

And Never the Twain Shall Meet: Administrator-Faculty Conflict

Book: *Mending the Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Strategies for Conflict Management in Higher Education*

Author: Judith Sturnick

How often do we try to walk around the "pink elephant" in the room once conflict arises? What are the roots of our conflict? Do we just dislike unpleasantness and, therefore, ignore conflict rather than face it head on? Do we take the time to listen to one another's thoughts and opinions, or are we busy building up "team support" for our own position?

Judith Sturnick (1998), in her chapter *And Never the Twain Shall Meet: Administrator-Faculty Conflict* recommends facing conflict as soon as it happens, but emphasizes that this often does not happen in higher education. Rather, conflict is either avoided or judged too quickly by involved parties. She further states that the one characteristic of an effective leader is the ability to ascertain the **importance** of the conflict and to know exactly when to intervene. There are several questions to ask when faced with conflict. Is the conflict deeply embedded in institutional culture and procedures? Is it systemic? What effect does, or could, the conflict have on the vision, goals or priorities of the institution? Are people already taking sides?

Judith Sturnick (1998, pp. 99-104) lays out 15 principles of effective conflict management.

- ✓ *Make a judgment about the breadth and seriousness of the situation in order to assess action timing.* Could this conflict have a major impact on the department or is it a minor issue that will run its natural course and then die down?
- ✓ *Clearly define the issues and competing agendas - for your sake and the sake of all parties involved - so that the focus of conflict management remains on the issues, not on personalities.* Remain objective and look at the desired outcomes of both sides.
- ✓ *Remember to honor and adhere to the institution's governance process.* This principle speaks to the importance of following the institution's policies and procedures. This helps to keep communication open and allows each party to feel respected.
- ✓ *Help constituents explore potential resolutions.* The best place to resolve conflict lies with the parties directly involved. Effective leaders will assist both parties in their search for meaningful solutions.
- ✓ *Find common ground.* The higher up the chain the conflict rises, the more cumbersome it becomes to resolve due to varying issues and agendas.
- ✓ *Manage your own emotions.* It is important for the mediator to remain neutral for both parties. Continue to remain calm, reassuring, and unbiased.
- ✓ *Listen attentively and make no assumptions.* Listen for what is **not** being said. Often times, underlying issues are being masked over by the presenting conflict.
- ✓ *Focus on issues, not personalities.* State and restate issues, rather than focusing on the persons

involved.

- ✓ *Describe, don't judge.* Define the issues, areas of agreement and disagreement without bias.
- ✓ *Stay in the problem-solving mode.* Keep parties focused on the problem at hand, and not on past history or blaming.
- ✓ *Stay in the specific present.* Leave the past in the past.
- ✓ *Stay positive.* Create a positive environment by reframing negative comments into positive comments.
- ✓ *Establish formal ground rules for behavior.* Maintain civility and encourage respect for all parties involved.
- ✓ *Conflict management takes time.* Conflicts do not magically appear overnight, therefore, do not expect them to always be resolved in one session. It takes time to process new information and ways of looking at situations.
- ✓ *Plan the follow-up.* Conclude your session with a summary of the discussion and areas of agreement. Include any areas that have yet to be resolved.

Individuals at any institutional level can use these steps: administrators, deans, chairpersons, and faculty members. Creatively solving conflicts is more than a way to resolve problems. It is a way to assist parties in **viewing a situation from more than one viewpoint**. It provides an opportunity to encourage people to be creative with how they approach situations and to develop more effective communication skills. Leadership, at its best, is proactive in effectively identifying conflict and addressing it in a timely and appropriate manner.

Sturnick, J. (1998). And Never the Twain Shall Meet: Administrator-Faculty Conflict. In Holton, S.A. (Ed.), *Mending the Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Strategies for Conflict Management in Higher Education* (pp. 97-112). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

Prepared by Sharon Pearson, FDR Graduate Assistant.