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When Conflict Crosses Cultural Lines: How Culture Informs Conflict

Joel Perez
Whittier College

David M. Johnstone
George Fox University

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Joel Perez, PhD
Whittier College

David M. Johnstone, EdD
George Fox University

Abstract

Diverse cultural experience provides tremendous educational value. At the same time, it presents the possibility for increased misunderstanding and conflict. While conflict can happen with students of the same background, cross-cultural dynamics tend to add complexities to tension. Using a tool such as the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory, we have helped college student leaders build stronger teams, with a better and deeper ability to navigate, mediate and mitigate conflict among their leadership teams and peers.

Introduction

A large part of our institutional student-leader training is focused on cultivating student competencies in relational and personal development. Of equal importance has been encouraging students to develop cultural humility. With these priorities in mind we, as trainers, want students to understand their own personal responses to conflict. We want to help students discern how their own approach has been shaped by their cultural community – and to recognize that as they matured, they may have attained attitudes and strategies for responding to conflict prevalent in their culture. Of particular importance has been how we train student leaders to mediate and help resolve conflict as our campus becomes more culturally diverse. Traditionally, our university has been a fairly white, middle-class, rural/suburban, evangelical and regional campus. With a large influx of international students and a growing number of domestic students from urban settings, our campus is changing. Peer institutions are on similar trajectories and we believe our experiences may be of benefit to others.

Literature Review

We believe this diverse cultural experience provides tremendous educational value. At the same time, it presents the possibility for increased misunderstanding and conflict. While conflict can happen with students of the same background, cross-cultural dynamics tend to add complexities to tension. Previous writers have described the complexity of what is unseen behind our cultural dynamics. In her research on multicultural conflict, Francine Kemp (2009) divided the world into two spheres: *Low-context* cultures and *high-context* cultures. In low-context cultures, communication is verbal with strong face-to-face interaction. These are cultures that emphasize autonomy, individual rights and responsibilities. High-context cultures tend to be communal and interdependent societies that are often hierarchical and highly traditional. The concepts of shame and honor rank high in a high-context group, while they do not in a low-context group. The behavior of one from a high-context group, due to the culture's communal focus, can affect the lives of many members within their societies. Unspoken elements (such as symbols, body language, etc.) are also important in high-context cultures.

In their early conflict resolution work, Elizabeth Chua and William Godykunst (1987) noted those from low-context cultures are able to maintain their friendship by separating the individual from the reason behind the quarrel in moments of conflict. By contrast, those from a high-context find it difficult or are unable to separate the person from the conflict because of the community impact of the tension.

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When high- and low-contexts cultures interact, their meanings, intentions and values are often misunderstood and perceived in a manner not intended. Mitchell Hammer (2009) defined conflict as a "form of social interaction in which substantive disagreements arise between two or more individuals, which gives rise to an affective or emotional reaction, often based on a perception of threat or interference by one [or] more other parties to the disagreement" (p. 222). The word *perception* should be noted, as this is a major component of conflict, including cross-cultural conflict.

Martin Davidson (2001) observed that cultures tend to approach conflict in distinctive manners. Most relevant to our situation, Deborah Cai and Edward Fink (2002) noted how different cultures become associated with certain types of responses to conflict. Of course, even within the same culture, there may be diverse responses to conflict. As Kamil Kozan and Canan Ergin (1999) observed, cultures are hardly homogenous entities; frequently, subcultures form responses to tension based on region, religion, or language.

Conflict is often viewed as negative and destructive, yet, as Anne Nicotera (1995) emphasized in *Conflict and Organizations,* conflict can go a long way toward helping members of an organization accomplish its goals. Conflict within a team can be particularly valuable for an organization trying to be creative in responding to its mission and goals. Culturally diverse teams can strengthen their ability to innovate by understanding and developing strategies on how to manage their differences. Dean Tjosvold and Alfred Wong (2004) found a team is more than just a grouping of individuals; members need to be able to interact and function with one another with high levels of efficiency. For multicultural teams, cross-cultural understanding is particularly important, as the potential for confusion is higher. These teams must be focused on cooperation, not competition. Kozan and Ergin (1999) noted when team members share *cooperation* as a value, it has significant bearing upon conflict behavior, leading to greater understanding and communication.

Our challenge and goal was to train student-leaders to move beyond the traditional conflict mediation skills we had used. We wondered how to train student leaders to consider the dynamics of culture and background as they encountered conflict and sought to provide mediation. We desired they develop more complex skills and understanding in order to maneuver through cross-culturally informed conflict with confidence. Such training involved developing skills and competencies in self-awareness, relational development, and a sense of cultural humility. From our viewpoint, the competency of cultural humility was particularly critical.

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We determined our conflict resolution training for student-leaders was limited in its success. Our traditional training was strong but very mono-cultural in focus and to some extent, culture-bound. We realized there could be no standard response to the unsettling aspects of conflict affected by culture. As Nancy Evans, D. Forney, F. Guido, C. Patton, and K. Penn (2010) described in *Student Development in College,* providing individuals with accurate feedback about self is a vital method of promoting self-learning on college campuses. Subsequently, we turned to a tool called the *Intercultural Conflict Style* (ICS) *Inventory* (http://hammerconsulting.org/) developed by Hammer Consulting. The inventory seeks to assist students in understanding how their own heritage, communities, and families have shaped how they respond to conflict. We viewed the tool as a way for our student-leaders to understand themselves in order to begin to discern how their peers respond to conflict.

The ICS inventory is a 36-question survey that initially divides an individual's preferences into two core approaches for responding or resolving conflict: (1) *direct* or *indirect* communication, and (2) emotionally *expressive* or emotionally *restrained* styles. For instance, the preference for a direct approach to conflict encourages an individual to speak their mind and rely on face-to-face resolutions of disagreements. Someone who prefers the indirect conflict style would most likely be discrete about voicing their opinions and tend to utilize a third party to help resolve disagreements. In addition to the direct/indirect dichotomy, there are emotionally expressive or restrained preferences that inform the direct and indirect styles. Individuals choose to display or disguise their emotions, visibly use their nonverbal cues (expressive) or minimally display their feelings through nonverbal behavior (restrained). The inventory then goes beyond these four general styles to begin identifying combinations of the styles to assist, specifically, the individual in understanding his or her approach to conflict.

As Hammer (2003) explains, the ICS inventory takes the information gathered from the questions and categorizes it into a focused understanding for the individual. For instance, the direct style can be sub-divided into two more precise styles – those who prefer discussion (direct but emotionally restrained style) or engagement (direct and emotionally expressive approach) responses to conflict – and the indirect style can be divided into accommodation (indirect and emotionally restrained) and what the inventory calls a dynamic (indirect and emotionally expressive) style. See Table 1 for a visual representation of how the direct/indirect and emotionally expressive/restrained styles interact.

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Table 1. ICS Conflict Resolution Style Matrix

	Emotional Expression	
Communication Style	*Expressive*	*Restrained*
Direct	Engagement	Discussion
Indirect	Dynamic	Accommodation

The discussion style is both verbally direct and emotionally restrained. The engagement style also emphasizes being verbally direct but is infused with an emotionally expressive manner. In contrast to these two (discussion and engagement), the indirect style of accommodation emphasizes approaching the conflict in a circuitous (indirectly responding to tension) manner. Individuals using the accommodation style seek to resolve conflict by maintaining calm, practicing emotional control, and pursuing harmony. The dynamic style is often defined by hyperbole and characterized by emotionally intense expression. The inventory is a tool for identifying preference and responses to conflict; it affirms that styles of response are often informed by worldview, heritage, and culture. It is not a tool for measuring culture, but it does acknowledge patterns that are very beneficial for students to discern when their background and culture informs their own response to tension.

Methodology

Originally, ICS was presented to student leaders at a private faith-based West Coast university in their fall leadership training. They took the inventory individually during a presentation by the university's chief diversity officer. After debriefing the results in a larger group, they divided into their individual staffs of about 12 students. In these groups, they explored the possible scenarios they might encounter and the possible implications of the assessment for their interaction with one another.

Over a two-year period, we surveyed 50 undergraduates who participated in these sessions. Thirty-three of the respondents were women, and 17 were men; all were between the ages of 19 and 23. All were student leaders responsible for areas of residential students. All were domestic students (none were international students); 18 identified themselves as students of color, including multiracial, while 32 identified themselves as being Caucasian. The interviews were conducted three or more months after their initial training, as we desired to see if students were able to incorporate any of the teaching in their leadership roles.

Results

Having administered the ICS Inventory for six years, we noted some common features. Not surprisingly, considering the profile of students we hire, most of our student leaders tend to prefer the *discussion* style of conflict. Each year, they have comprised 60-70% of our student staff. *Accommodation* is the next highest preference (18-22%), with a handful of students preferring the *engagement* style. Over the years as we gathered data, we only had two students (of two hundred) who identified themselves as having a *dynamic* conflict style.

As we began to reflect on the data, three trends stood out: (a) Respondents noted a greater awareness and understanding of their own responses to conflict and tension (Student respondent #7 [S7], S11, S25) ; (b) There was a greater awareness of the dynamics within their own residential staff teams (S9, S11, S16, S35); (c) There was a growing understanding of how their residents responded to conflict and a discernment of how to respond to student conflict and mediation (S2, S22, S37).

Awareness of Self

According to many of our respondents, the primary value of completing the ICS was in a growing self-awareness and increased relational competency. A female Pacific Islander noted, the teaching compelled her "to learn more about it and how [she] can better deal with the cultural differences" (S3). In terms of growing cultural humility, one respondent observed, "I found that by understanding the way I handle conflict, and putting it in the perspective of how other cultures might handle conflict, I was better able to deal with a larger range of people effectively" (S48). The most common reflection was, "It helped me see how I handle conflict in ways I never really had thought about before" (S11). One student summed up one of the principle aims of this training: "I think it was good to hear that there isn't a right way to communicate, and we should appreciate everyone's communications" (S21).

Awareness of Team Dynamics

A Latina junior observed the ICS inventory was helpful in understanding her teams and peers: "We realized that we all have differences that could cause problems, but if we worked together and recognized those problems, we could go far as a team" (S35). One student noted, "Every person deals with conflict differently, and by learning what each one means and that it's not meant to be offensive or pushover – we can deal with conflict better" (S19). A Latino senior commented, "It's important to be flexible in the ways that we confront others. I don't think we can always use our preferred conflict style, because

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not everyone will always respond well to that, and may even take offense" (S20). Discerning the differences on her team, one commented, "The conflict styles have manifested in our area staff in a variety of ways. It was helpful to identify how I approach conflict and how my duty partner approaches conflict so that we could better lead as a team and not as separate individuals" (S38). She went on to note, " Knowing the conflict styles of the staff members I know less well has helped me to work better when faced with indecision or hurt feelings" (S38). Another noted the value of the ICS for team building, understanding, and cohesions: "The biggest takeaway was seeing the conflict styles of my team. It was surprising and opened up conversation for about half of the group" (S41). A peer observed, "Those on our staff that are 'engagement' were viewed as overbearing and judgmental, but once we recognized their style we understood that it was not a judgmental attitude, those conflicts went away" (S21).

Awareness of Peers

One student observed, "seeing conflict styles as something cultural has helped me to identify why a resident may react in a way totally opposite of what I expect" (S38). However, most importantly for our purposes, a Caucasian senior acknowledged, "residents handle conflict differently, and this knowledge can help me mediate their tensions" (S50). As the student leaders began to understand their residents, another Caucasian student noted, "I have a heck of a lot of variation between my residents, and if I did not know this chart ahead of time, I would think a few my residents were actually crazy. This is absolutely invaluable" (S19). Further, another observed, "Some of my residents have been very indirect in approaching conflict. They have used me to help settle their conflict without first attempting to settle it themselves. This is really different from how I approach conflict, so it was a learning experience for me" (S2). One Caucasian male remarked, "I have realized that most of the people on my floor have very different conflict styles than my own, which initially was very difficult to deal with, but with help from my staff who have different styles together we have come up with resolutions to these problems" (S27). A Caucasian woman commented, "Seeing conflict styles as something cultural has helped me to identify why a resident may react in a way totally opposite of what I expect. It gives me insight into her upbringing and family dynamics. And that gives me an opportunity to ask about those family norms" (S38).

Implications

Recently, a student leader reported a conflict that arose among eight students living together in campus housing. At first glance, it appeared to be a simple cleanliness concern tied to failure to complete chores. As the RA coached the residents, it became clear that there were also cultural dynamics at play. Half the residents were Chinese nationals; half were white domestic residents. The two groups brought cultural differences to the situation. The RA helped the students understand their tensions are not as simple as they may have perceived. Taking the ICS inventory provided the student leader with a common vocabulary and paradigm to begin understanding how his residents were interacting. Simultaneously, the ICS has primed the students to ask themselves deeper questions when encountering conflict amongst their team members or peers. The ICS has helped them to begin developing questions that will enable them to see behind the manifestation of conflict. As Hammer (2009) wrote,

> Developing awareness of these style differences begins with oneself. How an individual profiles on the ICS Inventory provides a clear window on how that person will likely frame and respond to a problem that arises. … Recognizing how one's own approach differs from others then becomes the basis for increased sensitivity to difference and an improved ability to better bridge across these intercultural style patterns of difference. (p. 230)

Conclusion

We are in this journey to understand how to respond to conflict in better ways. Whether volatility or passivity is present in a conflict, one's responses are often tied to background, heritage, and style. Conflict is challenging, particularly if assumptions are made simplistically or purely based on outward appearances. The ICS Inventory provides a tool to broaden our understanding of conflict, its resolution, and even ourselves. There is much we do not understand, and most likely we don't even know the questions that could be asked. As our campus continues to diversify, the potential for misunderstandings will also grow. However, this inventory provides a launching point for responding to conflict. Particularly at institutions that see encouraging a diverse community as part of reflecting God's kingdom, pursuing reconciliation in all its forms is a beneficial piece. The ICS inventory is a tool to begin approaching that reconciliation. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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