simon & Shuster.

Kolb, D. & Williams, J. (2000). *The Shadow of Negotiation*. Simon & Shuster.

Lewicki, R.J. (1997). "Teaching Negotiation and Dispute Resolution in Colleges of Business: The State of the Practice". *Negotiation Journal*, July, 253-269.

Lewicki, R.J., Saunders, D.A., & Minton, J. (1999). *Negotiation*. Third Edition. Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin McGraw Hill.

Morrill, C. (1995). *The Executive Way: Conflict Management in Corporations*. University of Chicago Press.

Original piece presented by Roy Lewicki, Fisher College of Business, Ohio State University, April 4, 2001, Lewicki.1@osu.edu

Abridged, with permission, for online publication by Samantha Spitzer, Wayne State University, 2002