

CASE STUDY: Resolving Organizational Conflict

Key words:

- organizational conflict
- community development
- organizational change and growth
- Worldwork
- facilitating conflict

How to work with community conflict when participants do not feel safe and previous attempts have not gone well.

Chronic conflict and tensions can divide an organization but can also be a catalyst for innovation, a driving force of change. Leveraging the creativity, growth and innovation within conflict is the hallmark of the Worldwork approach.

Working through a chronic community conflict that hit close to home.

Social media, open source software, car shares, and CSAs (community supported agriculture): there is no doubt that sharing is the new growth industry. Cohousing communities are a part of this trend.

Cohousing is collaborative housing in which residents actively participate in the design and operation of their own neighborhoods. The physical design encourages both social contact and individual space. Currently there are more than 100 cohousing communities being planned or built. It is predicted that cohousing communities in the U.S. may triple over the next 10 years, due in large part to 76 million baby boomers that see cohousing as a more viable option than traditional retirement and assisted living communities. Some of the core values and structures of cohousing community include a participatory design process, consensus based decision making, resident managing and maintenance of the property, and non-hierarchical governance structure.

Background

I was invited to facilitate a longstanding conflict at a cohousing community that formed in 1994. There are approximately 15 shareholders, 40 people, two-thirds of whom live full time in the community of 400 acres. The community is in a country that has a fragile and isolated eco-system. Their mission statement describes their goal as living in an ecological balance and using sustainable building and living practices. The land was deemed a site of ecological significance by the Department of Conservation because of fragile wetlands on the property.

The community asked me to facilitate a conflict with two shareholders. The conflict had been going on for several years, and previous attempts to work on it had left members feeling upset and afraid of further attempts. This particular conflict concerned noise levels, but it reflected numerous conflicts in the community over environmental issues.

While the content of each conflict varied, the nature of each was similar. On one side were those who held a stricter, less compromising view of environmental standards and on the other were

those more willing to compromise and take a case-by-case approach to issues. One member described the dynamic as "those who put people first and those who put the land first. Some want clear agreements and rules about how we live together and others want to trust each other and come to agreements through our relationship building."

Challenges

1. **The governance challenge:** The community charter specified that decisions and conflicts would be arbitrated by community meetings and that consensus decision making shall be used to reach an agreement or decision. When things went smoothly, this worked fine. But when conflict arose, consensus broke down.
2. **The safety challenge:** The group had been through several very difficult and unresolved community meetings. There was a concern about safety, about re-opening wounds and diving into difficult issues without resolution. There was some hesitation and skepticism that this facilitation would have the desired effect.

Interventions

1. **Create safety.** Because the community had diverse views on the value of working with conflict and the concerns for safety, I took time at the beginning to discuss issues of safety, and the function of working with conflict, and what outcomes people would like to see. We returned to the goals and outcomes repeatedly over the course of our work together.
2. **Facilitate a large group forum on the community conflict.** Using the Worldwork framework, the large group approach to the conflict allowed us to work on the conflict without putting individuals on the spot. It provided a safer forum for airing differences by framing the participant's grievances in terms of polarities or positions, rather than as personal differences. When people have been hurt by the process of conflict resolution itself, it is important to use methods which frame conflict as a function of a system – in this case, as a symptom or sign of the community trying to understand itself better and get to know its deeper purpose.

The group forum revealed an interesting polarity under the conflict which involved the original vision and mission of the community. What looked initially like a conflict over noise and pet policy, turned into a discussion about "insiders and outsiders" and even more fundamentally, about participation and involvement. Newcomers who weren't present when the charter was created wanted an opportunity to engage in the creation and execution of the by-laws. This was fundamentally a diversity issue – how open are we to suggestions and input from all?

3. **Develop and deliver training sessions on conflict facilitation methods.** Providing and practicing tools for resolving conflicts and facilitating dialogue across difference. The goal of this session was two-fold, to practice skills and also to work on existing conflicts.
4. **Connect the conflict to the community vision.** We reviewed the issues that emerged and identified the central themes and polarities in the conflict. In large and small groups, the community discussed how these polarities related to the community's vision. How did the conflict relate to their community vision, and what was the meaning of the conflict for the community's task together?

Innovations

There were several outcomes and new directions that emerged over the course of the two days.

- **Recognized a shared investment in health and healing.** The conflict reflected the initial vision of the community which was to 'heal the earth.' Interestingly, the majority of stakeholders themselves were in health and healing professions. Even the concern about safety reflected an engagement with healing – they did not want to re-open past wounds. Having a framework to understand the conflict in terms of their initial vision and concern with healing created a sense of cohesion among the participants. It also gave rise to the idea that people-processes needed as much attention as the land. The group decided they needed more conflict management tools and procedures for working with conflict more rapidly, not waiting for it to escalate to the degree that it had.
- **Determined the initial charter and charter development process needed attention.** Not only was more and diverse input needed, but the charter itself needed to include guidelines for working with conflict. The group decided to create an ongoing charter development group, with rotating and diverse membership tasked with updating the charter periodically to reflect changes in the community's membership and values.
- **Established an 'ombudsgroup,' a group of people interested in mediating conflict** and advising others, to whom community members could turn for help. The ombudsgroup could also offer tools and training for mediating conflicts.