1

The Art of Creative Fighting

H.B. Karp

Whether the particular setting is the family, the small group, the agency, or the business unit, training individuals to deal effectively with conflict requires a great deal of skill and awareness on the part of the facilitator. When training is unsuccessful in other areas of human resource development, such as communication, problem solving, or motivation, the worst that usually happens is that the situation does not improve with time; in other words, communication remains ineffective, problems are not solved, or productivity fails to increase. In dealing with conflict, however, the situation is quite different. A training error or an inappropriate intervention can make the situation immediately more risky and volatile than it was previously. It also becomes less likely that a positive outcome will emerge.

Several elements contribute to making conflict training such a touchy area:

- The topic itself has a strong tendency to initiate deep feelings on the part of most participants and some facilitators. Most people either do not like conflict or are afraid of it even before they deal with it.

- Training in conflict management is not just a matter of cognitive understanding of relevant theory and technique. Facilitators must be comfortable with conflict and their own unique approaches to dealing with it *before* they can assist others in this regard.

- Despite disclaimers to the contrary, there appears to be a highly preferred, "one-best way" to deal with conflict from the viewpoint of human resource development: collaboration. Facilitators work effectively with people in developing collaborative approaches to conflict issues, but they often ignore or avoid other approaches in the process. This tendency has the effect of

limiting alternatives and can lead to an impasse. In fact, such a unidirectional approach may increase rather than lessen the fear of conflict. Although collaboration may be the most preferable method for dealing with conflict, on some occasions a collaborative solution simply is not available.

A pragmatic view of training in the area of conflict indicates that the first essential step is to help people to see the simplest and most basic aspects of conflict, thereby stripping it of its mystic and awesome nature. Conflict certainly demands respect, but it need not generate fear and wonder. The second essential step is to legitimize the process of conflict. The most valuable skill needed in handling a conflict is not the ability to get along well; it is the ability to fight well. The time to get along well is after the fight is over. Indeed, when people are able to fight fully and creatively, it is probable that they will get along better after the resolution than they did before the conflict arose.

THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

Conflict occurs when two or more people attempt to occupy the same space at the same time. This space can be physical, psychological, intimate, political, or any arena in which there is room for only one view, outcome, or individual. Whether cast in the home or the work setting, conflict is absolutely unavoidable as a normal condition of active life. In addition, it is neither good nor bad in itself; it simply is. Whether the outcome of a conflict situation is positive or negative is almost totally determined by the way in which it is managed. When managed effectively, conflict actually becomes a vital asset in that it is a prime source of energy and creativity in a system.

The four major categories of areas in which conflict arises are described as follows, in descending order of the objectivity involved.

1. *Fact.* Conflict over fact is the most frequent variety, the most objective in nature, the least volatile, and by far the easiest to resolve. This type of conflict centers on *what a thing is or is not.* Resolution is usually achieved by comparing the object of the conflict to a standard or by referring to a mutually acceptable authority. For example, if one person believes that a specific object is a hammer and another believes it to be an axe, resolution is simple to achieve: Obtain a picture of each and hold them next to the object in question.

2. *Method.* Conflict over method is a little more subjective and volatile than conflict over fact. Those involved disagree about a procedure and are in conflict over *what is to be done.* Although personal opinion enters into the process, the conflict can be managed objectively for the most part. For example, a conflict about how to conduct a sales campaign can be resolved most easily by achieving mutual agreement on market conditions, advertising capabilities, budget constraints, and so forth.

3. *Objectives.* Conflict over objectives is more subjective and has a greater potential for volatility than the two types previously discussed. It concerns *what is to be accomplished* and is harder fought due to the fact that it incorporates higher degrees of personal commitment and risk, in terms of both personal and organizational variables. For example, "what is best for the company," such as the next project, is often intertwined with "what is best for me," such as the next promotion. Critical to managing this type of conflict is the recognition that the subjective elements involved are as legitimate as the objective elements.

4. *Values.* Conflict over values is almost totally subjective in nature and is, therefore, the most volatile type. It pertains to *what is right or wrong.* Mismanaged conflicts over values can result in divorces and even wars. The basic strategy in dealing with such a conflict is to avoid it if at all possible. If it is unavoidable, the best tactic is to objectify the issue as much as possible, dealing with behaviors or events that arise from the value rather than dealing with the value itself. For example, a heated argument over the morality of capital punishment has a high probability of ending in nothing but rage, self-righteousness, and moral indignation. However, a discussion of capital punishment in terms of its deterrent effects and legal ramifications has a somewhat better chance of resulting in agreement and resolution.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING CONFLICT

The three basic strategies that are used to manage conflict are described in the following paragraphs. These strategies concern the way in which the conflict is resolved rather than the way in which it is conducted.

1. *Competition* is known as the "win/lose" approach to conflict; people compete to see who wins, and the winner takes all. The most obvious example of the competitive approach to conflict is an athletic event.

2. *Compromise* is a "lose/lose" approach. All parties agree to sacrifice equal portions of what they want. Subsequently, another mutual cut may be established and another until everyone settles for very little of what he or she originally wanted. An illustration of the result of conflict that is dealt with through compromise is the comparison between the wording of a bill in the House of Representatives prior to its first committee hearing and the final wording when that bill is enacted into law.

3. *Collaboration* is called the "win/win" approach. When this strategy is employed, people agree ahead of time to work with their conflict until they come up with a unique solution that provides each of them with all or almost all of what he or she wants.

There is little question that the collaborative approach to conflict, although it is the most costly in terms of time and energy, has the highest probability of producing the most creative and highest yielding results. However, as mentioned previously, there are times when a collaborative approach is not available and the issues are too important and vital to the individuals involved even to consider compromise. Some conditions that tend to preclude collaboration are harsh time deadlines, poor interpersonal relationships between or among the conflicting parties, severely limited resources, or differing values. Under these circumstances, competition is the only means available for managing the conflict.

Frequently a conflict is first approached competitively due to lack of interest in or unawareness of a collaborative alternative; then, after those involved have competed for a while, they discover a collaborative solution. If the fighting is creative and effective, there is a higher probability that this will occur, given the potential availability of a collaborative solution at the outset.

CREATIVE FIGHTING

It is often the case that people in conflict are unwilling to engage one another powerfully simply because they do not possess the basic skills required for effective fighting. Paradoxically, once an individual has acquired these skills and is comfortable with them, it is much less likely that he or she will have to use them. The newly acquired knowledge and abilities produce a clear confidence that is observable to others, thereby making the individual less subject to unilateral attacks. On the other hand, if a fight becomes unavoidable, he or she can handle it.

Anger is as appropriate and productive a reaction to events as is any other human response. It is as unavoidably reflexive a response to being frustrated as laughter is to being amused. The issue involved is not whether it is appropriate to feel anger when frustrated, but rather how to deal with anger appropriately when it occurs. People must be made aware that there are techniques of fighting that can be learned and used skillfully. Also, they must be given the opportunity to practice these techniques in a neutral, low-risk setting, such as a training workshop. When all parties involved in a fight have acknowledged the legitimacy of conflict, established the norms for fighting, and are confident in their own abilities and strength, they are likely to approach one another with respect. Under such circumstances, there is little threat to ongoing relationships; in fact, there is a great potential for solidifying and enhancing these relationships.

The following paragraphs describe ten guidelines for the process of preparing people to fight creatively.

Establish the Legitimacy of Fighting

Fighting must be seen as a natural and sometimes appropriate thing to do. Occasionally it is even fun, as long as all parties agree to do it. Above all, fighting must not be viewed as an activity to be avoided at all costs. Whenever two or more people are working or living together, conflicts of interest arise. Sometimes these conflicts can be resolved through peaceful negotiation or willing compliance; sometimes they cannot. When the latter condition exists, fighting is the ultimate and appropriate response, unless one or more of the parties disempower themselves and give in because of fear of confrontation.

As stated previously, when fighting is approached creatively, it has several positive aspects that should be recognized: It is energizing; it honors all of its participants; it frequently produces the best solution under the circumstances; it strengthens, rather than weakens, relationships; and the arena in which it occurs becomes a safer, more "human" place in which to live and work. When fighting is not engaged in creatively, personal relationships deteriorate and become characterized by spite, sniping, silent vows of vengeance, sulking, self-pity, and complaints about being misunderstood.

Deal with One Issue at a Time

In an ongoing relationship, unfinished business frequently coexists with the current source of contention. The temptation when fighting is to bring up unresolved arguments from the past and catch an opponent off guard. When

this ploy is successful, the person who initiated it achieves the upper hand and places the opponent on the defensive; the parties involved start a different fight that bears no relevance to the present conflict, and both (or all) of them become vulnerable to attack in this fashion.

Therefore, it is important for those in conflict to maintain a focus on the point of contention. When one person confronts another with an unrelated issue, the individual who is attacked should not respond except to say "That's not what we're dealing with at the moment." Subsequently, the parties may agree to discuss the secondary issue at some time in the future.

Occasionally, during the course of a fight, it becomes obvious that a secondary issue from the past is actually blocking the resolution of the issue at hand. For example, one person might say to another, "The last time you asked me for support and I helped you, you refused to acknowledge my contribution in the final report." When such a situation arises, the current issue should be set aside until closure of the unfinished issue is achieved, at which point the original fight can be continued with greater energy and a higher probability of a successful outcome. The important point is that only one issue should be addressed at a time.

Choose the Arena Carefully

Just because one person is angry with another and wants to fight does not automatically mean that the second party is ready or willing to oblige. Too often, one of the parties is dragged into "the combat zone" when totally unprepared or uninterested, and this situation frequently creates further unnecessary defensiveness, resentment, and personal animosity. To prevent such a development, all parties involved must understand and agree that if one person does not want to fight at a particular moment, no fight takes place at that time. There are three basic responses to consider when a fight is impending.

1. *Engage.* If the timing is right and the point is legitimate, the sooner it is brought into the open and dealt with creatively, the better. The usual outcome of avoiding a fight is that the longer it stays internalized, the higher the probability that it will fester and become more interpersonally volatile.

2. *Accede.* If an issue is important to one party but not to another, the person who feels it to be unimportant may accede to the point. Before engaging in a fight, everyone involved should determine whether the issue

is worth his or her time and effort. It makes little sense to pursue a goal that is of no personal consequence. One benefit of this response is that it transforms an opponent into an ally. Another positive aspect is that the individual who consciously chooses to accede to another's wishes experiences no loss of power.

3. *Postpone.* If a person is prematurely engaged in a conflict, he or she may choose to acknowledge the issue and then put it aside. This approach involves listening to what the other person says, acknowledging an understanding of the point being made and its importance, and setting a time for assembling everyone involved and dealing with the issue. This response has a tendency not only to defuse the issue for the individual who brought it up, but also to prevent its escalation. In addition, postponing a fight allows time to consider the issue fully and to develop appropriate tactics.

The individual who initiates a confrontation and is met with postponement as a response must remember that an opponent should never be forced to fight before he or she is ready. Agreeing to the postponement can be advantageous in that a fully prepared opponent is less likely to overreact or to wage unwarranted counterattacks than is an opponent who is caught off guard.

Avoid Reacting to Unintentional Remarks

Frequently, in the heat of battle, things are said that are regretted an instant later. This is particularly true if the issue at hand is of deep, personal significance to one or both of the parties; if ego involvement is high; or if the relationship is an important one. A related consideration is the fact that often people do not know precisely what they feel or think until they hear themselves verbalizing these feelings or thoughts.

An important aspect of creative fighting is to establish the norm that when unexpected or unintentional comments are made, none of the parties involved will respond by escalating the fight into a more volatile stage that no one wants. Instead, the preferred tactic should be to stop the conversation when a questionable comment is made and determine whether the comment accurately conveys what the speaker meant. If the speaker disavows the comment, everyone—including the speaker—should ignore it; if he or she confirms it, a deeper point of contention may have arisen. In the latter case, those involved in the fight must then decide which issue to focus on.

Avoid Resolutions That Come Too Soon or Too Easily

Newly married couples are often told, "Never let the sun set on an argument." However, this advice may be too simplistic. When a fight is resolved too quickly or a simple but incomplete resolution is agreed to, there are several negative side effects that are usually more painful and damaging in the long run than the original fight itself.

For example, if a fight ends prematurely, its unfinished elements do not go away; they are temporarily repressed and will almost certainly manifest themselves later. Also, the easiest solution is not always the best one in that it tends to treat symptoms and thereby obscure the real problem. Still another negative effect is that if the solution is complete for one party but not for another, the person who feels unsatisfied is not emotionally free to enter into future fights with total enthusiasm. This last effect, although very subtle, can seriously damage the relationship(s) involved.

Each fight has its own, unique level of intensity. Some fights involve simple disagreements and are resolvable "by sundown," whereas those that involve intense feelings, deep-seated values, or complex issues require much more time to be dealt with effectively. With each fight, it is essential that the parties recognize and remain aware of the time element.

There are ways to approach the handling of time. The first is to recognize clearly and specifically the complexity and importance of the issue and then to agree to devote as much time as required to achieve a resolution. The second approach, known as "bracketing," is also quite useful, particularly when complex, interdependent relationships are involved and the issue at hand is complicated. Many times, reality dictates that even though a fight is taking place, everyday life must go on. When this is the case, it is appropriate to fight for the length of time available; "bracket" the fight by setting it aside completely, but on a temporary basis; devote energies to other concerns as necessary; and resume the fight when possible. In many instances, this approach allows adversaries to work together well and energetically in areas that are not affected by the fight; the harmonious functioning is possible because the point of contention, although "on hold," is still actively being honored by the adversaries.

Avoid Name Calling

The function of creative fighting is to manage conflict in such a way that the following outcomes are ensured.

- An effective resolution is found;

- Everyone involved maintains a clear sense of personal dignity throughout; and

- The relationship(s) is (are) in no way damaged.

Nothing blocks these outcomes more effectively than resorting to name calling.

Creative fighting is unlike many other approaches to conflict in which the participants devote their efforts to injuring their opponents as much as possible; instead, when fighting creatively, each participant strives to achieve a specific objective. In most cases these individual objectives are mutually exclusive so that a clear choice must be made as to which will constitute the final outcome. When accomplishing a specific objective is a person's reason for fighting, it is very much in that individual's best interest not to dehumanize the opponent(s).

Name calling usually occurs when logical arguments fail or when one or more of the parties have become frustrated beyond tolerance. In order to avoid name calling, the safest and most productive stance to maintain throughout the fight is to speak strictly for oneself. When everyone invariably speaks only in terms of what he or she wants, feels, or thinks, there is little risk that anyone will be personally offended; consequently, there is little risk that the fight will escalate to a more volatile and unmanageable level.

Avoid Cornering an Opponent

Occasionally, being "right" and devastating one's opponent may be more personally satisfying than achieving the best resolution possible. However, this approach produces only momentary satisfaction and can be very costly. The practice of cornering and devastating an opponent may preclude a solid resolution. Also, the party who is the object of such an attack may eventually retaliate in kind.

One important aspect of conflict is that, regardless of the point of contention, the longer the fight goes on or the greater the intensity, the higher the ego involvement and the greater the need to save face. Everyone involved should keep this in mind and make it as easy as possible to accommodate one another's wishes. Above all, opponents must be allowed to save face. For example, if it is obvious to everyone that an opponent cannot win a particular argument, it is best to let that opponent retire gracefully. The adversary who allows such a retreat not only achieves what he or she wants, but also accords the opponent the respect that is deserved. Thus, this stance

usually results in some degree of appreciation on the part of the vanquished opponent, particularly when all parties realize that pain and humiliation could have been inflicted had the party with the upper hand chosen to do so.

Agree to Disagree

Creative fighting demands the generation of alternatives and a conscious choice of one of these alternatives. Although a mutually acceptable resolution is always the desired outcome, sometimes the reality is that such a resolution is not available. In a fight in which the point of contention is basically impersonal, such as an argument over a fact or a method, a mutually acceptable resolution is almost always available. However, in a fight that is waged over a deeper, more personal issue, such as an objective or a value, mutuality is much more difficult and sometimes impossible to achieve. In the latter case, each viewpoint is so innately a part of the individual who holds it that any attempt to minimize its validity will be taken as an attack on the individual personally. Thus, it is almost impossible for someone involved in such a fight to concede a point without feeling personally diminished in the process.

As mentioned previously, the best and most obvious choice in dealing with arguments of a personal nature is to avoid them completely, if at all possible. Sometimes, however, a discussion about one point reveals a more intense point that is really what is at issue. As soon as it becomes evident that the parties involved are diametrically opposed on a deeply personal issue, there is little or no chance that anything can be said to alter the situation. In fact, the longer the confrontation continues, the higher the probability that each party will become more firmly entrenched in his or her position. Thus, the parties should simply agree to disagree and drop the subject for the moment. Once everyone agrees that it is perfectly acceptable to see things differently and that no attempts at conversion will be made, the subject is much safer to discuss in the future should it arise again. In the meantime, all parties can live or work together productively, because the point of difference can be side-stepped.

It is highly improbable that people involved in a long-term work or personal relationship will share all core values. Not to recognize this fact invites unnecessary squabbling. Although there seems to be constant pressure in interdependent relationships to locate common ground, it may be just as important to isolate irreconcilable differences and acknowledge them as being equally natural and "human."

In some rare instances in which a relationship between two people is extremely interdependent and long term, the parties may hold such polar-

The Pfeiffer Book of Successful Conflict Management Tools © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

ized values that when one pursues his or her value, the pursuance automatically creates pain or severe problems for the other. Some examples of this type of polarization are the need for autonomy versus the need for participation, the need for isolation versus the need for intimacy, and concern with production versus concern for people. When the situation is so extreme that any concession on the part of either person will result in a loss of self-respect, the following procedure should be considered.

1. *Accept the polarity.* The two parties involved must establish the norm that both have a right to their viewpoints, but that neither is required to like the opposite viewpoint.

2. *Establish the importance of the relationship.* The parties should determine all of the positive, productive aspects of the relationship. It is preferable that they complete this task together rather than separately. They must review the basic values that they hold in common as well as their past successes in the relationship. During this process, enjoyable times and instances of mutual support should be recalled, and the potential for similar occurrences in the future should be accepted. In addition, the interdependent nature of the relationship should be acknowledged and defined.

   It is important to note, however, that this step might reveal the possibility that the two parties do not have a solid relationship and that permanent disengagement may be the most realistic, mutually beneficial resolution.

3. *Stay with the fight to the end.* If the parties determine that the relationship is important and worth saving, they must agree to endure the fight. However, neither should acquiesce only to please the other person or to reduce the other's pain; both should be appreciative of attempts to please, but they should not accept concessions that are made strictly for this purpose. If they have evaluated their relationship correctly, they will find ways to continue to work together productively, even though they are both experiencing some degree of pain. Both parties must remember that although they seriously disagree on a specific issue, they do not disagree on all others.

Working or living with someone under these conditions represents an incredibly heavy burden for both parties. Sooner or later, only because of exhaustion, it is probable that they will mutually agree to "let go" of the troublesome issue. More to the point, as the exhaustion increases, so does the importance of other issues, and the originally polarized viewpoints tend to become modified. When this happens, it may be possible to achieve a resolution.

Focus on What Is Wanted Rather Than Why It Is Wanted

Almost all fights, creative or otherwise, arise from the fact that the participants want different things. Also, in many cases compliance from the opponent(s) is necessary for the attainment of each person's objective. Thus, it is essential to establish clearly what each party wants and how these objectives differ. On the other hand, spending time and energy exploring why each party wants what he or she wants is, at best, a total waste of time and, at worst, an invitation to a psychological melee.

The point to remember is that people have a right to want what they want and to want all of it. This point has tremendous impact on creative fighting. When participants answer opponents' inquiries as to why they want specific objectives, they become "defendants" and the opponents become "judges" who can rule on the worthiness of the reasons supplied. These reasons, once verbalized, are usually anything but convincing. The reality is that very few people know exactly why they want what they want. In fact, most are not very concerned with their own motivation in this regard; for them, it is simply enough that they want.

In addition, the answer to the first "why?" usually leads to another "why?" and still another, and each time the defendant is forced to stray farther from the original objective in order to provide an answer. Eventually, the issue that generated the fight becomes obscured. The roles may even be reversed; the defendant may become the judge and counter with questions of his or her own. Thus, all parties are compelled to defend themselves, and as a result the fight may escalate.

Therefore, the best strategy is to avoid asking and answering queries about motivation. Instead, each person should concentrate on accomplishing his or her specific goal.

Maintain a Sense of Humor

Fighting is most often viewed as a grim and serious business. In many cases, of course, it is quite serious and certainly deserves to be respected. However, even when the subject of the fight is important and tempers are aroused, it is important that the participants not lose their perspectives. The best way to retain one's perspective during a fight is to exercise a sense of humor. For example, a married couple may be arguing vehemently about finances when suddenly the husband exclaims, "Not only *that,* but you never really liked my mother!" At such moments, it is perfectly legitimate to recognize the humor of the situation and respond accordingly. In fact, the parties involved may

be unable to control their laughter and subsequently may find that the fight has disintegrated. Although the tendency when engaged in a fight is to become more "righteous" as the confrontation progresses, the participants would do well to remember that it is the fight that should be taken seriously—not themselves.

SUMMARY

Training people to deal with conflict in an effective manner requires much of a facilitator. Participants must be taught that conflict is a natural part of life and that dealing with it creatively can actually enhance rather than destroy relationships.

Part of the facilitator's responsibility is to help the participants to see that there are four different sources of conflict—fact, method, objectives, and values—and that each source represents a different level of volatility. In addition, the three basic strategies for handling conflict—competition, compromise, and collaboration—should be presented and explained, and the facilitator should take care not to convey an exclusive prejudice in favor of collaboration.

When all participants are aware of the basic aspects of conflict, they should be allowed to practice fighting creatively in a relatively nonthreatening environment, such as a workshop. As they practice, the facilitator should help them to adhere to the ten guidelines that are detailed in this paper.

_____

Originally published in The 1983 Annual Handbook for Facilitators, Trainers, and Consultants.