

Controlling the Conflict Environment

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Abstract

Conflict has stages beginning with the latent stage and progresses through an escalation stage before it reaches any settlement, if it does. Conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation, and reconciliation are all words describing reactive responses to conflict. In searching for prevention and pro-active responses, it is important to examine the root causes of conflict as a first step in reducing the occurrence of conflict. The root causes of conflict can be found in the social context that surrounds participants in a conflict. The social context is the environment in which conflict is born, nurtured, and grows. By making changes to the conflict producing environment, the conflicts that grow from that environment can either be eliminated or at least reduced. But do we misread the elements of social context and attach the wrong meaning to what really causes conflicts? If hearts cannot be changed, changing the rest will not work.

Controlling the Conflict Environment

Conflict is defined as opposition, disagreement, or a dispute. Conflict can exist between individuals, groups, and nations, or can be internal as in feelings or emotions. Conflict has stages beginning with the latent stage and progresses through an escalation stage before it reaches any settlement, if it does (Brahm, 2003, ¶1). Conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation, and reconciliation are all words describing reactive responses to conflict. But these responses are after the fact. Conflict resolution is needed after a conflict begins and if done in an early stage, reduces potential for conflict in each of the other stages.

Heaven is a place where conflicts do not exist. One of the reasons why Heaven on earth is not yet accessible is because mankind does not have the capability of creating a conflict-free environment. What we do have is the capability of making enough small changes in different parts of our environment where we can reduce the conflicts that exist in our share of the world. The problem is that we often misunderstand the environment that we are trying to change by suggesting that by controlling “things” we are controlling conflict.

Controlling “things” does not control “people”

One example of what was considered an environmental approach to conflict prevention is the use of “nuclear deterrence” strategies that came out of the cold war. This suggested that rational leaders of nations would not start a nuclear war if the result would be “mutually assured destruction” (Younger, 2009, 44-49). The stockpiling of nuclear weapons is an attempt to create an environmental approach to conflict prevention by creating a balance of power among opponents. Younger asserts that great leaders such as Eisenhower, John Kennedy, and James Schlesinger supported the doctrine of *MAD* because it “reflected the uncertain times in which

decision were made, the novelty of the weapon, and quite simply, an inability to come up with anything better” (2009, p. 46). The “deterrence theory” still has proponents and the fact that the world has not experienced a nuclear holocaust may suggest that it is working. Hitler however was not rational, and neither is Osama bin Laden. Will *deterrence* be effective against North Korea? Creating controls on nuclear weapons, removing weapons of mass destruction, or tightly controlling arms imports will reduce the potential for a worldwide conflagration, but it won’t stop the rogue nation or lone fanatic intent on killing thousands with a hijacked airliner.

The control of firearms should be viewed the same way. A lone gunman intent on killing will not be stopped by stockpiling all weapons and having an “anti-proliferation” mandate for handguns. Neither will control of the sale of firearms stop the rogue criminals in the streets or the irrational mind of a teenager who wants to kill fellow students in a school shooting. Since nuclear weapons were not available to Osama bin Laden, he used airplanes. If handguns or assault weapons are not available to gangs, they will simply go to shotguns, single shot rifles, knives, or clubs. They may not provide the convenience of a pistol, but they kill just as surely.

Things do not create conflict, people do. Unless the strategies to reduce conflict target people, they will not succeed.

Things that contribute to the conflict environment

Deborah Prothrow-Stith and Howard Spivak mention six categories of major risk factors that contribute to violence in America (2005, p. 60). These categories include gun availability, poverty, and alcohol and drug use. There is a debate over whether handguns influence violence or are the causes of violence.

It appears that the authors suggest that the risk factors may be the causes of violence rather than things that are a part of the conflict environment. For example, *Sugar & Spice* says, “The presence of a gun seems to influence behavior, resulting in more assaults and homicides than would otherwise happen” (Porthrow-Stith & Spivak, 2005, p. 61). This statement by the authors seems to suggest that gun availability is a cause of violence by virtue of its influence. This statement might be challenged by asking the question, “Of all gun owners, how many have used their guns in acts of violence?” This is a different question than, “Of all acts of violence, how many were with the use of a gun?”

To put this in perspective, the CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control reported gun deaths of 30,896 in 2006 (U.S. Firearms, CDC, Fact Sheet). The *Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence* website also says that there were an additional 69, 863 shootings that were not fatal. On the same website, it is reported that there are 283 million privately owned guns and 40% are handguns; that is 113 million handguns. The 100,759 incidents of violence by guns represent 0.000356% of available guns to owners. This would mean that 99.9996% of gun owners are not influenced by the presence of a gun to commit violence. The presence of a gun would only influence the behavior of a person toward violence if there is also some other influencing factor in combination. The other factor may be the presence of a conflict, or it might be the desire to steal. In the statistic above, 22% of the shootings were accidental shooting, many which included hunting accidents, which had nothing to do with negative influence.

The National Institute of Justice did a 1994 survey of private gun ownership in America and while the overall statistics vary from the 2006 report, a major issue included in the report was the number of self-defense incidents related to gun use. In 1994, the report cites the National Crime Victimization Survey which concluded there were about 108,000 annual

incidents of guns being used in self-defense. (Cook and Ludwig, 1997, p. 8). The numbers suggested in the National Institute report vary widely from the 2006 CDC report, but suggest that self-defense makes up a considerable percentage of any gun statistics. In fact, the survey reports that 46% of gun owners report protection as the reason for gun ownership. (1997, p. 3) and the highest percentage of gun owners are middle-aged, college educated people of rural America (p. 2).

Another question to be considered – if there were no guns, would it eliminate violence? Does one consider that until guns were invented there were wars, crime, and murders? Violence existed to such an extent that God sent the flood in Noah’s day because, “the earth was also corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11, KJV). All of this existed without the presence of guns.

The risk categories of course are not intended to mean that they are *causes* of the violence, but that they are risk factors that may be a part of the environment in which conflict happens. They become contributing factors, but only when there are other things in the environment that is precipitating the violence. Standing alone, none of these risk factors can be said to be the cause of the conflict nor would they contribute to violence if there were no other environmental factors. There is a suggestion that by reducing any or all of the risk factors would be the best approach to reducing violence. Whether one views risk factors as causes or contributors influences the approach on steps that must be taken to reduce violence.

Root causes of conflict

Bryan Lask of the University of London identifies eight reasons for conflict, seven of which are generally applicable to causes of conflict (2003, p.43-44). The seven general reasons are:

- Poor communication
- Impaired trust and confidence
- Differing expectations
- Power imbalance
- Soci-cultural differences
- Emotional reactions
- Developmental changes

These broad categories include subcategories such as our values, emotions, perceptions, and beliefs about everything from rules, roles, relationships, recognition, status, and privilege – the sum needs of our body, soul, and spirit.

In noticing that guns, alcohol, poverty, weapons of mass destruction, knives and other “things” are not listed, it must be suggested that the real work of conflict and violence prevention must start by working on these root causes. The environment or social context of violence should be examined in the light of the “people environment” and how relationships, values, people skills, and emotions contribute to the conflict, beginning to end.

Are you a thermometer or thermostat?

What is an environment? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines environment as “the circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded” (Liberty Library). God has

given men the capability of controlling different conditions in their environment. While men cannot control the weather, they still are able to control their environment where the weather is concerned by using air conditioning, heaters, shelters and different ways of protecting themselves from weather effects.

One of the most unique inventions of man is a thermostat, which is simply a device to control temperature. A thermometer is another device, but rather than controlling temperature, thermometers are controlled *by* temperature. A thermometer can be said to be controlled by its environment, while a thermostat controls its environment.

Each of us live within a “people environment” and the source of most conflict is predicated upon the relationships we have with the people that are a part of our social environment. The seven reasons for conflict are the major influencers of whether the “temperature” in our people environment is comfortable or uncomfortable. Whether we are comfortable depends on our ability to be a thermostat rather than a thermometer in relation to our people environment.

Summary and Biblical Integration

While this paper does not give sufficient space for a detailed examination of each reason of conflict and a corresponding treatment of possible conflict prevention and resolution techniques, it is important to emphasize that the Bible has provided guidelines for how to create an environment conducive to minimizing relational conflicts and allowing for social skills to develop that can be used in controlling conditions in other environments to which one is exposed. Here are the instructions to be a thermostat that can be in control of your “people environment”:

- Communication: control the tongue (Prov. 15:1, 10:19, 13:3, James 3:2, KJV)
- Trust and Confidence: control the choice of friends (Psalms 1:1, Prov. 22: 24-25, 2 Corinthians 6:14, KJV).
- Differing Expectations: control issues of the heart and desires (Prov. 3:5-6, 4:23, KJV)
- Power Imbalance: control power issues proper role modeling, showing respect, treating others fairly, using authority wisely, and train children with a Biblical concept of roles. (Eph. 5:21-25, Col. 3:18-22, James 2:1-9, Mark 10: 42-43, KJV)
- Soci-Cultural differences: control what you watch and how you think
 - Control what you watch (Psalms 101:3; Prov. 4:25, KJV)
 - Control what you think (Phil. 4:8, KJV)
 - Control how you judge others (Luke 6:37, KJV)
 - Learn tolerance for cultural differences that do not offend God (Rom. 14: 1-13, KJV)
- Control your spirit and emotions. (Prov. 16:32, KJV) (Prov. 25:28, KJV)
- Developmental changes: recognize that everyone needs time to grow and that parents have a responsibility to train and teach. Educators, counselors and professionals can facilitate changes by empowering parents to teach or by empowering children to learn self-discipline (Prov. 22:6, KJV).

Each of these has an affect on your “people environment” and will strongly impact relationships with others. The starting point for conflict prevention begins with the individual. Parents and educators must focus attention to the hearts and minds of people to address the root causes of conflict. It is what happens in the heart that determines our behavior (Matthew 15: 18-20, KJV).

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