

10-1-2006

Conflict as a Form of Capital in Controversial Community Development Projects

Jeff Zacharakis

Kansas State University, jzachara@ksu.edu



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Recommended Citation

Zacharakis, J. (2006). Conflict as a Form of Capital in Controversial Community Development Projects. *The Journal of Extension*, 44(5), Article 4. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol44/iss5/4>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.



October 2006 // Volume 44 // Number 5 // Feature Articles // 5FEA2



PREVIOUS ARTICLE



ISSUE CONTENTS



NEXT ARTICLE



Conflict as a Form of Capital in Controversial Community Development Projects

Abstract

Without conflict there would be little passion and interest in most community initiatives. Conflict within controversial community development projects is capital that can be reinvested and serve as a positive source of energy that benefits the project. To illustrate this point, this article looks at a composite of three actual sub-watershed projects in Iowa's Maquoketa River Basin and analyzes how the different levels of conflict affected these projects.

Jeff Zacharakis

Assistant Professor
Department of Educational Leadership
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas
jzachara@ksu.edu

Without conflict and turmoil there would be little passion or interest in most community initiatives. In the United States, the notion of conflict as a positive source of energy is not typically taught to community development specialists or community workers. Rather, workshops on conflict management are offered to teach techniques on how to minimize and control conflict. Yet, by minimizing conflict we risk disempowering the community and neutralizing its energy.

This article shows how conflict is capital and how, when managed correctly, can be an asset to stimulate citizen participation in controversial community development projects. The first part of the article discusses the importance of conflict. The second part describes the environmental problems and types of conflict experienced while working in northeastern Iowa on the Maquoketa River Basin watershed project as a community development specialist for Iowa State University Extension between 2000 and 2003. Finally, the third part describes the role of the community developer and discusses some useful strategies to strengthen a conflict-laden project.

The Importance of Conflict and Turmoil

To nurture openness and honesty in any organization, a dialogue and expression of conflicting points of view must be encouraged. Leas (1982) argued there are times to curb conflict and times to instigate conflict for the good of the organization. The following summarizes Leas' (1982) five reasons conflict should be escalated rather than decreased.

1. People are so caught up in being nice and agreeable that they do not look at problems seriously or are not challenged by ideas.
2. People wanting harmony and peace make it difficult for anyone who is not like them to become part of the organization. Hence there is a tendency to promote conformity rather than an honest discussion of ideas.
3. When differences and uniqueness are accentuated, aggressive behavior is minimized. If people feel free to express themselves, they feel less disenfranchised and therefore are better able to work with others toward a manageable solution.
4. In moderate amounts, conflict is a way of expressing aggression. It is better to have this aggression expressed openly than to hold it inside until there is a volcanic explosion.

5. Finally, conflict increases consciousness, aliveness, and excitement. (Leas, 1982) pp. 107-109)

Although writing from a business perspective, Blackhard and Gibson (2002) noted that opportunities emerge when leaders learn how to capitalize on conflict. They stated:

Conflictive behavior in the workplace (or community) can range from very positive at one extreme to very counterproductive at the other. Properly managed, conflict can enhance creativity through constructive challenge and interchange, improve decisions by introducing more information and perspective, and foster learning through mutual problem solving. It can therefore further the purpose of the organization by improving the performance of its people and systems (p. ix).

These points are important to understanding why managed conflict is essential to complex community development projects.

The Maquoketa Watershed

The Landscape and Its Environmental Problems

The Maquoketa River watershed is the largest contributor of excess sediment and nutrients among the 13 major rivers into the upper Mississippi River. More than 61,000 people live in its 1,879 square mile boundary. Its landscape has many small, rural communities and small and medium-sized family farms situated in rolling hills with highly fertile soil.

The Maquoketa Watershed Project was initiated in 1998 to promote citizen-led watershed councils in each of the watershed's 25 sub-watersheds. It was an effort to strengthen citizen awareness and local participation by developing a comprehensive plan to address its environmental problems. In 1999, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) allocated funds "to develop local leadership with a long-term vision and commitment to deal proactively with nonpoint source pollution issues" (Maquoketa Quarterly Report, 1999, p. 1).

Nonpoint source pollution tends to be systemic within this ecosystem and is therefore much more difficult to control than point source pollution. Throughout the United States, nonpoint source pollution has been identified as the leading cause of water quality degradation, most of which is attributed to agricultural practices (Schilling & Wolter, 2001; Shepard, 1999).

Between 1999 and 2000, rumors ran rampant throughout the region that EPA was seriously considering regulating all farming operations in the same way that industries were regulated in order to reduce nonpoint pollution. One threat was the possibility that livestock operations over 300 animal units would fall under EPA regulations instead of the current threshold of 1,000 animal units. Farmers were angry with the government for threatening further regulations and blamed them for the watershed's environmental crisis.

Assistance from a Local Leader

As the result of EPA pressure to strengthen agricultural regulations, several community members in three of the sub-watersheds requested Extension's assistance to organize community forums to discuss specific issues and opportunities to form a local watershed council. In one sub-watershed, Extension staff worked closely with Philip, a county soil and water conservation district commissioner and a resident of the watershed. Philip was a trusted neighbor and respected leader. He knew most people by name and was familiar with their farms and their personal lives. The most important decision made in each of these sub-watersheds was to identify and invite key leaders to participate on the planning committee and provide guidance on how to reach out to as many residents as possible, even those with combative personalities and chips on their shoulders.

Philip expected 50 residents to attend this first meeting, but was not shocked when the final count came close to 150. There were many reasons people attended this public forum. Some farmers merely wanted to know what "the government was up to." Other farmers, who were known to be conscientious producers, adopting all the best management practices recommended by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), wanted to support this establishment of a sub-watershed council. A few rural residents wanted to blame farmers for all the environmental problems.

Addressing the environmental issues, the pending economic threat to their livelihoods, and the stigma of being labeled a polluter, weighed heavily on every farmer's mind. These problems exacerbated the potential level of conflict. Philip and the planning committee made everyone feel welcome regardless of their reason for attending.

Types of Conflict and Turmoil

Even though there is a common belief that "Extension faculty is in a unique situation to help address these conflict-laden situations" (Corp & Darnell, 2002), it is unrealistic to think that a county director or community development specialist can manage all types of conflict. Yet they can learn to recognize points of conflict and use them to the advantage of the project. Working with these sub-watershed projects, a number of conflict types surfaced.

Family Conflict

Most farming operations include parents, brothers and sisters, and aunts or uncles. In some farming operations, family members who share in the ownership do not live on the farm or participate in its management. In one instance, a farmer arrived with his brother and father. Even though they shared ownership, his brother lived in another state and was most interested in receiving his rent, and his father was less than 5 years away from retirement and did not want to invest any money into upgrading their feedlots. It was a tremendous victory for this farmer to convince his family to attend the meeting, even though there were years of conflict between them related to planning the future of their farm.

In another family, both brothers had joint ownership and worked side by side on their diversified livestock operation. Yet only one brother attended the watershed meetings. He was totally responsible to keep the other brother, who did not trust "the government," informed about each meeting. Family conflict was often undetected, yet it affected the dynamics of the watershed project because the managing partner of the farm corporation was unable to make decisions and therefore was unable to fully participate.

Conflict Between Neighbors

In rural communities everybody's business is public knowledge. In one case several farmers were upset with their neighbor for straightening his section of the creek that ran through all their properties, resulting in greater downstream erosion. In another situation, a farmer with a large feedlot was notorious for spreading large amounts of manure when his land was frozen and the nutrients would not be absorbed into the soil.

Most of the time the community developer only knows that certain neighbors do not speak to each other, while their neighbors know the reason for the discord. Having someone like Philip identify these potential firestorms was essential to avoiding open conflict, while still enabling all parties to continue participating in the process. The Extension community developer served as facilitator and project coordinator and had to maintain a neutral position when conflict emerged in order to keep the entire group working together.

Conflict Between Rural Non-Farm Residents and Farm Families

Rural residents often complained about neighboring farmers. How close to "my" house can farmers spread manure? Don't farmers realize that smells associated with livestock production are irritating? Can't they see that their equipment tears up the road during the spring? Moreover, rural residents were quick to blame farmers for all the pollution in their watershed. On the flip side, many rural residents did not understand the seasonality, physical stress, and tight profits associated with farming.

When these problems were expressed, the group was reminded that the purpose was not to place blame but to work together to solve a common problem. Ironically, in one watershed when council members started testing their creek water for contaminants, it was discovered that one small unincorporated village of 50 homes had connected their septic systems, many years earlier, directly into a drainage tile, allowing contaminated water to flow directly into the stream. After this discovery, it became clear that everyone shared blame, and everyone shared responsibility to improve the watershed.

Conflict Between Farmers and Government

While many farmers prefer to have complete control of their operation, they have become dependent upon government payments to maintain their cash flow. Though many farmers have learned to work with their local USDA office, the tension is similar to other groups who work or live within cultures of dependency, such as corporations and welfare recipients. There was great apprehension to openly discuss government regulation, yet farmers were quick to agree that they would love to farm profitably without government payments. It was apparent that many producers did not trust federal and state government agencies.

Conflict Between Government Agencies

The final type of conflict experienced while working on these sub-watershed projects was that between local, state, and federal government agencies. Extension was the educational organization providing research and assistance on a variety of topics (e.g., nutrient management). In contrast, state and federal agencies were regulatory (Zacharakis, Morton, & Rodecap, 2002). Local representatives of state and federal agencies did not make the rules and had little latitude to interpret these rules.

It was problematic and confusing when the regulatory agencies attempted to design and implement educational components in these citizen-led sub-watershed projects. Was their purpose to generate "democratic decision-making and action" or to persuade farmers to adopt USDA's list of best management practices? For the Extension specialist, the challenge was to maintain a strong working relationship with federal and state partners while encouraging local residents to mobilize around issues that concerned them.

It was not unusual to observe multiple types of conflict during the community meetings. A farmer might be experiencing problems simultaneously in his or her family, with neighbors, and with government agencies. The complexity of multiple types of conflict increased the difficulty in managing these sub-watershed projects.

Managing Conflict

Although it is difficult to accurately predict the outcome of a difficult project, certain points of conflict can create positive energy and lead to action. Community development theory "promotes broad-based, participatory decision making in order to initiate social action processes to improve local economic, social, cultural, or environmental situations" (Christenson & Robinson, 1989, p.14). The community developer's role is to work with people to maintain the balance between economic, social, and environmental needs; individual goals; and collective needs by encouraging them to see the whole picture. The challenge is to provide public space and encouragement for citizens to engage in critical thought, careful planning, and involvement in democratic decision-making and action.

Hustedde (1998), in his insightful presidential speech to the Community Development Society, stated, "Soul can make sense out of paradox. It thrives on it. The many paradoxes within community development cause its practitioners to draw upon their intuition and their discerning spirits in deciding what is right when dealing with them" (p. 160). Hustedde (1998) argued that community developers are caught in the middle. "Community developers cannot afford to ignore the powerful or they find themselves powerless. Nor can they neglect their key concerns, which are to expand the range of affected parties' voices, action, and self-understanding" (p.160).

Kreitlow (1970) argued that when educators are involved in change or controversy they test their professional security. The issues that create conflict and tension in controversial projects also create conflict and tension for the community developer. All too often Extension workers side with key community leaders or government representatives, at the expense of the project itself or the community at large. Typically the reasoning is that Extension workers will work with these key leaders and government representatives in the future, and they cannot afford to jeopardize these relationships. The long-term result of this practice is that the community sees the Extension worker as a representative of government, rather than a fair and knowledgeable educator who can be trusted to serve the community first and foremost.

In capitalizing on conflict and maximizing community participation, the experience in the Maquoketa watershed illustrates some important community development strategies.

1. Accept conflict as an important component of a project. Conflict can be an asset that will strengthen a project.
2. Identify points of conflict, some of which are easily visible and some of which are not, and determine which ones are opportunities and which are threats.
3. Work closely with local leaders.
4. Create an environment where everyone is welcome and where their ideas will be heard and discussed.
5. Be willing to take chances and set your personal job security aside. In the end your job will become more secure.
6. Advocate for the community as a whole, not individual stakeholders or various factions. Remind everyone that the goal is to solve a problem, not to place blame.
7. Explain to your government partners that your job is to nurture citizen involvement and community empowerment and that at times this may mean that you will disagree with or challenge their agency's policies.
8. Be flexible and open to new ideas. Over time project dynamics change; therefore, you may need to change your development strategies.

Conclusions

Dynamic systems and organizations evolve because of environmental pressures such as local politics and cultural norms. Within the watershed example, the pressure on residents to change their farming practices and address environmental problems ideally might have been attributed to growing awareness and an intrinsic desire to come together and address the problem. In reality, though, the impetus to work on this problem was extrinsic. Without EPA's threat to regulate farming and without the promise of additional government monies for cost-sharing the implementation of prescribed conservation practices, these citizens probably never would have pulled together, and these sub-watershed projects might never have been initiated.

The types of conflict identified in the Maquoketa River watershed project show that conflict is not

one-dimensional and often is not directly related to project goals. Conflict has many different faces that can arise at unexpected times and in unanticipated ways. Finally, conflict is a form of capital that when reinvested and placed in its proper perspective results in a stronger project with a greater likelihood of success. As capital, conflict is a source of energy that invigorates the community. The challenge for Extension professionals in these types of projects is to recognize how conflict can be an opportunity to strengthen a project, rather than an impediment.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of John Rodecap, Maquoketa Watershed Project Coordinator with Agronomy Extension, and Lois Wright Morton, Extension Sociologist, Iowa State University.

References

- Blackard, K., & Gibson, J. W. (2002). *Capitalizing on conflict: Strategies and practices of turning conflict to synergy in organizations*. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black.
- Christenson, J. A., & Robinson, J. W. (1989). *Community development in perspective*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Corp, M. K., & Darnell, T. (2002). Conflict-laden issues: A learning opportunity. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 40(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002february/rb1.html>
- Hustedde, R. J. (1998). On the soul of community development. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 29, 153-167.
- Kreitlow, B. W. (1973). Controversy: Its positive role in education. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 11(3), 9-16. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1973fall/1973-3-a1.pdf>
- Leas, S. B. (1982). *Leadership and conflict*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Maquoketa Quarterly Reports (1999). *EPA Region VII Water Quality Cooperative Agreement*. Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa. (October and December)
- Schilling, K. E., & Wolter, C. F. (2001). Contribution of base flow to nonpoint source pollution loads in an agricultural watershed. *Groundwater*, 39(1), 49-58.
- Shepard, R. (1999). Making our nonpoint source pollution education programs effective. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 37(5). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1999october/a2.html>
- Zacharakis, J., Morton, L. W., & Rodecap, J. (2002). Citizen-led watershed projects: Participatory research and environmental adult learning along Iowa's Maquoketa River. *Adult learning*, 13(2), 19-23.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*. joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)