

CONFLICT AND THE SCHOOL LEADER:
EXPERT OR NOVICE

Patsy E. Johnson, Associate Professor
University of Connecticut
Department of Educational Leadership, U-2093
249 Glenbrook Road
Storrs, Connecticut 06269-2093
Telephone: 860-486-0284
E-mail: patsy.johnson@uconn.edu

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Abstract: School principals devote a significant portion of their time to dealing with conflict. Principals who look for the sources of these conflicts may find that many of them reside in the principal's own interpersonal behaviors, which may be products of their leadership skills. Four important leadership variables related to the amount of conflict are conflict response styles, problem solving, communicator styles, and bases of social power. Each of these dimensions can be partitioned into two domains--concern for self and concern for others. The degree and consistency that concern for others is operational determines the depth of expertise of the principal's conflict management. Expert school leaders have developed a healthy other-centered perspective of running their schools. Conversely, novice school leaders employ knowledge and skill gained to support only self-survival in the principalship, which will lead to personal and professional disappointment.

Annotation: The interpersonal behaviors and leadership skills of the principal are explored as possible sources of conflict. Descriptions of expert and novice responses to conflict scenarios are provided along with guidelines for becoming an expert conflict manager.

Introduction

The following comment was made by a competent, hard-working principal: "If there was another job in education that I was qualified for and would enjoy more that wasn't constantly dealing with conflict, I would look at it. Thirty to 40% of this job is preventing or dealing with conflict" (Whitaker 1996, p. 60[HL: [Whitaker](#)]). No doubt the preceding quotation resonates with many school principals. Conflicts between principals and students, teachers, parents, and community elements reflect our troubling social conditions. However, many conflicts find their sources in the principal's own leadership skills.

Although many variables impact an individual's leadership, only four will be considered here. They are: conflict response styles, social problem solving behaviors,

communicator styles, and bases of social power. These dimensions of leadership behavior are related to the amount of conflict that a principal encounters and the successes and failures resulting from managing it (Johnson and Payne 1997, Leithwood and Steinbach 1995). The following conflict episode entitled “Room 238” has been provided as a frame of reference for the discussion of these four leadership variables. Although the story is based on an actual incident, the names are fictitious and some of the details have been varied to preserve anonymity.

Room 238

It has been an unusually trying year for the custodial staff of the high school. Finding committed and competent people to work as custodians, for barely minimum wage, has become a difficult problem. In previous years, classrooms were swept and trashcans were emptied every afternoon. Unfortunately, the current cleaning staff must prioritize its emphasis on a daily basis. Long lists of loose ends remain each day, and an undercurrent of teacher discontent can be traced to this problem. “Just-thought-you-should-know post-its” fill the bulletin board behind the principal’s desk. The last few are, “When are you going to do something about this?” which are held especially tight on the board with firmly placed red pushpins.

An especially vexed teacher makes a visit to the principal’s office during her last period and delivers her concern about the conditions in her room and the “unhealthy” atmosphere. The ever-irritating school intercom system blares a call for the head custodian to come to the office immediately. After the principal delivers heated instructions about the day’s work list, room 238 moves up the priority list. The head custodian takes personal responsibility and painstakingly moves all desks into the hall, meticulously sweeps the tightest corners, mops thoroughly, and uses a buffing machine to get that final shine on the floor.

The high school drama coach has developed a very successful program, and this year the regional and state championship is in sight. This highly motivated teacher spends countless hours in preparation and rehearsal but has developed a reputation as being “pushy” with her needs. She also seems to harbor resentment for what she perceives as a lack of recognition for her program from the administrative and the instructional staff. The small but vocal parent group that supports her represents the community’s best, so her school-wide influence is powerful.

The regional drama championship is approaching and the after school rehearsal that day is not going well. The available space in the coach’s room seems especially tight, and the importance of the competition demands the appropriate area and atmosphere to inspire student performance. During a break,

the coach walks up and down the hall looking for a larger room for rehearsal. Checking each classroom door, she finds none unlocked—then she comes to room 238!

The coach instructs her team to move into this larger room. She barks her orders, “Move all the chairs back, do not spill drinks, and do not leave food lying around.” The rehearsal immediately begins to improve. Many students comment on how clean the room is and how pleased they are that the coach found this new area for rehearsal.

While working in the cafeteria, the head custodian realizes that he may not have locked room 238 and decides to promptly check it. Fatigue nearly keeps him from taking the stairs, but the thought of something happening to that room keeps his feet moving. He had worked hard on that room; resentment still sizzling on his brow, he wanted to make sure that the principal had a chance to see that the cleaning “orders” had been carried out.

As he enters the long, second-floor hallway, he hears student laughter and the sound of desks sliding across a clean tile floor. He breaks into a run and enters the room coming face to face with the drama coach. “What do you think you’re doing?” he screams.

Sensing his anger, the coach sneers, “It’s called work!”

Immediately, the battle is on—two adults, nose to nose, one yelling obscenity laced jargon and the other spouting vicious hyperbole.

The coach, assuming her perceived authority advantage, barks, “To the office, right now!”

“Fine!” responds the custodian assuming his own sense of authority taken directly from the principal’s orders.

Out they stomp, clenched teeth and fists, leaving 15 intensely interested students trying to remember and repeat every word in the argument, fair or foul.

The office door swings back hard, and the entering hubbub prompts a late-working secretary to summon the principal. The door slams shut with a sound that seems to wound the heart and soul of the school.

--Anonymous

When dealing with any conflict scenario, the conflict manager must consider the entire scope of the conflict episode. The primary conflict manager in the school is the principal, the person who has power to make changes and who is responsible for outcomes in the conflict episode. The next statement in the “Room 238” episode could have been delivered with good justification by the drama coach to the principal: “You caused this mess, now fix it!” Clearly, the drama coach and the custodian were not

headed for a confrontation that day because of their own actions. Their argument was set off because issues of significance for both of them, which were compatible under most conditions, became fractious touching points resulting from decisions made by the principal. It was the principal who set the chain of events into motion that led to the eventual emotional outbursts. It was the principal's avoidance behavior when dealing with the teachers' notes regarding the condition of the building that placed the combatants' emotions on edge and susceptible to rage reactions when sufficiently provoked. Also, the principal, because of lack of communication with the faculty, revealed no plan to solve the problems created by the shortage of cleaning staff. The teachers pointed out indirectly that the principal had the power to do something and that their patience was wearing thin because of the school leader's apparent lack of effort to get the job done.

Because of training and experience, an expert school leader would demonstrate knowledge of interpersonal behavior and skills in management when addressing the "Room 238" scenario. The novice, on the other hand, either lacks training and experience or fails to learn from experience to apply the knowledge and skills needed for successful leadership

Given the principal's deficiencies in leadership regarding the problems preceding the "Room 238" conflict episode, little hope is held out for an expert solution. Hope could be found if the principal were to link the events of the quarrel to faults within the principal's leadership. These faults are related to conflict response styles, problem solving skills, communicator styles, and bases of social power.

Conflict Response Styles

Individuals engaged in a dispute or conflict try to respond in two dimensions—concern for themselves and concern for others—which usually operate simultaneously. The success of the conflict resolution efforts depends on how well both concerns are satisfied. These dimensions can be represented as “win/lose” scenarios (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Five Possible “Win-Lose” Combinations and Concerns in Conflict Management

Combination	Concern
I win and you lose	High concern for self and low concern for others
I lose and you win	Low concern for self and high concern for others
I lose and you lose	Low concern for self and low concern for others
We both win some and lose some	Some concern for self and some concern for others
I win and you win	High concern for self and high concern for others

How one balances these concerns determines the response style. Five response styles or behaviors have been identified corresponding to the five win/lose combinations--dominating, obliging, avoiding, compromising, and integrating (Rahim, 1992 [[HL: Rahim](#)]).

The dominating response is “I win/you lose.” This is an undesirable outcome for many situations, especially when the stakes are high for both parties as they often are in a school. The effects are often destructive because the conflict is not resolved and might even be escalated. However, the undesirable effects of a dominating style may be offset by gains in organizational efficiency in some low-stakes scenarios. The dominating style

involves the use of power and aggressive behavior in attaining self-concerns. Such behaviors show a lack of respect for the rights and feelings of others, often display hostility and sarcasm, force one's feelings, beliefs, ideas, and decisions on others, and often shift responsibility from one's own actions by blaming others. Intense and tenacious enemies often emerge as an aftermath to this response. Tactics and strategies include attacking others' ideas and beliefs, offering derogatory remarks, and demanding concessions from others. Nonverbal behaviors include glaring or condescending eye contact, an attacking or threatening body posture, and hostile facial expressions.

The obliging response is "I lose/you win." A person responding in this way tries to absorb conflict by ignoring, covering up, or playing down differences with the other person. One's own self interest is ignored to satisfy the other's concerns. The obliging person has difficulty expressing ideas, beliefs, and feelings, is often unable to say "no" to unreasonable requests, feels guilty when saying "no," and will not make one's needs known. The long-term effect is for the obliging person to become a pushover for anyone initiating a conflict. If the person is in a leadership position, the conflicts will eventually spread to other groups and persons, which will lead to a dysfunctional organization. Tactics and strategies employed are to apologize and make excuses, be silent, use a soft, hesitant voice, and conform to ideas of the opposing party. The obligor tends to avoid eye contact, display nervous body movement, and maintain a closed body posture.

The avoiding response is "I lose/you lose." This allows the conflict to continue with potentially disastrous consequences for high-stakes situations. The response is to ignore the conflict issue altogether or pretend that it does not exist. The person avoiding the conflict refuses to discuss it. It becomes a "see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil"

situation. Such a response shows little regard for one's self or others in the conflict and indicates that one has little regard for others' abilities or interests in solving the conflict problem. This response may show an ignorance of what to do about the conflict. The primary strategy is to avoid behaviors that lead to interaction with others in the conflict.

The compromising response is "we win some/we lose some." This response is in an intermediate position between concern for self and concern for others. It incorporates some elements from each of the other responses. The compromising person is less integrating, less dominating, less obliging, and less avoiding than non-compromising persons. Each person sacrifices something to achieve at least a partial resolution of the conflict, which may not be satisfactory to either party. As a result, an apparent conflict resolution may fracture after some time leaving the conflicting parties to address the issues again. The compromise may be the best solution or it may be no solution. Time usually tells which is the case.

The integrating response is "I win/you win." This is the best outcome to the conflict. People using this style believe themselves to be important, and they believe the other people in the conflict are important, too. Behaviors include expressing feelings, beliefs, and ideas openly and honestly to others (whether positive or negative), listening to others, and responding to their comments in a clear, firm voice. Important nonverbal behaviors include eye contact, a pleasant, confident facial expression, and a relaxed and natural body posture. The integrating response means taking responsibility for one's own choices and outcomes and accepting one's own failure without blaming others, the system, fate, or luck. Useful strategies or tactics for "I-win/you-win" outcomes include: letting the situation "cool down" by taking some time out, not blaming or calling names,

stating both sides of the conflict, accepting blame when appropriate, and exploring various solutions and selecting the one both sides like best.

The principal in “Room 238” seems to have adopted the avoiding style as the first response to the teachers’ complaints about the condition of the school. Clearly, everybody loses because nothing happens. In fact, the conflict escalates to the point of confrontation between a vexed teacher and the principal. At this point the principal shifts to an obliging style with the teacher and to a dominating style with the head custodian. At every turn at least one party to the conflict is losing. As losses mount, so do tensions leading to a complete breakdown of the situation.

Problem-Solving Components in Conflict Scenarios

Expert conflict management comes from an understanding of the way one responds to each of several problem-solving components. Leithwood’s and Steinbach’s (1995, p. 46 [HL: [Leithwood](#)]) list of components provides a useful frame for understanding conflict management. They have been translated into conflict management considerations (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Expert and Novice Solutions to Problem-solving Components in Conflict Scenarios

Problem-solving Component	Expert Solution	Novice Solution
<u>Interpretation</u> —The principal determines the specific nature of the problem.	Will give the problems a priority based on the welfare of the school, see that even difficult problems can be managed through careful thinking, and gain understanding by collecting information to provide a clear comprehensive	Will give priority to their own welfare, see difficult problems as frightening and stressful, make assumptions instead of collecting data, and become distracted by irrelevant issues.

<u>Goals</u> —The principal will have some immediate purposes that he or she wants to achieve in response to the interpretation of the problem.	interpretation of the problems. Will be primarily concerned about knowledge of the situation, about providing all parties with relevant information, and the quality of the school program for the students.	Will be primarily concerned about their feelings, with making the influential parties happy, and the needs of the teachers.
<u>Principles</u> —The principal will have some relatively fixed guidelines and assumptions serving to direct thinking. These would include operating principles or usual practices.	Will tend to use principles to help set priorities and set goals for problem solving. They also tend to take personal responsibility for their actions.	Does not often display underlying operating principles and blames others for problems.
<u>Constraints</u> —Some principals will indicate that they cannot solve a problem because of some obstacle that limits their ability to act.	Tends not to cite constraints.	Tends to cite constraints.
<u>Solution Processes</u> —Principals plan and order their actions, utilize resources and support from others, communicate and consult, and evaluate their actions.	Plans in detail, consults extensively to gather information, details steps in reaching a solution, and values planning for evaluation of the conflict management process.	Responds more spontaneously with little attention to planning, consults with others less frequently, and ignores follow-up evaluation.
<u>Affective Dimension</u> —Often, principals will show some state of feeling or anxiety as they approach and solve problems.	Usually calm and confident that a satisfactory solution will be found.	May be fearful, lack confidence, and mask their feeling with belligerence or arrogance.

In “Room 238” the principal faced many problems that required expert management. However, the expert application of the problem-solving components is not apparent. The principal fails to interpret the conflict issues in the situation and set goals that are in the best interests of the school. Although the leader may have other options to consider and untapped resources available, the principle guiding his actions seems to be

procrastination rather than setting any priorities or goals. The principal feels constrained by factors beyond his control--a shortage of custodial personnel. The principal's solution process is to respond to what or whoever is applying the most pressure. The affective dimension reveals a head custodian under considerable pressure from the principal's insistence that everything else be dropped to attend to room 238. The principal is anything but calm and confident when badgered by the teacher for long-overdue action.

Communication in Conflict Scenarios

Each problem-solving component likely will involve some communication. Others, through some form of communication, know the principals' interpretations, goals, principles, constraints, solutions, and affective responses. The way the leaders communicate—the communicator styles—will have a strong impact on the outcome of the conflict episode. How something is communicated, either verbally or nonverbally, can powerfully convey a different message than the actual words spoken. The communicator signals how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered or understood. The expert communicator is skilled in transmitting messages that match the intent of the sender, leaving little room for misunderstanding.

Norton's (1978 [HL: [Norton](#)]) effort to measure an individual's communicator styles generated 11 different types that can characterize two types of leader styles—directive or supportive—which are grouped as follows:

1. Directive leader styles

- a. animated--the animated communicator provides frequent and sustained eye contact, uses many facial expressions, and gestures often;
- b. argumentative--the contentious communicator is argumentative;

- c. dominant--the dominant communicator talks frequently, takes charge in a social situation, comes on strong, and controls informal conversations;
- d. dramatic--the dramatic communicator manipulates exaggerations, fantasies, stories, metaphors, rhythm, voice, and other stylistic devices;
- e. impression leaving--the impression leaving communicator tends to be remembered because of the stimuli that are projected. What is said and how it is emphasized affect a person's level of impression leaving;
- f. open--the open communicator readily reveals personal things about the self, easily expresses feelings and emotions, and tends to be unsecretive, unreserved, and somewhat frank;
- g. precise--the precise individual has a concern for documentation and accuracy in communication situations.

2. Supportive leader styles

- a. attentive--the attentive communicator really likes to listen to the other, shows interest in what the other is saying, and deliberately reacts in such a way that the other knows he or she is being listened to;
- b. communicator image--a person with a good communicator image finds it easy to talk with strangers, to small groups of people, and with members of the opposite sex;
- c. friendly--the friendly communicator is encouraging to people, acknowledges others' contributions, openly expresses admiration, and tends to be tactful;
- d. relaxed--the relaxed communicator is calm and collected, not nervous under pressure, and does not show nervous mannerisms.

The directive styles involve activity and emphasize the communicator's doing and being talkative. Directive communication means telling others what to do, setting rules and procedures, and giving specific guidance. The focus of the communication is on the leader. The directive communicator shows high concern for self and low concern for others. This can be a characteristic of the novice leader. The supportive styles, on the other hand, are more passive and place the orientation of the communication on the other person. They involve acting friendly and considerate, being patient and helpful, showing sympathy and support when someone is upset or anxious, listening to complaints and problems, and looking out for others' interests. Such human relations skills are marks of expert leadership and relate strongly to the integrating conflict response style (Johnson & Payne, 1997 [HL: [Johnson](#)]).

The degree to which each of these styles is used characterizes the leader as directive or non-directive and supportive or non-supportive. The leader's communicator styles in the "Room 238" scenario must be characterized as non-supportive. The principal is inattentive to repeated requests for something to be done about the school's maintenance. The principal's communication is unfriendly, it lacks tact, it is not encouraging to an overworked employee, and it fails to acknowledge the custodian's or the drama teacher's contributions to the school. The principal is not relaxed; the pressure from the teacher provokes a response that is hurried and poorly thought out. It could also be argued that the principal is non-directive as well. The principal's avoidance behavior tends to minimize all communication to the point of creating a leadership vacuum.

Social Power in Conflict Scenarios

The effect of interpersonal skills in communication and conflict response and the benefit of personal abilities in problem solving extend only as far as the leader's social power. Social power is used when one person wants to change or control the behavior, attitudes, opinions, objectives, needs, and values of another person. The amount of power is determined by the extent that one person can influence the other. The source of power that school leaders use is critical to the influence they acquire.

A typology of social power developed by French and Raven (1959 [HL: [French](#)]) places five power sources into two groups as follows:

1. Personal power

- a. expert—special knowledge, information, or expertise--share it or withhold it; and
- b. referent—the desire to identify with the leader by others accompanied by their feelings of acceptance or approval.

2. Position power

- a. legitimate—the legitimate right of the leader, usually by virtue of the position that a leader holds, to prescribe or control behavior in others resulting from their feelings of obligation or responsibility;
- b. reward—the leader's control over reward or things desired; give something or take something away; and
- c. coercive—the leader's control over punishment or things not desired; administer it or remove it.

Personal power is derived from the personal abilities developed and demonstrated by the leader. The degree to which these abilities have been developed relative to the

leadership context (e.g. principal in a school) determines the strength of the leader's personal power. Position power, in contrast, is derived from the organization, regardless of who occupies the position. Principals may believe that their position power is eroding with the encroachment of teacher empowerment initiatives, school-based councils, and collective bargaining by teachers and other staff. They may also feel that along with the criticisms of public education the position of principal no longer carries with it the respect of earlier times.

The school leader typically may use one or more power bases to exercise influence. The power base or bases chosen by the leader potentially affect such psychosocial dimensions as conflict, trust, and satisfaction, either positively or negatively. These outcomes include commitment, compliance, or resistance. The likely outcomes of referent, expert, legitimate, and reward power are either commitment or compliance. The most likely outcome of coercive power is resistance.

Strong relationships have been found between social power bases and conflict response styles and communicator styles (Johnson & Payne, 1997 [HL: [Johnson](#)]). Personal power is strongest among principals who typically employ integrating and compromising conflict management styles and attentive, relaxed, and friendly communicator styles. Position power is strongest among principals who typically employ avoiding and dominating conflict management styles and argumentative and dominant communicator styles.

In "Room 238," as in most school conflict scenarios, several power dyads form a complex web of social relationships that impact on the conflict, problem solving, and communication processes. Some dyadic relationships are clearly superior/subordinate

(e.g. teacher and student, principal and teacher, or principal and custodial). Usually, in these relationships the superior exercises power over the subordinate. Other relationships are provider/client (e.g. principal and parent, teacher and parent, and to some extent custodian and teacher). Power in these relationships depends on who has the upper hand, so to speak. For example, in the “Room 238” scenario, the principal has legitimate power and would do well if expert and referent power were also available when dealing with the custodial problem. The teacher and the custodian are also operating from their perceived legitimate power. The teacher’s power to select any workspace available is based on one simple premise, “If you expect me to do the job, then I have to have a place to work.” The custodian’s perceived power comes from the principal’s mandate to present a clean classroom to the teacher who demanded it.

Guidelines for Becoming an Expert Conflict Manager

Anyone will find becoming an expert conflict manager challenging but possible.

Observing the following seven guidelines will do much to assure success.

1. Begin each conflict episode with an ‘I win, you win’ intent to resolve the conflict.
2. Use communicator styles that show a focus on others, rather than on self.
3. Assess the power relationships involved in the episode.
4. Employ strategies used by expert problem solvers.
5. Spend time reflecting on the relationships of conflict responses, problem solving, communication, and power to each conflict scenario.
6. Analyze the behavior of expert school leaders who have become expert conflict managers.

7. Evaluate and reflect on the aftermath of your conflict episode for signs of emerging expertise in conflict management and continue to work toward expert leadership.

These guidelines clearly indicate that expertise in conflict management depends on the principal's capacity to direct concerns away from self to a concern for the welfare and needs of individuals and the organization. The degree and consistency of concern for others determines the depth of expertise of the principal's conflict management. In other words, those principals who manage their conflict expertly have developed a healthy other-centered perspective of running their schools and probably their lives. On the other hand, knowledge and skill gained to support only self-survival in the principal position will likely lead to the kind of personal and professional disappointment revealed by the principal's comment quoted at the beginning of this article. Even so, self-survival is the frequently chosen operational frame. It is even accepted or encouraged as the norm by such exhausted remarks as, "All I can do is try to survive from one day to the next," or by such cynical advise as, "What is most important in this job is to cover your [backside]." This is the frame of the perpetual novice.

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