

From the Editor

The Intertwining Relationships Among Power, Resources and Conflict: A Brief Essay

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Welcome to the inaugural issue of the Journal of Conflict Management (JOCM). As the Editor, I am excited to offer this scholarly, multi-disciplinary journal that fills a void in the conflict management literature. We are grateful for the almost 40 manuscripts we received for peer-review, and we selected three that represent a broad perspective of the field. The first is an article on family court mediators and their use of metaphors while describing themselves, mediation concepts, and the parties involved in the mediation process. The second is a case study that explores liminal spaces between the relationships of those associated with a family-owned business. The third article in the inaugural issue studies the relationship between rational organizational systems and organizational conflict.

Phases of Conflict

Two common threads in many conflict situations are power and resources. For conflict to occur, parties must first be aware of a differential in perceived power, goals, resources, or perspectives. This awareness often comes in the form of a triggering event that either moves the parties to settlement or escalates the conflict. Until that triggering event occurs, conflict is dormant or latent (Rummel, 1976). Parties are aware of the potential for dissension, but that triggering event opens the door for the parties to feel, experience, and acknowledge their differences. They choose to either work together to resolve the issues in a productive manner, to ignore the problems altogether, or to allow the differences to escalate into destructive conflict (Rummel, 1976).

This initiation phase lays the groundwork for collaboration and cooperation. At this point, the conflict manifests itself from an intellectual awareness to action. If the actions are viewed as contentious or contrary to the goals of the other party, the conflict continues. This leads to the next stage—balance of power. There the parties vie for power by assessing one another's resources and capabilities, and they move towards settlement of their differences, destruction of their relationship, or potential violence.

At this point the parties assess the consequences of resolving the conflict or sustaining it. Parties become entrenched in their positions, and only move forward when changes in attitudes, goals, or circumstances occur. The conflict then progresses to the disruption stage where parties once again realize the potential for conflict and confrontation. The phases of conflict represent a continuous cycle of movement through which the conflict progresses until its resolution (Rummel, 1976).

Power is the food that nourishes that conflict and keeps it alive as it moves through the phases. In social conflict people with the perceived power exert pressure on the opponent and are able to manipulate the outcome if they have the resources, and the skill to effectively utilize those resources. Contrary to popular belief, power is not a quality of the stronger party or a

short-coming to the weaker one. Power is relational and dependent on the endorsement of others. Therefore, if the resources are not valued by the second party, the first party's power is diminished. When one party withholds endorsement of power, the tables are turned, and they now become the powerful party.

Four Factors

Four factors prejudice our endorsement of power—social categorization, mystique, skillful mastery, and legitimacy. Social categorization refers to the power given to executives, physicians, professors, and other professionals. In general, society views certain professions as more powerful than others, and therefore, tend to endorse that power (Folger et al., 2009). In that case, power is self-perpetuating. However, social categorization can also weaken members of its group through degrouping and deindividualization (Coser, 1956; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). If power is given to a certain group, it can also be denied to that group. In addition, by attributing negative personality traits to a group, they become dehumanized and the potential for aggression against the group accelerates.

Secondly, power can have a mystical quality which gives the illusion of uniqueness. Parties tend to grant power to this special group who has perceived unattainable qualities (Folger et al., 2009). A third factor that influences parties' endorsement of power is the skillful mastery of interacting with others. As stated earlier, resources are only valuable in power plays when the party appropriately and expertly employs them. Finally, endorsements are given to skills, abilities, and characteristics when the individual party values those resources and sanctions them as a source of power. In addition, once the resource "trump card" has been played, whether it is money, favors, or force, it diminishes and the party risks a loss of that endorsement (Folger et al., 2009).

Applications of Power

While power is used extensively in conflict tactics, it is important to view power through the lenses of direct, direct and virtual, indirect, and hidden. Threats and promises are direct, while relational control is indirect, and issue control is hidden. Threats and promises are the most common power tactics used in conflict. Direct application of power discounts the desires of the perceived weaker party and forces that party to submit to the desires of the stronger party by threatening physical, economical, or political repercussions. Direct and virtual applications of power attempt to force others to comply by revealing the resources of the perceived stronger party along with a willingness to use them, usually characterized by threats or promises. Indirect power is exercised when the perceived stronger party attempts to control the situation without exposing their resources or even threatening or promising to employ their power. Hidden power is exerted when the issues are never expressed and consequences are never determined because the issue is decided before it has an opportunity to materialize (Folger et al., 2009).

Although the person with the most power is normally viewed to have the upper hand in a conflict situation, once that power is used it may start to crumble. In any power situation, the perceived weaker party must endorse that power and, in effect, give it to the perceived stronger party. The power position may begin to deteriorate after it is used for several reasons. First, the consequences of the threat may be less harmful than originally thought, so further attempts to coerce using the same power influence become less effective (Folger et al., 2009).

The second danger the more powerful party faces is inaccurately presuming the weaker party's response to the threat. Stronger parties often surmise that they can gain the cooperation of the weaker party because the weaker one has a desire to be in the good graces of the stronger party. Finally, a third risk faced by the more powerful party is that the person in power has the capacity to force the terms for reaching a settlement. The weaker party has no motivation to collaborate on creative solutions that will resolve the conflict if the only choice given is to completely concede to the stronger party's wishes. When that happens, the stronger party may lose either a good employee, friend, or partner (Folger et al., 2009).

The three areas of danger for the weaker party in a conflict are that the stronger party may be able to stipulate the terms of the outcome of the conflict in their own favor, and that may halt any chance of collaborative problem-solving and result in an inferior or worthless answer to the problem. For example, in the case of a labor/management dispute management may order the striking workers to resume their normal schedules by midnight tomorrow or they will all be fired. As a result, even if labor returns to work to protect their jobs, the underlying issues have not been resolved (Folger et al., 2009).

In addition, weakness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy for the perceived weaker party and results in defeat. When one party perceives the other party is stronger, the weaker party capitulates and surrenders to the stronger party's desires, does not oppose the stronger party's actions, or declines to address conflict issues in an effort to protect the relationship from further damage. Weaker parties who feel threatened by the loss of a particular goal or possession resort to committing acts of desperation which can destroy relationships or lead to dire consequences (Folger et al., 2009).

Conflict management professionals understand the role of power in social conflict since power has an effect on the dynamics of the conflict. Understanding the different types of power and their impact on the conflict will help the CM professional work through the phases of social conflict and balance the power for all parties, thus decreasing manipulation by the powerful party. Understanding where the power lies allows the CM professional to understand the viewpoints of the parties and how they interact with one another. For example, is the stronger party willing to exert his power? Does the weaker party endorse that power? Recognizing the perceptions of each party will help the CM professional empower them and bring about an effective resolution to the conflict.

About Sullivan University

In 2003, Sullivan University began offering a Master's of Science in Conflict Management degree. Then, in 2010 we extended our degree programs and started a PhD in Management program with an option in Conflict Management. This year, the university will add an undergraduate concentration in Conflict Management to its Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degree. By launching the *Journal of Conflict Management*, the university is continuing its commitment to help organizational leaders, conflict management practitioners, and conflict management scholars learn, research, and make contributions to this emerging field.

The JOCM has the full sponsorship of Sullivan University, so we will not be tasked with generating a profit. Not only will this make the journal widely available without issue or subscription fees, but it also gives authors broad exposure. The JOCM will be published by a team of volunteer editors and professionals who are dedicated to the scholarly advancement of conflict management.

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