CONFLICT – WILD FIRE OR CONTROLLABLE BLAZE?

"The fact that their interests are bound to clash when it comes to deciding who gets what share of the cake, all too often obscures the point that management and unions need to co-operate together to increase the total size of the cake and must co-operate if the economic objectives of the company and all the people in it are to be achieved." **The Industrial Society**

In the midst of recent military, political, business and social conflicts at the international, regional and domestic levels, it is timely to briefly examine the topic of conflict resolution.

In the book 'Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In', it is stated: "Whether you are making a deal or settling a dispute, differences are defined by the difference between your thinking and theirs…Ultimately, however, conflict lies not in objective reality, but in people's heads." Such a view of conflict not only reveals that conflict is an inevitable part of life; but that any bloodshed, rancour, broken relationship, etc., is really the result of inadequately managed conflict rather than equivalent to conflict.

At the organisational level, conflict can result from differing personalities or behaviour; scarce resources; communication problems; jurisdictional ambiguities; cultural differences; gender; poor integration of people and tasks (job-ability fit); unmet expectations or objectives; etc. Conflict provides a 'red-flag' that highlights where or when adaptation of an existing approach is necessary; and once adequately managed, conflict can lead to innovation, the pooling of a number of different ideas and problem solving.

I will use the analogy of fire and fire control since fire, like conflict, is not necessarily bad in itself but creates problems when uncontrolled. For a fire to exist it requires heat, oxygen and energy. Analogously, conflict requires the 'heat' of personality and other clashes, the 'oxygen' of fears, and the 'energy' of the particular matter of contention. Fire control requires cooling of the heat, smothering of the oxygen and starving of the energy. Therefore, by extending the analogy, conflict management requires the 'cooling' of the clashes, the 'smothering' of the fears, and the 'starving' of the particular matter of contention by seeking to constructively fight the issues and not the people.

A manager has two general thematic options with which to manage conflict within his/her area of responsibility. The first approach is to be a 'Solver of Conflict' and the second is to be a 'Resolver of Conflict'. When the manager acts as a *solver of conflict,* he/she seeks to personally solve the conflict. Such an approach may only temporarily address the problem and temporarily appease the conflicting parties because the solution is imposed upon said parties by an external source – the manager. Conversely, when the manager assumes the role of a *resolver of conflict*, he/she facilitates the conflicting parties in finding a solution to their problem. This approach can be a far

more effective means of reducing conflict than the aforementioned one because it empowers a process by which the aggrieved parties have a stake within dealing with the *source of their conflict and reaching an agreement which they deem appropriate.

Managers need to develop creative conflict management techniques, which are appropriate for the particular situation, for two reasons. Firstly, any benefit that accrues from conflict is dependent upon how the conflict is handled. Secondly, conflicts do not just heal themselves, they must be constructively addressed. Researchers from Harvard University developed the following Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Handling Model to capture the various approaches used to negotiate conflicts.

High

ASSERTIVENES

Compete	Collaborate
Compromise	
Avoid	Accommodate

Low

Low   High
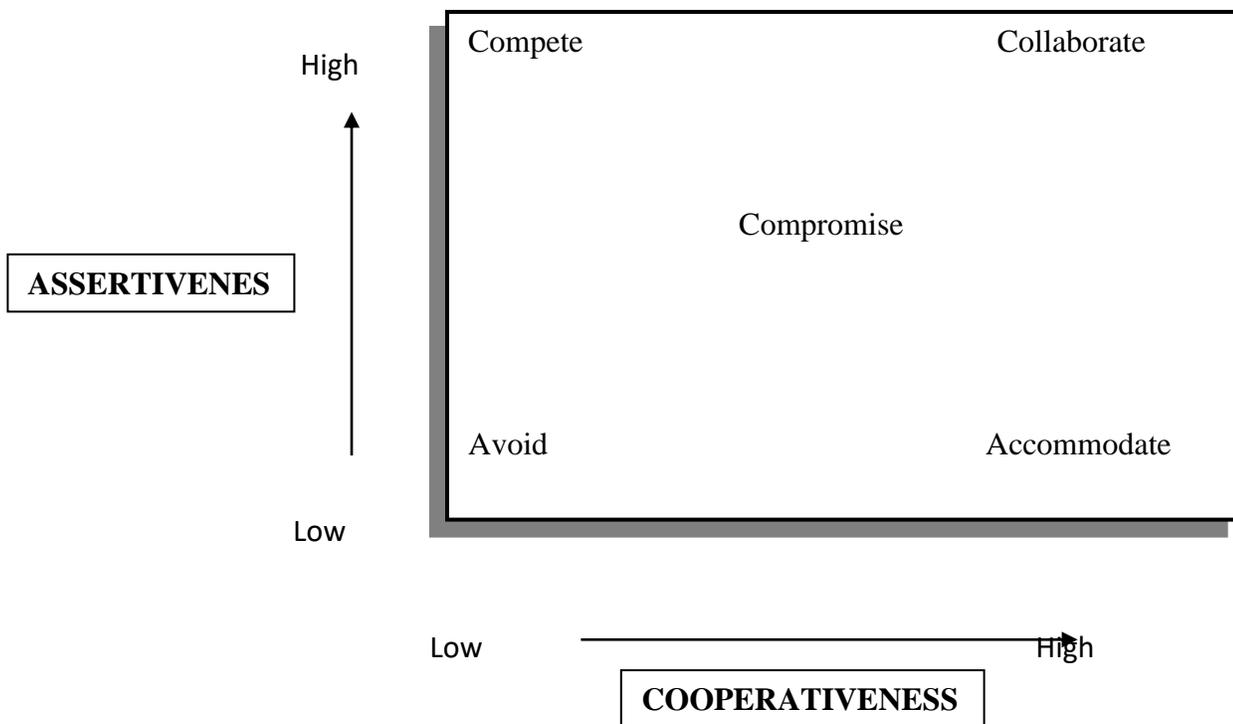
COOPERATIVENESS

Assertiveness looks at the extent to which the negotiator is focused on his own needs and interests, whereas *Cooperativeness* considers the extent to which the negotiator considers mechanisms for meeting the other party's interests. As exhibited by the diagram, high assertiveness and high cooperativeness is a manifestation of collaboration; low assertiveness and low cooperativeness is a sign of avoidance; high assertiveness and low cooperativeness is synonymous with competitiveness; high cooperativeness and low assertiveness is characterised by accommodation and medium assertiveness and medium cooperativeness represents compromise.

Competing can be effectively used where 1) quick, decisive action is necessary, 2) where unpopular actions need to be taken and 3) where the other party will take unfair

advantage of you. Disadvantages of competing include 1) others may not put forth their point of view for fear of 'losing' or appearing ignorant and 2) adequate information may not get to you.

Accommodation can be effectively used where 1) you want to show that you are reasonable; 2) you feel that you may be wrong; 3) you feel that learning from others is more important than getting your way; 4) the issue is more important to others than to you; 5) you want to show goodwill; 6) if you feel overpowered; and 7) keeping the peace is more important than anything else. Disadvantages of accommodation include 1) your ideas and concerns may not be heard enough; 2) you may not command as much respect and recognition as your formal position would imply that you should; and 3) subordinates take advantage of you.

Compromising can be effectively used where 1) you are limited by time; 2) both parties are strongly committed to opposing goals; 3) you tried but cannot use collaboration as a preferred method; and 4) goals are only moderately important. Disadvantages of compromising include 1) longer term goals may be sacrificed, 2) tactics of compromise may overwhelm underlying issues of trust in long term relationships.

Avoiding can be effectively used where 1) the issue is trivial or when other more pressing issues are present; 2) you do not have any shot at winning on the issue; 3) the status of the other person is unequal; 4) a cooling down period is necessary; and 5) others can resolve it more effectively. Disadvantages include 1) important issues may get resolved by default or by others; and 2) your input may not be weighed in a potential conflict situation.

Collaborating can be effectively used where 1) it is possible for both parties to be satisfied; 2) it is desirable to build trust for future potential conflict situations; 3) both parties feel a commitment to the agreement; and 4) it is necessary to overcome past problems. Disadvantage is that trivial or moderately important issues make take too much time to discuss and resolve.

As we continue our journey into the uncertain waters of 2016, the following decades-old perspective of the Industrial Society remains quite poignant for both managers and trade unionists – "More often than not full-time trade union officials are treated like the fire brigade and only get called in when things have already gone wrong. They cannot be expected to see things in perspective or to do a constructive job if this is their only contact with management. It is important for managers to establish something more than a negotiating relationship with full-time officials as it is with stewards".

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