

# Creating Awareness of the Spiritual Dimensions of Conflict Resolution by Contemplating Organizational Culture

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*Conflict resolution training for faith-based groups asks members to look at how to integrate their group's specific rituals, practices, and values into a reconciliation process and uncover the deeper, taken-for-granted meanings of these features of spiritual life. However, faith-based organizations differ significantly along several dimensions. Conflict resolution training must take into consideration both the commonalities and distinctions among faith-based groups.*

I was hired by our local community mediation center to develop and deliver a basic conflict resolution training for “faith-based” communities. The opportunity to provide this training was exciting and challenging, perhaps even dangerous, given the ambiguity of the term *faith-based* combined with the plurality of spiritual groups here in the sunny Southwest. On the one hand, in the current political economy faith-based implies support for an administration that advocates government decentralization, reduction in publicly financed social services, and greater influence of special interest groups (especially fundamentalist religious groups). On the other hand, an advertisement for a conflict resolution training for “spiritual” groups might entice more of the New Age, personal transformation groups that color our New Mexico desert landscape. It was equally likely that “spiritually based” training might discourage liberal churches, synagogues, and mosques from enrolling—the groups we were most interested in attracting.

Even more challenging for me was creating a syllabus and course materials that were relevant for any and all of these groups. In this article, I

describe my approach to conflict resolution training for faith-based groups, which draws on both their common characteristics and their distinctions. The article concludes with discussion of the challenges for trainers who plan to work with religious and faith-based congregations.

### Organizational Culture and Faith-Based Organizations

During the last decade, the new institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) called attention to how broad social and cultural processes confer legitimacy on certain kinds of structures, technologies, means, and outcomes, thereby shaping organizational activities and the behavior of organizational actors (Lounsbury and Ventresca, 2003; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991a). This institutionalization takes place at the sectoral or societal level and accounts for the similarity among organizations in specific fields. Earlier theories characterized organizations as disparate, rational, goal-seeking entities populated with actors who sought to maximize their self-interest. The new institutional theory focuses on the standardized and homogeneous elements of organizations and explains how the organizational field, comprising governmental agencies, professional associations, the legal environment, regulatory bodies, and bodies of knowledge, accounts for the homogeneity in organizational shape and structure across the field (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991b). The organizational field provides a “set of cultural rules that give generalized meaning to social activity and regulate it in a patterned way. The rules then seem natural and taken-for-granted” (McMullen, 1994, p. 710).

Unlike public education, art museums, and corporations, the religious sector is weakly institutionalized and not subject to extensive centralized regulation and control (Chang, 2003). Within the religious sector, local cultural differences contribute to the vitality of congregations. Not only are there denominational differences but within denominations there are subgroups that are markedly dissimilar from each other. For example, regular Presbyterian churches are quite different from Biblical Presbyterian congregations, as Orthodox Jewish synagogues differ from Jewish Renewal congregations.

However, it is possible to identify some regular cultural elements across congregations, in part due to standardized elements at the denominational level. Type of polity—a denomination’s governing structure—for example, accounts for some consistency in congregational structure and culture (Becker, 1998; DiMaggio, 1991; McMullen, 1994). McMullen’s research

finds that polity significantly influences the behavior of parishioners at the local level. In denominations with a hierarchical polity, church members who are faced with symbols, myths, and rituals of ecclesiastical authority accept the church representative's authority, while those with a congregational polity are more likely to have participatory decision making and the opportunity to craft local rules.

Additionally, it is the centrality of values reinforced by the myths, rituals, beliefs, and practices that differentiates the sacred organization from the secular (Chang, 2003). Although the content differs across (and sometimes within) denominations, religious and faith-based groups are defined by the importance of values and beliefs, their articulation in myths and ritual, and the need for an ongoing community to enliven them. A major goal of conflict resolution training is to help people engage with these aspects of organizational culture and learn to use them as tools in the conflict resolution process.

### Types of Conflict

According to the new institutional theory, conflict is played out in the external realm, in fieldwide structures at the national level where administrative professionals vie to define the field, its goals, and its organizational forms. Institutional theory pays little attention to conflict at the local level (DiMaggio, 1991; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991a). But Becker (1998) finds that conflict is a normal part of congregational life, although its frequency and intensity vary according to congregational model. Becker identifies four congregational models—family, community, leader, and house-of-worship—that cut across denominational lines, and she describes how the nature of conflict and conflict resolution style vary with the congregational type. Her models offer guidance in how to tailor conflict resolution to address important distinctions across congregations.

In the family model, congregation members form a close-knit community with intimate and supportive relationships. Conflicts emerge over stylistic differences between the lay leaders and the pastor, or over the pastor's competency. Although conflict is infrequent, when it occurs it engages the entire congregation and is highly personalized. Resolution occurs through the departure of the pastor or lay leader, or sometimes through a vote.

In the community model, the congregation is also close-knit, with community-building as a conscious goal. People develop friendships in smaller groups, such as study groups or committees. There is twice as much conflict in community congregations as in family-style congregations, and it is framed in

moral, not personal, terms. Conflict can emerge over anything: money, staffing, worship, outreach, and sexuality and gender issues. Older and newer members are often the protagonists. Community congregations are process-oriented, seek consensus, and often settle conflict through compromise.

Leader congregations, the third model, are visible and proactive players in the political and social problems facing the larger community. Conflict is framed as a moral issue and occurs over a range of issues involving the entire congregation. The congregation is not as close-knit as the former models, and the pastor assumes a dominant role as the congregational leader and spokesperson in the community-at-large. In most instances, the pastor determines the best outcome and lobbies the congregation until agreement is reached.

Fourth, the house-of-worship model describes congregations whose members come only to have a place to pray, worship, and experience their connection to the Divine. Few events are viewed as conflict, as individuals have limited commitment to and connection with other members of the congregation. Conflict is viewed as an administrative matter and is resolved by a committee or staff.

Conflict resolution training must recognize how local distinctions impinge on the type of conflict that emerges, how that conflict is framed, who is involved, and traditional conflict resolution methods. By meeting with congregation leaders, staff, and members well in advance of preparing a workshop or class, trainers can attune their materials, including role play, to the local organizational culture. The rest of this article discusses how conflict resolution training incorporates some of the commonalities in faith-based and religious organizations and reflects on the role of the trainer, especially in light of the distinctions discussed here.

### Commonalities

Values, rituals, and practices embody assumptions about how group members respond to conflict. The assumptions behind values, beliefs, rituals, and practices often remain tacit and constitute the taken-for-granted knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) of church membership and participation. Thus another training goal is to facilitate discussion of the underlying messages about conflict in spiritual and religious beliefs.

#### *Values*

Spiritual groups cohere around values that order interpersonal and community relationships. In every spiritual tradition, we can find guidance about

war, peace, conflict, hate, love, neighbors, strangers, restitution, and retribution. These values are embedded in artifacts: liturgy, holy books, myths and stories, proverbs and adages, the words of the founders, and today's sermons. They surface as our own deeply held and often unconscious beliefs and values about justice, punishment, revenge, restitution, and peace.

Because values are so powerful, they can unite or divide a community. Many of today's disputes dividing religious fellowships emerge from value differences. For example, intradenominational animosities about gay union, marriage for priests, and abortion rights have created a divisiveness that churches are finding difficult to bridge.

Although values can sustain or divide a community, their undeniable presence in faith-based organizations presents an opportunity rarely at hand in other conflict settings. The role of a trainer is to facilitate a discussion of values, both those that help and those that hinder conflict resolution, and to guide discussion about their influence on interpersonal and organizational behavior. A discussion of values may lead participants to consider commonly held transcendent ideals such as personal sacrifice and relinquishment of the ego in order to preserve community, while also valuing and caring for oneself (Beneson, 1996; Sidy, 1996). When values such as mutual respect, love of one's fellow person, human dignity, forgiveness, and compassion become transparent to the group, they can be integrated into the conflict resolution process. At times, the trainer's role entails risk taking. The trainer can question how the deeply held values help or hinder conflict resolution.

### *Rituals*

Rituals establish order, deepen communal life, and facilitate personal transformation (Driver, 1993). Rituals signify beginnings, transitions, and endings. They are an everyday part of spiritual life, and we perform many of them automatically. For example, Catholics kneel when entering a church, and Jews kiss the mezuzah on entering a Jewish home.

Ritual is a shortcut, a wordless and powerful way to evoke a group norm. As part of the conflict resolution process, ritual can separate stages of conflict transformation, refocus the group on the purpose of assembling, and allow participants to connect with the higher self. For example, many groups use silence to call themselves to order. In some traditions, silence signifies the deep spiritual significance of the interconnectedness of all people. Silence is a ritual form of behavior that can easily become a marker in the conflict resolution process. In other traditions, members wear ritual

clothing to indicate that the activities taking place are sacrosanct. Trainers can elicit from group members the most recognizable and powerful rituals. The group can decide which are easily and appropriately implemented in a conflict resolution context.

An organization I belong to incorporates two moments of silence into its meeting structure, at the beginning and at the end. The moment of silence is a time for people to become centered and focus on the reason the group has gathered. In facilitating and mediating for this group, I use the moment of silence to restore order. When I ask for a moment of silence, I convey the message that the group has let go of its purpose. Perhaps people are interrupting, or no one is listening. Maybe the conversation has lost its thread, or some members are making personal attacks on others. A moment of silence means we need to collect ourselves and focus on the task at hand. Members may not make the conscious connection between the words “moment of silence” and activation of a group norm or value, or the importance of having a collective focus. Training is beneficial because it makes this connection transparent. Awareness also opens the group to the possibility of creating additional norms and practices to institutionalize connections among people, respectful behavior, and community.

### *Practices: Bearing Witness*

Practices include ways of being in sacred space, relating to each other, and relating to God. Forgiveness, repentance, and *metta* (loving kindness) are examples of practice from a variety of traditions. As an illustration of practice, here I discuss bearing witness.

When I was a program manager at a community dispute resolution center, a recurrent topic of conversation among the staff focused on our intentions while we mediated cases. We listened with empathy and openness to all parties and practiced our version of a transformative mediation model that encouraged parties to be empathic and compassionate toward each other (Baruch Bush and Folger, 1994). But we also talked a lot about the idea of “holding the space” for our clients during the mediation sessions. We talked metaphysically about projecting positive energy and good will toward all parties, modeling compassion, and keeping our heart open to everyone and to the events unfolding in mediation (Gold, 1993; Saposnek, 1993), a form of bearing witness (Cobb, 2001).

Although *bearing witness* is often used to describe the historical involvement of a church in social justice or a human rights movement,



exemplified by groups such as Witness for Peace, it has another meaning with greater relevance to mediation. In some traditions, as with the Quakers, bearing witness means seeing the light and truth in everyone. When we as mediators approach every conflict affirming the integrity of all human beings and our interconnection, we bear witness.

A mediator bears witness through staying present with the parties in a mediation session and through authenticating their experiences in the session. Spiritual traditions use various words to describe similar behaviors. The trainer explains how most traditions have some form of witnessing and asks group members to discuss how it manifests in their own tradition. Then participants can discuss whether bearing witness would be helpful in resolving internal conflict.

As trainers, we model bearing witness when we validate our students' frustrations, anxieties, satisfactions, and curiosity during their learning experiences. The trainer who models bearing witness can ask students to discuss two aspects of the practice: how one bears witness, which the trainer has been modeling; and the experience of receiving validation, which the students have just experienced from the trainer.

## Community

Community is an assembly of persons who breathe life into a spiritual fellowship. Just as community is the foundation of spiritual fellowship, reconciliation is the heart of a spiritually based conflict resolution practice. Unlike traditional Western conflict resolution, which values individualism and personal autonomy (Cooks, 1995), in spiritual groups restoring harmony between people and in the community is of primary importance. In all religious systems, restoring relationships takes priority over settling the specifics of a dispute (Kirkup, 1993; McThenia and Shaffer, 1985). Thich Nhat Hanh's description of reconciliation in a Buddhist monastery illustrates the role community can play: "In a convocation of the whole sangha, everyone sits together mindfully, breathing and smiling, with the willingness to help. . . . The two conflicting monks are present, and they know that everyone in the community expects them to make peace" (1996, p. 75). "Then the senior monks remind the feuding monks, 'First of all you are part of the community. The well-being of the community is most important. Don't think only of your own feeling. Think of the well-being of the community.' And then each monk will be ready to make a sacrifice,

and get ready to accept the verdict or decision made by the community” (1996, p. 78).

The community is a resource for resolving conflicts (Lederach and Kraybill, 1993; LeResche, 1993a, 1993b). Thich Nhat Hanh’s example is an opening to discuss the beliefs and norms that address community. For example, the sacrifice of personal victory to restore harmony in the larger group is a tenet in many traditions. The trainer facilitates discussion of the viability of beliefs that address community, how they influence individual and group behavior, and what occurs when they are violated.

When community plays a central role in reconciliation, the resolution of conflict becomes public. Recognition of our responsibility for our actions and the offer and acceptance of forgiveness become public events that facilitate reintegration into the group. In the United States, our mediation models promise confidentiality and privacy as part of the dispute resolution process. It is not common to involve the community as witness to forgiveness and reconciliation. Many Western groups are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with this role for community, even though their own precepts encourage reconciliation as a process that entails community participation.

### Considerations for Designing and Delivering Training

The heart of conflict resolution in spiritual space is reconciliation, affirmation of values that bring out the best in people, creation of sacred time and space for resolving differences, and bearing witness to suffering and joy.

As trainers we are often in the role of “expert.” Training participants look to us for answers and insights. In the training model proposed here, expertise resides within each participant. The trainer is there to help people draw from their own knowing, doing, and being. The trainer’s role is to elicit from the students what they know, how they can use what they know, and possibly how they can change what they think and act on (Bohm, 1996; Beneson, 1996; Freire, 1986).

As a teacher of peace and conflict resolution, the trainer engages in a spiritual activity; teaching conflict resolution is itself a spiritual practice that employs a “pedagogy of peace and conflict resolution which is itself peace and conflict resolution” (Said and Funk, 1996, p. 1). The trainer does not participate as theologian, minister, rabbi, priest, or imam; she or he functions in a spiritual role, trainer as alchemist helping make transparent what was murky, raising consciousness, and demonstrating new purposes for old tools.



Unfortunately, there is not a prepackaged approach for working with individual congregations. Considerations include how a person's role in the organization affects participation in training; whether the participants will be representative of the entire congregation or limited to leaders and key administrators; and whether both old-timers and newcomers attend.

The degree to which tradition is valued influences the tone of the training. An organization with a congregational polity may be comfortable challenging traditional ways of doing things and welcome an opportunity to create its own conflict resolution method, while members of a congregation from a highly centralized, hierarchical denomination may want to stay closer to familiar rules and processes. Trainers need to respect a group's limits while encouraging them to be playful and imaginative.

The possibility of working with two or more congregations raises other concerns. According to Becker's research (1998), congregations within the same denomination may demonstrate important variation in the type of conflict experienced, the relationships among members, and the role of leaders. Perhaps a joint training for congregations based on the model they most closely approximate would be more successful, because the similarity in communication needs, strength of members' ties to each other, the relative importance of emotion and authority, and other common traits suggests the possibility of bringing the group together on the basis of cultural similarity. Even so, training that brings together congregations from a number of denominations might fail because of basic differences in religious beliefs. The similarity in organizational culture may not be recognized or valued if ontological beliefs are in conflict. A trainer's religious affiliation is a significant consideration for some congregations, and some groups will decline to participate unless the trainer is from the same faith tradition.

Organizational culture governs the appropriate time and place for holding training. Some congregations separate worship from business and other activities, each perhaps attracting its own kind of member. Other congregations plan speakers and workshops to be contiguous with the worship service. The time influences the attitude and expectation of the people attending the training. The space that is selected for the training also communicates a message. Meeting outside of the congregation's normal setting could help people shift their focus to fresh understanding of conflict and new technologies for dealing with

it. However, meeting in the group's facility might constitute the easiest access for most members.

## Conclusion

Training can help make conflict resolution a more natural, ongoing, organic part of group life by helping members imbue it with familiar and loved aspects of their tradition. Helping people figure out how to use ritual as part of the process, invoke practices that strengthen the exchange of good will, and reinforce the role of community creates the possibility that they will resolve conflict through a healing and unifying process instead of a divisive one (Gold, 1993; Zumeta, 1993).

The training described in this article is intended to raise members' awareness of how organizational culture defines conflict and how organizational values encourage particular models of conflict resolution. Making the tacit beliefs and norms transparent is a way of giving people a hand in creating a more conscious organization with a spiritually based conflict resolution process.

With deeper understanding of how their beliefs and values are not only shaped but also reinforced by their ongoing engagement in a sacred organizational culture, members of religious and faith-based congregations can become more conscious of and reflective about their automatic response to conflict. They will be able to reflect on and choose which responses they want to keep, discard, or change when facing conflict.

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