

A CULTURE OF CONFLICT

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QUT

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A Culture of Conflict

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ABSTRACT

While some conflict in organisations may be a healthy incentive for action and competition, conflict that becomes the dominant feature of the organisation's culture is damaging. In non-profits it cripples the organisation's ability to function because the organisation is unable to set goals or to present a coherent, united front when applying for government grants.

Research theory in management and non-profits discusses the need for consonance, but our research demonstrates that some community organisations do not fit the model presented in the literature.

The paper presents the results of a consultancy engaged in by the authors between December 1994 and August 1995 with a small, church-based, non-profit organisation. The organisation works in an environment where there is a need for unity, but our research found conflict between the volunteers and the paid workers, and among the volunteers themselves. Conflict, which had become the over-riding consideration in all decisions, was paralysing the organisation.

The paper gives some background to the organisation and the context in which it operates, describes the nature of the consultancy and the findings, and explains the recommendations we made to the organisation.

INTRODUCTION

The paper describes a consultancy engaged in by the authors - all of whom were working as academics in the School of Management at the Queensland University of Technology at the time - with a small, church-based, non-profit community organisation, which had received a government grant to enlist help with their management skills. None of us expected the findings we made, and none of us was prepared for the conclusions we reluctantly had to come to. We entered the consultancy believing our task would simply be to provide the organisation with the necessary information on management skills. However, what we discovered was that, while the

organisation works in an environment where there is a need for unity, there was, instead, deep conflict between the volunteers and the paid workers, and among the volunteers themselves. Conflict, which had become the over-riding consideration in all decisions, was paralysing the organisation. Our findings do not fit the model of non-profits presented in the literature, as research theory in management and non-profits discusses the need for consonance and assumes that this consonance will naturally exist in such organisations. This paper gives some background to the organisation and the context in which it operates, briefly reviews the relevant literature, describes the nature of the consultancy, the findings and recommendations we made, and explains the conclusions we came to about the culture of conflict.

BACKGROUND

The organisation, which we will call St B's, describes itself as "a non-school organisation providing post-school educational and social support to students with disabilities by developing, implementing and monitoring individual transition programs from school to adult life" (St B's Statement of Commitment, 1994). It is based in the northern suburbs of Brisbane, and caters for young people in the 18-21 year age group. Its target group is in the range of mild to moderate level of intellectual disability. Clients have attended special schools, special learning units, and sometimes Senior Colleges. They enter the Transition Program either as school graduates or at a later stage as home-based.

St B's has a duly constituted sponsoring body in the Catholic Church and is supported by the administrative structure of Catholic Social Response with the capacity to effectively manage all aspects of the project. The Church provides a venue for meetings and for the implementation of the Individual Transition Programs. St B's also receives funding from the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) system of the Queensland Government Education Department, provided it meets certain criteria on evaluation, and from fees paid by the parents and carers of the students enrolled in the courses.

The program originated with a group of parents and/or carers who perceived a gap in service provision for young adults who have an intellectual disability. These parents/carers believed that on exiting the formal education sector the young people were experiencing difficulty in gaining suitable jobs in the community; and they were also failing to establish those support

mechanisms that would help them retain any skills they may be able to acquire. The parents/carers believed that, as a result, the young people withdrew from community contact and experienced a rapid decline in their literacy, numeracy and communication skills.

The parents/carers also believed that the majority of young adults with intellectual disabilities **are** clearly motivated to develop new skills but need assistance in establishing short-term goals. They believed the young people would participate only if the activity was seen by them as appropriate to their immediate needs and was conducted in a supportive environment. The parents/carers maintained that neither they nor the young people concerned were well informed on options for further learning and that none of them knew where to go to seek information and help. The parents/carers believed that, even if opportunities did exist for these young people, the young people themselves would need assistance in making choices that were right for **them**.

Therefore, a group of parents, carers and community support persons established St B's Transition Education program with the following objectives:

To assist mildly intellectually handicapped young adults in the transition from school to community life:

- . to identify opportunities that respond to individual needs;
- . to receive support in accessing a range of educational activities that are community based;
- . to achieve personal goals and ambitions;
- . to build and maintain social contacts.

(St B's Statement of Commitment, 1994)

St B's is administered by a Management Committee, made up entirely of volunteer workers who are parents and/or carers of the students; and two paid employees - a Project Coordinator and a Resource Teacher. Other teachers are employed on a casual basis to teach the specialist courses offered. It was the Management Committee that had received the government grant to employ our consultancy team.

This grant was a training grant from the Queensland Government Department of Tourism, Sport and Racing; and the funding application covered six training objectives, namely:

- . conflict resolution
- . meeting procedure
- . goal-setting - for policy development and review
- . decision-making skills
- . identification of and utilising individual skills
- . writing submissions for funding.

As the management consultancy team from QUT felt qualified to assist in those areas, between September and November 1994 Di Lewis negotiated the consultancy contract with St B's.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are three areas of literature pertinent to the research carried out at St B's - organisational culture, conflict, and a relatively new area pertaining to the management of non-profits.

Organisational Culture

The concept of organisational culture has been well documented in the literature, though there is still inconsistency in definitions and therefore uncertainty in the meaning of the term. While some authors see culture as basic assumptions held by organisation members (Sathe, 1983, 1985; Schein, 1984; Lewis, 1992), most authors prefer to view it as a combination of assumptions, feelings, beliefs, values and behaviour. Lewis (1996) believes that this preference could be either a result of the culture model's basing itself on the Organisation Development model, which takes this broad view of culture; or a result of the important influence of the books of Peters and Waterman (1982) and Deal and Kennedy (1982), who also propounded the "combination" theory.

Whichever view of culture is taken, culture itself is a contributing factor to what makes one organisation different from another. And, according to the literature, it can have a significant effect on the performance of the organisation. While we do not adhere to the Peters and

Waterman claims of culture as the sole basis for the success or failure of an organisation, we did find that one facet of the culture; namely, conflict, had an important effect on the behaviour of organisation members. Therefore, it indirectly affected the performance of the organisation studied.

Organisational Conflict

Traditionally conflict has been regarded as abhorrent in organisations. When seen as behaviour intended to obstruct the achievement of another person's goals, it is easy to understand the belief that a healthy organisational climate should reflect complete harmony (Mullins, 1993). However, this unitarist view (espoused by Drucker, 1989, and Handy, 1987, in Mullins, 1993) and others is no longer paramount. Conflict can be a positive force that stimulates interest and creativity, identifies and assists in resolving problems and promotes group cohesion (Schmidt, 1974, in Mullins, 1993). It can also be a stimulus for organisational learning (Pascale, 1990). Vecchio, Hearn and Southey (1992) suggest that conflict is not necessarily good or bad but inevitable, and it is only the effect that conflict has on performance that should be judged. Both too much or too little conflict can be detrimental to organisational performance. Too much conflict leads to chaos and disorder, while too little can result in complacency and lack of innovation. The implication is that conflict must be managed.

Sources of conflict include communication, structure, personal variables and organisational boundaries (Mullins, 1993). Bryans and Cronin (in Mullins, 1993) identify the opportunity for conflict between parties; that is, between corporate and individual goals, between departments or groups, between the formal and informal organisation, between manager and managed, between the individual and the job, and finally between individuals. However, while these factors are standard in organisations, the amount of conflict varies. Conflict erupts when the actions of one person or group are perceived or felt by another person or group to be preventing, blocking, or interfering with the effective actions of the other group. Only then must conflict be managed.

There are many strategies for reducing conflict, including standardisation of rules and procedures; shared behaviours; planning and scheduling, which encourage shared values and norms; negotiation and bargaining, which acknowledge differences and strive for acceptance or resolution; and putting aside differences in order to strive for superordinate goals, which encourages organisational commitment (Robbins et al., 1994). Our consultancy team

attempted to use the advice given in the literature in our training sessions with St B's.

Non-profit Organisations

Non-profit organisations are becoming known as the "third sector", as differentiated from the public and corporate sectors ("first" and "second" sectors respectively). In recent times there has been greater attention paid to management concerns in third sector organisations because of the increasingly complex and uncertain resource environment existing, which demands sophisticated managerial skills and a strategic approach. These organisations are exhorted to undertake strategic planning, quality assurances, and to stream-line their budgeting practices in the same way as public and private sector organisations. Many people in third sector organisations do not have the necessary background and skills to enable them to effectively carry out these tasks.

The management literature generally assumes there is little to distinguish the practice of management between sectors. This assumption can be challenged by exploring one of the distinct aspects of non-profit management - that non-profit organisations are motivated by values rather than by wealth creation or the phenomenon of power. Such motivation suggests the existence of consonance and cohesion in group effort. The value-base of non-profit organisations reflects a counter-cultural dimension to their management, founded as they are on values and beliefs, in stark contrast to the competitive, capitalistic and profit-oriented values of business. These sorts of organisations - those with foundations that affirm value consonance - experience frustration when conflict surfaces.

While the management literature generally recognises the worth of some conflict as possibly productive, such dissonance and conflict pose dilemmas for non-profit institutions, particularly church-based organisations, who base their values on "The Ultimate". As such, the "bottom line for church-based non-profit organisations is in "calling to faithfully witness to such values" (Jeavons, 1993). Puffer and Meindl (1995) state that church-based non-profit organisations appear to operate according to values concerned primarily with "the other" rather than for ego-orientated concerns.

Non-profit organisations that operate under the auspice of the Catholic Church rely upon a culture (scripture, teachings, stories and heroes) where consonance is perceived as more "Christian" and that disagreement or conflict is unnecessary if not damaging to the

organisational mission.

PROCEDURE

As members of St B's Management Committee were not prepared to come to special training sessions, the QUT proposal included an agreement for one or more members of the QUT management consultancy team to attend St B's regular monthly meetings and to conduct training sessions at that time.

Between November 1994 and January 1995 Di Lewis gathered background information on the organisation, its aims and objectives, its history, its composition, its problems and its possible needs. Erica French and Di Lewis then attended the first Management Committee meeting for 1995 in February to meet with the committee and the paid employees to discuss the content of the training sessions and the form the committee would like these sessions to take. Any member of the Management Committee who wanted to speak to any member of the consultancy team was invited to make an appointment to do so. People were assured of confidentiality if they so wished, as we wanted people to feel they could speak freely and candidly with us.

As a result of this meeting and in full consultation with the Management Committee, we designed the following program:

- . March 1995: Meeting procedure
- . April 1995: Goal setting - for policy and review
Decision-making skills
- . May 1995: Conflict resolution, assertiveness and negotiation
- . June 1995: Writing submissions for funding
Identification of an utilising individual skills
- . July 1995 Submission of QUT Management Consultancy Team's report

Di Lewis also held an interview with the two paid employees later in February to gather information on their feelings about their job, what problems they perceived they faced, what they felt they needed in order to be able to do their job properly, and what the QUT management consultancy team could do to help them. As a result of this interview, written

information was given to the committee to help them in their compilation of a job description and duty statement for the two paid employees. The paper now gives a short overview of the material covered in each of the five training sessions listed earlier.

February 1995 - Discussion of Program and Meeting Procedure

In addition to designing the training program for St B's, a short critique was held of the meeting. Questions the committee were asked to consider were:

- . What was your aim in this meeting?
- . Do you feel you achieved your aim?
- . What hampered you?
- . What helped you?
- . How could the meeting have been changed to make it more effective?

March 1995 - Meeting Procedure

This session was conducted as a training session in response to an actual meeting. Di Lewis observed the meeting of the Management Committee and gave a critique of the meeting, using the following themes:

- . What is the purpose of the meeting?
- . Starting and finishing on time
- . The role of the chairperson
- . Purpose and use of the agenda
- . The minutes
- . Motions and amendments

A summary of the main points covered was distributed to each member present and the committee was given two books to help them with their meeting procedure problems: Puregger, (1977) and Puregger (1986).

April 1995 - Goal setting for policy development and review; Decision-making skills

During this session, the following concepts were covered and a discussion held on them with the committee:

- . Decision-making and goal-setting within the context of policy formulation. These areas are understood to be part of the strategic planning process.
- . Particular emphasis was given to decision-making skills and how this contributed to policies and goals.
- . The four characteristics of policies were detailed and examples were given.
- . The seven steps in goal-setting were outlined.
- . There was repeated reference to the need to adapt decision-making and goal-setting practices to the non-profit environment in which St B's operates.

A summary of the session was provided to committee members.

May 1995 - Conflict resolution, assertiveness and negotiation

Each member of the committee was given a small booklet on conflict compiled by Erica French, and encouraged to follow it during the session. The session began with a discussion on conflict - the traditional view, definitions, and potential sources of conflict in relation to the committee. Each member was encouraged to take part in the discussion to determine the likely sources of conflict that the committee must resolve. At this time the different behaviours likely to develop in a conflict situation were outlined and examples given.

An experiential exercise (taken from Johnson and Johnson, 1987) was used to allow each person to be involved in the identification of behaviours and their use in achieving an outcome in a conflict situation. In debriefing this session particular emphasis was paid to confirming the benefits of managing conflict in an overt manner and of building trust in the group. Assertiveness and negotiation were discussed in the context of the conflict model.

June 1995 - Identification of and using individual skills;
Writing submissions for funding

This final session consisted of two parts:

In the first part of the session, the topic of writing proposals for funding was covered and the information was related to the types of proposals St B's Management Committee might write in the future. Main points covered in this session were:

- . Rules of persuasive writing
- . Organisation of the proposal

In the second part of the session, advice was given to the committee on how to identify and use individual skills that members of the committee and the paid employees may have. The following points were covered:

- . Abilities and skills
- . Types of abilities
- . Aptitude
- . Interests, values and preferences
- . Relationship between interests and abilities
- . Skills identification
- . Task identification
- . Skills utilisation.

The first five points were given as background only, with emphasis being placed on skills identification, task identification and skills utilisation. Specific examples of each were given and members of the committee were urged to consider how a knowledge of their own skills might be utilised by St B's.

Handout summaries were given on both segments of this meeting and a feedback questionnaire was distributed to gauge people's feelings about the management training program. People were asked to fill it in at their leisure and return it through a stamped, addressed envelope.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The interview with the two paid employees led to the conclusion that these people were unsure of their role and duties. The contracts of employment were very general and needed to include a duty statement, pay rates and length of time for which the contract is valid. In addition, no member of the Management Committee voluntarily asked for advice or assistance from any member of the management consultancy team, though all had been invited to do so. All interviews were on an official level as part of the negotiation of the initial contract or at the request of a member of the management consultancy team. Only three members of the committee responded to the written questionnaire, and all responses were general and complimentary. However, there was no indication that the respondents had solved any of their problems as a result of these sessions - a very disappointing result for us.

As a result of the training sessions held with St B's Transition Education, it was concluded that:

In meeting procedure, while St B's held its meetings regularly, the conduct of the meetings could have been tightened to improve efficiency and to ensure important issues were given adequate attention. The Chairman (in this case, the President) allowed the meeting to go off on tangents and permitted people to make the same point a number of times. This sometimes resulted in a disproportionate amount of time being spent on relatively minor issues. Financial reports were missing from the meetings observed, resulting in a lack of information on the financial situation of the committee. We tried to convince St B's that it is very difficult to do forward planning without knowing if there are the resources to support it.

In planning and goal-setting, St B's Management Committee needed to be more specific. The policy statement was too general and gave little direction to members of the committee on what actual *actions* to take in any given situation. This was hindering rational decision-making, as committee members had no benchmark by which to measure their decisions. Decisions at the time seemed to be based on what individuals *wanted* rather than on what the goals of the organisation were. Part of the problem seemed to be that committee members were not entirely clear on what the organisation's specific goals *were*. A clearer policy statement would have enabled members of the committee to have a common basis for decision-making. It also seemed to us that the committee was trying to work alone rather than taking advantage of help from parent bodies such as Catholic Social Response and other organisations with similar goals. With all the confusion over goals and decisions, there appeared to be little effort being made to attract more students to the programs. Therefore, the aims of the organisation were suffering.

In conflict resolution, assertiveness and negotiation, there appeared to be a number of breakdowns in communication between the committee and the paid employees and between the members of the Management Committee themselves. For example, there was confusion over the difference between service development and service delivery and the breakdown of responsibilities; the committee did not seem to be aware of exactly what the paid employees did; there was confusion over who should be monitoring the employees and what form this monitoring should take as at the time there appeared to be no clear reporting mechanism.

St B's were not negotiating, bargaining or planning, and nor were they putting aside their differences in order to strive for the greater good of the organisation. As a church-based organisation, it did not display evidence of values based on "The Ultimate". Overall, they did not appear to be using any of the strategies recommended in the literature for reducing conflict.

People's individual skills, abilities and values were not being accepted. Members of the committee did not appear to recognise individual differences and the benefits these differences could bring to their organisation. We felt that if committee members had a better understanding of the organisation's goals, they would be in a better position to make use of individual's contributions.

St B's had very little experience of proposal writing, but were in a position to take advantage of a number of government grants. We felt that, provided they were realistic in their proposals,

they had an excellent chance of success. However, we discovered part-way through our training program that the group had received the government grant to employ **us** by accident - they had not really wanted it at all. It had been applied for by a member who had since left the organisation, and the committee felt "stuck" with it.

St B's also needed to be more assertive in responding to funding cuts for payment of its employees. It needed to formulate an argument and submit a proposal arguing against such cuts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While members of the QUT management consultancy team were convinced that lack of management skills was not the base root of the problem at St B's, we made the following recommendations to the Management Committee as "band-aid" measures:

Meeting procedure

- . That, in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its meetings, St B's Management Committee follow recognised meeting procedure as outlined in such books as *Mr Chairman* and *How to Chair a Meeting* and in the handout notes given to members of the committee.
- . That the committee ensure that financial statements are prepared and presented at each committee meeting.

Goal-setting and decision-making

- . That the policy statement be re-written by the committee in clear, concrete terms; that everyone on the committee be involved in its writing; and that help with the writing be sought from the Catholic Social Response.
- . That the committee develop links, coalitions and relationships with individuals and organisations familiar with funding cycle procedures. The aim would be to be mentored by organisations competent with this process. Such liaisons would be important in formulating policy and strategy, as well as assisting the committee in ascertaining alternative funding opportunities.
- . That the committee be more outgoing in its attempts to attract more students and that it use parent bodies and other organisations engaged in similar processes to help it in this process.
- . That the committee differentiate between service development and service delivery and incorporate this difference into the duty statements for its paid employees.
- . That the committee and the paid employees, when both parties are satisfied they have negotiated acceptable contracts of employment and duty statements, review these whenever a new contract is drawn up, to ensure employees are fully aware of their duties, responsibilities, rights, and terms of employment.
- . That the paid employees not attend for the full length of monthly committee meetings, but come only for those parts in which they are directly involved.
- . That the committee develop a three-year strategic plan based on its mission its differentiated service to the community. Linking this plan within the concerns of parent organisations would be prudent. Deciding whether such a plan is going to be resource-driven (that is, determined largely by funding organisations) or mission-driven (that is, determined largely by vision and client needs) is important.

Conflict resolution, negotiation and assertiveness

- . That committee members try to improve communication with the paid employees by familiarising themselves with the employees' work. It was recommended that committee members take advantage of the paid employees' offer made at a Management Committee meeting to discuss their work with them and to view that work first-hand.
- . That the committee attempt to identify some of the conflict issues currently unresolved.
- . That the committee practise conflict resolution method as demonstrated in the training session, starting with some of the smaller issues in order to gain an understanding of its

versatility. The committee can do this by:

- . regularly choosing an issue and assigning behaviour roles and asking individuals to determine strategies within those roles;
- . encouraging and accepting others in a variety of behaviour roles in conflict situations;
- . ensuring that individuals have adequate time to determine their position in conflict situations and to encourage assertiveness;
- . using one of its own members to facilitate the process of conflict resolution. (This should be someone who can stand outside the conflict itself and manage the process);
- . using a variety of conflict behaviour methods in order to resolve the conflict;
- . implementing further strategies to cement the resolution once the conflict is resolved.
- . That where decisions have to be made on a one-off situation, the committee use negotiation.

Individual skills and abilities; proposals for funding

- . That the committee respond to funding cuts by being assertive as a group and arguing a case either for retention of previous funds or for an increase in funding
- . That the committee apply for a small grant to employ help in the facilitation of the process of conflict resolution over three practice sessions.
- . That the committee begin a skills inventory for detailing skills available to the committee either from within or from people allied to the committee.
- . That the committee identify the major tasks of the Management Committee with a view to determining the skills make-up of these tasks.
- . That the committee determine any areas of weakness - areas where the committee has insufficient skills, including a lack of potential to develop those skills.
- . That the committee supplement current skills through recruitment or through a development program.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Our overall conclusion was that it was not the lack of management skills that was crippling St B's; it was the conflict in the organisation. While needs existed in all areas we had covered in

our training program, we felt that if the conflict could be resolved, the needs in the other areas would be a long way towards being solved also.

It is true that some conflict in organisations may be a healthy incentive for action and competition, but conflict that becomes the dominant feature of the organisation's culture is damaging. In non-profit organisations it cripples the organisation's ability to function because the organisation cannot set goals or present a coherent, united front when applying for government grants.

At St B's the conflict had become endemic; it was simply part of the culture. And so, like most culturally-based things, it was not recognised, and certainly not openly and honestly acknowledged. Therefore, the session on conflict was regarded very warily, and the conflict-resolution exercise conducted was treated as an interesting, but largely irrelevant, time-filler. This attitude is typical of something that is deeply ingrained in the culture of an organisation; it is unconscious and non-debatable.

It is doubtful, therefore, whether the QUT management consultancy team "taught" St B's anything they would choose to make use of; but we did learn a lot ourselves. However, we cannot be sure just how far our findings and conclusions can be extrapolated to other non-profit organisations. Much more research needs to be done in the area, but we hope that the material provided here will be of some benefit to other organisations experiencing similar problems.

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