
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Responding to Conflict

Joel Lee (National University of Singapore, Faculty of Law) · Wednesday, January 14th, 2015

This has been a bad week. With the Charlie Hebdo incident in Paris, I found myself despairing about the state of the human condition. And I know that the issues are complicated. On the one hand, the right to free speech balanced off against the right to exercise free speech responsibly. On the other, whether, even in the most extreme exercise of free speech can justify the actions leading to loss of lives. I don't propose to get into those issues here. Minds better than mind can ruminate and argue about them till the cows come home.

I am concerned in this entry with one question. Why do we respond to conflict the way we do?

Readers who are familiar with the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas-Kilmann_Conflict_Mode_Instrument) will know that it postulates 5 different approaches to dealing with conflict. These are (simplistically put):

- Avoiding: One chooses not to engage. They are unassertive of their own needs nor do they wish to cooperate to meet the needs of the other party.
- Accommodating: One chooses to give in. They are unassertive of their own needs and will cooperate to meet the needs of the other party.
- Competing: One chooses to fight. They are assertive of their own needs and are not interested in cooperating to meet the needs of the other party.
- Compromising: One chooses to give and take. They will assert and cooperate in so far as they recognize that it not realistic for them to get 100% of what they want.
- Collaborating: One chooses to assert their own needs as well as to cooperate to meet the needs of the other party.

Those of us who engage in interests-based or problem-solving conflict resolution will recognize the collaborative mode playing out in our methodology.

In the modern world, especially in a professional context, it is increasingly difficult to adopt an avoiding or accommodating mode to conflict. It would be difficult to justify and likely to be negative to one's career. More likely than not, one adopts a competitive approach and in those situations where the competitive approach does not seem to be working, then a shift to a compromising approach happens. In the rare instance, one will see the collaborative approach being manifested (without prompting from an external source like a mediator).

In the personal context, the avoiding and accommodating modes feature more with those preferring to keep the peace rather than to fight or compete. As has been expressed in "Getting to Yes", they

trade the substance for the relationship. Having said that, there are also glorious examples in the personal context where parties compete in the relationship as if it were a pitched battle.

Therefore, one conclusion that can be drawn from this is that context matters. However, it would also be fair to note that the competitive mode is by far the most common approach to dealing with conflict.

Why should this be? From a biological perspective, it is understandable. When a hungry sabre-tooth tiger is charging at you with intentions of you on its dinner menu, your reptilian brain shifts into fight or flight. You either run like hell or you pick up a handy weapon ready to be killed or be killed. Adrenaline is pumped into your system to facilitate this.

In the modern world, there are no longer any sabre-tooth tigers. Interestingly, we still nonetheless respond to threats (or perceived threats) with this fight or flight response. And since, the flight (avoidance) response is not as helpful in a professional context, that leaves us with the fight response. Unfortunately, our reptilian brain does not allow for, in the face of a threat, a collaborative response.

Fortunately, we are more than our reptilian brain. We have higher cognitive functions that allow us to redefine what we consider to be a threat. This is likely why reframing works. It allows us a different perspective on something that then changes the meaning of that particular event.

The problem is that these higher cognitive functions are only as useful as they have been programmed. Our socialized biases and responses are generally installed through observing how our families, friends and others in our environment respond to various stimuli including situations of conflict. And frankly, as a species, I don't think we are very good role models for dealing with conflict. Our first experiences might be observing a fight between our parents which sadly, for many, ends up in a shouting match. There is of course the making up after, but the pattern is clear. Compete then compromise (or accommodate).

Increasingly, our approaches to conflict are also influenced by popular media. Movies and television shows generally do not portray positive ways to deal with conflict. "Aggro" and "Emo" makes for good viewing. Make a movie or television show that portray adults dealing with conflict in positive and collaborative ways and I will predict it won't last long.

Our thinking is also influenced by the patterns of thought and classification inherent in our religion, education and philosophy. For example, western philosophy and classification is based on dualistic thinking. Something is either this or that. Right or Wrong. Win or Lose. Black or White. Good or Evil. Heaven or Hell. And an inability to classify them into these either-or categories creates discomfort. This dualistic thinking permeates exclusive monotheistic western religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam. (By way of contrast, non-exclusive polytheistic or non-theistic eastern religions are generally more at ease with shades of gray (albeit not 50 shades)).

Dualistic thinking makes it easier to feed into a competitive mindset. Everyone wants to be right and win. Which by an either-or definition means that the other person must be wrong and lose. Within a competitive mindset, it is difficult to conceive of the notion of win-win. Which makes it all the more interesting how and where the interests-based model was developed.

Where does that leave us? As mediators, I feel that we need to realize the extent to which the deck is stacked against us. For those of us who practice the interests-based model of conflict resolution,

it helps us understand why it is sometimes difficult to move parties away from win-lose thinking and why they may also prefer you as a mediator to evaluate. It also means that apart from providing a dispute resolution service, we also provide an educative function. Through our explanations, practice, behaviours and coaching, we are (hopefully) providing parties a positive example of communication and dealing with conflict.

Thank you for reading my ramblings to this point. It has been somewhat cathartic and while I still despair about the human condition, I also know that there are many out there working to improve it. All the more power to them and you.


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