

# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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## Leadership Development: Conflict Management for College Student Leaders

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Conflict is a pervasive part of group and organizational culture (Fasnacht, 1990) and unmanaged group conflict can be very chaotic (Kormanski, 1982). At the same time, the absence of conflict indicates or results in apathy. Therefore, the goal of groups should not necessarily be to avoid conflict, but to use conflict as a means of creating a more positive group atmosphere (Hungenberg & Moyer, 1996). Increasing the acceptance and management of group conflict, however, requires effective leadership to increase as well (Kormanski, 1982). As a result, conflict and leadership are inseparable (Burns, 1978).

Important leadership functions determine whether or not a group will work together, accept improvements, and try to develop better ways of doing a job. Knowledge of conflict management skills is very vital to those in leadership roles (Fasnacht, 1990) and is an "integral part of leadership effectiveness" (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993, p. 406). Despite the growing industry of conflict management training, little research and theorizing has been done in this area (Deutsch, 1994), in particular on the impact of skilled leaders on the group participants' conflict management style. The study described below provides a step in this direction. It examines the effectiveness of conflict management skills intervention training on the conflict management style of college student organizational presidents, key leaders within the larger campus community.

### The Problem and Its Background

Historically college student organizations have been seen as falling within the educational mission of colleges and universities (Schmitz, 1997) and particularly within student leadership development (Komives, 1994). More specifically student organizations have been viewed as "learning laboratories" (Street, 1997). Student organizations offer many opportunities for students including the chance to develop meaningful relationships, to pursue special interests, to clarify a sense of purpose and identity, and to develop interpersonal, leadership, organization, and social skills (Street, 1997). On the other hand, there

are many variables at play within student organizations that influence individual and group behavior. Schmitz (1997) applied organizational behavior theory to college student organizations, depicting the student as the core of the group, surrounded and influenced by task, technology, structure, leadership, and culture all within the university environment. Conflict is caused by the constant interplay of these variables. Franck (1983) reported that research conducted at the student activities divisions of three midwestern colleges indicated that the three major conditions that promote conflict in student organizations are role conflict, interdependence and scarcity of resources. These findings indicate the potential for constant conflict in student organizations.

Certain leadership skills are thus demanded of any leader in charge of a group (Maier, N.R.F., Solem, A.R., & Maier, A.A., 1975; Coyne, R.K., Harvill, R.L., Morganett, R.S., Morran, D.K., & Hulse-Killacky, D., 1990), and it is the job of educators to equip students of all ages with the relevant skills needed. These skills may also be key to their success in a rapidly changing society. In presenting their research on views of effective group leadership, Conyne et al., 1990, reported that experts in the fields of group counseling, training, research and practice responded similarly in urging more group leader training. Conyne and others also reported that leadership training with groups is often directed to group process and less to the mechanics of group leader skills, which address what leaders do. On the college campus, for example, there seems to be a general assumption that student leaders of campus organizations are automatically effective leaders that are

"flexible, prepared, knowledgeable about self, and are able to create therapeutic climates, intervene critically and to successfully apply 'problem-solving processes'" (Conyne et al., 1991, p.34).

This may very well be an expectation of group leaders but it cannot be left to chance by student affairs professionals that are engaged in student leadership development. Without proper training, many students are unable to effectively assume leadership responsibilities (Lamoureaux, 1984). These

"idealistic, energized students are quickly 'burned out' by unrealistic demands they place upon themselves and by the frustrations that develop as a result of the absence of a systematic approach to solving their organizational problems" (Duvall and Ender, 1980, p.145).

**I**n an analysis of the literature about college student organizations, Street (1997) found that little research had been reported on student organizations. He found that most of the literature involving student organizations dealt with the role organizations play in student involvement and student development. Most of the research examined the efforts that elements in the college environment, such as student organizations, had on college students. The challenge is for student affairs staff to assume their appropriate role as equal partners in the educational training and development of student leaders (McIntire, 1989). Many colleges and universities have set leadership training as a high priority goal (Newton, 1975; Faulkner, 1997). Sogunro (1997) cautions, however, that when training does occur, program providers lack the assessment of training impacts on program participants. Street (1997) specifically proposes that student affairs professionals perform research on student organizations and the effectiveness of various interventions on student organization development. He found that reported research on the use of organization development in college student organizations described new practices, programs, and techniques for working with student organizations but did not reflect attempts to measure the effectiveness of interventions.

Just as managing conflict is one of the aims of group leaders (Kormanski, 1982), one of the major challenges facing student affairs administration is student conflict. Conflict in any organization, especially those as volatile as student organizations (Franck, 1983), cannot be eliminated, but students can be trained to better manage conflict, while gaining invaluable life skills. Morton Deutsch (1994), renowned author of literature in conflict principles, training, and research, points out that mediation, conciliation, arbitration, problem-solving workshops and other forms of intervention are in widespread demand and use. Hugenberg & Moyer (1996) suggested that leaders, and as a result groups, who avail themselves to information on negotiation and mediation techniques will be more prepared to effectively facilitate outcomes of group conflict, enhance group satisfaction, and build quality interpersonal relationships.

## **The Research Study**

**O**ur study explored the influence of conflict management skills training on members of the Council of Student Organizational Presidents. From the larger group of 159 members, 30 student presidents were randomly assigned to the experimental group and 30 student presidents to the control group. A pretest/posttest experimental design was used in administering a self-reporting conflict management style survey to both groups. A 10-hour conflict management skills intervention was designed by the researcher to enhance participants' organizational leadership behaviors in the areas of understanding the nature of conflict, conflict management styles, communication, and the

conflict management models of negotiation and mediation. This training was provided to the experimental group but not the control group.

Our research hypotheses explored the difference in the self-reported pretest conflict management survey scores of the experimental group and control groups; comparative group gains on posttest scores between the experimental group and control group; differences in the self-reported conflict management pretest and posttest survey scores of the experimental group; and the perceived usefulness of the intervention by the experimental group. Demographic characteristics of both groups were obtained.

## **The Results**

Comparison of pretest and posttest scores revealed a significant increase in the Integrating Style score and approaching a significant decrease in the Obliging Style score for the experimental group who received the treatment. An increase in the Integrating Style is advocated as the only true and most effective approach for all concerned parties in resolving interpersonal conflict, so this can be taken as good news.

The control group, who received no treatment, showed no change from pre to posttest. There were no significant differences in the group gains on posttest scores between the two groups. Additional analysis revealed no relationship between gender or student classification and conflict management style. The post assessment survey revealed that a very high percentage of the experimental respondents agree or strongly agree that conflict management skills intervention increases a leader's capability to promote a collaborative instead of a competitive conflict management style, increases confidence to use conflict constructively, and helps to establish group process understanding within student organizations.

On the basis of these findings, the researcher concluded that conflict management style might be improved through conflict management skills intervention. In an effort to aid in leadership development, student retention, campus community building, and reduction in campus violence and expulsion, further investigation of the use of conflict management intervention with various groups on the college campus is clearly warranted.

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