

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

Volume 2, Number 3, May 2002

Slouching Towards Inclusion

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Volume 56, April/May 1995*

Okay, so we all agree we want our staffs to be more diverse and inclusive. We'd all love to have more trainers on our staffs who bring perspectives and experiences of non-dominant groups and cultures to the conflict resolution field. And we all want our work to be more responsive to the needs of different communities. So why doesn't it happen?

Yes, there is a shortage of resources for everyone in the field. Yes, there never seems to be enough time to do the outreach and mentoring that we should. And yes, too few foundations are serious about funding efforts which could support and strengthen a more diverse cadre of practitioners, particularly those who work in our most vulnerable communities.

Although all of these obstacles are real, we would like to suggest a more personal reason for so little change regarding who does the work and how it gets done: We, professionals in the conflict resolution field, just don't pay attention often enough! Those of us who live in the dominant culture of the white European, educated, middle class can scrutinize and analyze other people and other groups relentlessly and still not come to terms with our own biases and limitations. If we truly believe that self-awareness is so important for others, we ourselves need to rethink what we do and how we do it.

Several years ago, we, Carol and Jamala, made an agreement with each other to pay attention to the "diversity problem" and rethink our practices, with two goals in mind. First, in a city that remains socially, professionally, and geographically segregated, we want to build a crosscultural team of folks who willingly choose to work together. We also hope that our partners take their conflict resolution tools, and their commitment to inclusion and flexibility, to groups and projects outside of our collaboration. Second, we want to move beyond the settings, audiences, and facilitators already associated with conflict resolution in our local community. This has meant that we often choose to ignore established practices and professional protocol in an effort to break the conventional boundaries that influence the staffing, scope, and methodology in conflict resolution work. In this article, we will describe briefly some problematic situations we encounter as we

rethink our practices and some of the "rules of thumb" we have developed to deal with these situations.

Problem

A group of "well-connected" white educator/consultants wrote and received a foundation grant to do conflict resolution work with staff and students in a city school with an African American student population and an integrated staff.

What Could Have Happened: This could have been another case of "outsider" white folks coming in and telling black folks what to do.

What Did Happen: The coordinators intentionally hired a cross-cultural project staff, including African Americans and Latinas, who implemented the project.

Rule of Thumb #1: Build a team of diverse trainers and associates, including volunteers and part-time staff. Ask people in the community to identify folks they know who are "good with kids" or who "can keep a group cool when tempers are hot." Beat the bushes looking for potential trainers who may not have had access to advanced formal schooling or conventional conflict resolution training. Keep in mind diversity of gender. We notice a striking split in the field: Academics are mostly male and "front line" practitioners are mostly female. We've discovered that just the presence of young men can make a powerful difference in the impact of the training. In longer trainings, we have often set aside several non-paying slots for young men who have been identified as potential leaders.

Problem

A conflict resolution project staff met its goal of ethnic diversity. Some were "credentialed" and others were more informally educated; some were connected to the community and the streets, while others were connected to money, power, and knowledge institutions. Three problems were apparent immediately. 1. People brought very different perceptions, work styles, and experiences to the implementation of projects and programs. 2. There was the problem of power imbalance -- the white folks had most of the CR tools, computer expertise, and training experience. 3. People who were new to CR tools and processes simply could not afford to pay for expensive training and could not afford to "intern" without getting paid.

What Could Have Happened: These tools could have stayed in the hands of the dominant culture staff who'd remain lead trainers while people of color would not move beyond assisting the white folks. Over time, resentment and distrust would increase dramatically.

What Did Happen: Experienced practitioners teamed with people who

were long on community experience but short on formal training in conflict resolution. Everyone was paid the same salary. New staff practiced and refined their facilitation and conflict resolution training tools, both "on the job" and through rehearsal and video-feedback, and they identified key program development tasks that they wanted to learn. Everyone learned how to use computers. Two project staff who were new to this work now integrate conflict resolution practices into programs and services that they provide through other organizations.

Rule of Thumb #2: Name the power imbalances that exist and discuss how people feel about them. Make time to decide together how to close visible and invisible power gaps. Ensure that the organization validates different knowledge bases, approaches, and methodologies.

Rule of Thumb #3: Figure out some "creative financing" so that new staff can be paid as they learn "on the job." This is an essential step in diversifying a staff. It may involve some personal financial sacrifice; for example, experienced trainers can agree to be paid less or not at all on some projects so that interns can be paid. An organization may also agree to turn down projects or grants which don't include funds for internal staff development and mentoring.

Rule of Thumb #4: Block out time to explore differences in how staff members communicate and work. New staff members know you're serious if "getting to know you" time is paid time. Encourage people to share their idiosyncrasies, concerns, preferences around language, "buzz words," learning and work styles, and assessment and feedback. Ask people to: a) identify the strengths and resources that each individual brings to the group; b) discuss aspects of the work that are easy and fun as well as the parts that are scary or a drag; c) identify the tools and processes that each person wants to improve or refine as well as the kinds of support that will help them become more effective in these areas. In other words, model in your organization the process that you seek to model in your training.

Problem

A small full-time national office staff of a professional development and training organization is white, middle class, and almost exclusively from one region of the country.

What Could Have Happened: The organization could continue to lack diversity at all levels.

What Did Happen: The organization has recruited a diverse board of directors across regions and ethnic groups. More importantly, the organization includes many part-time training associates who represent a more accurate picture of the nation's diversity.

Rule of Thumb #5: Develop a cadre of trainers who have other part-time and full-time jobs. You can't always hire the people you'd like to

work with on a full-time basis. But you can create a network of associates who work three or four times a year. Part-time staff can strengthen an organization in other ways. When you recruit people from outside of the field of conflict resolution, you add "outsider" perspectives that can keep a vision from getting stale or too precious. Furthermore, you build the capacity for future collaborations across diverse constituencies.

Problem

Extension grants utilize university expertise and resources in community efforts to address local problems. In one case, university extension staff developed a leadership/conflict resolution/violence prevention project involving young people from four public housing projects. Full-time university faculty, who are overwhelmingly white and male, must participate in the implementation of extension grant projects.

What Could Have Happened: University faculty, who may not be comfortable in the "trenches," could have presented a program that was too "talky," failing to capture the attention and interest of young people.

What Did Happen: This extension grant was specifically written with the requirement that local community organizers and practitioners were project partners.

Rule of Thumb #6: Search out university faculty or grant sponsors who are willing to be allies with community people. Identify community people as partners in grants, allocating sufficient funds to pay them. You might also agree not to participate in grants unless community people, teachers, or service providers are involved in the development and implementation of the project.

Several universities are interested in developing more opportunities for diversity and conflict resolution training in their undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs. There is never enough money to hire two instructors from different ethnic backgrounds and frequently, the desired instructors don't have Ph.D.'s.

What Could Have Happened: The university could have hired one instructor, representing only one ethnic background.

What Did Happen: Two universities have allowed two instructors (one black and one white) to split the fees and co-teach courses and workshops. One university has also agreed to allow non-Ph.D. instructors to teach courses as long as a full-time faculty member "signs off" as the instructor of record.

Rule of Thumb #7: Find academic allies who are committed to the goals of this work and push the boundaries of traditional courses and

teaching configurations as much as you can.

Rule of Thumb #8: Especially when working with mostly African American or mostly white groups of students or teachers, we often insist on providing at least two facilitators, even if this results in reduced fees for individual trainers. The power of modeling inclusiveness can never be underestimated.

The final rule is to throw out some of our rules. If we are seeking genuine inclusiveness, some of us have to lighten up. Professional competence and success can be habit-forming. Relying on tried and true procedures and a standard set of conflict resolution models can prevent us from reaching audiences who might challenge "the way we do things." We all love it when participants leave a training with the emerging insight that "here is no right way." But are we willing to admit the same about our own training methods and approaches? Are we willing to adjust our goals, agendas, and outcomes to the cultural context of our work? Do we risk experimentation? We'd like to close with a situation that helped us face these questions head on.

We were training a group of young people who told us flat out that nobody could work with them. The community center's coordinator had asked us to design a two day training that would help students develop some negotiation and mediation tools. When we met the kids, they were glued to cartoons on the T.V. Our first day's agenda included making agreements, small group dialogues, community building exercises, and interactive activities that we thought would be fun and help introduce communication tools and skills. After several exhausting hours, we gave each other the look that said, "This isn't working." The pace was too slow and we hadn't grabbed them.

We chucked the agenda, drove home, got the camcorder and tape deck, brought it back to the room, and didn't say a word. Kids immediately wanted to know what we were going to do. We asked them if they would like to be videotaped practicing some problem-solving. We showed a brief student mediation, cooked up a juicy interpersonal conflict, gave the kids our one page mediation "cheat sheet," and let the camera roll.

We took turns being co-mediators with different students and debriefed each practice with the rest of the kids who were remarkably astute at identifying the process steps and mediation skills that enabled mediators to help the disputants work it out. When the kids watched the tape, they were also quick to suggest what could make each mediation better next time. We broke every rule in the book regarding "good process" and coherent sequence. But by allowing ourselves to step back and pay attention -- and notice that they were more focused on the T.V. than anything else -- we broke through the resistance and hooked them into the process. A final note on building authentic crosscultural partnerships: The bad news is there are no short cuts. All those hours spent blabbing about nothing, commiserating about the state of the world, and continually questioning beliefs and assumptions do build trust, comfort, and

mutual respect. We are writing this article collaboratively at 11 pm on a Sunday night -- a testament to both the challenges and rewards of building sustained cross-cultural partnerships.

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