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Interpersonal Conflict

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Interpersonal Conflict Narrative:

Conflict Styles and Systems Theory

Thus far, I have written three papers on what I’ve called “the helping interaction.” In the first paper, I laid out one example of the helping interaction in which a man at a Greyhound station overtly offered unsolicited assistance and was offended because I rejected his offer. In the second paper, I explained the various goals and interests each party had in our interaction with special emphasis on relational and identity goals: In the third paper, I outlined the power dynamics present in our relationship and conflict. I have also outlined possible steps we could have taken together to reduce mutual face threats, enhance our relationship, and balance power such that we could have achieved mutual satisfaction and joint gain. In this paper, I will outline and explain two more important elements, conflict styles and systemic interaction, that helped to create our conflict and, if recognized and used to our advantage, could have helped to resolve it.

As individuals, we all have a “style” that characterizes how we tend to resolve conflicts. Wilmot and Hocker (2007) describe five conflict styles that a person might use: a competitive style, an accommodating style, an avoiding style, a compromising style, and a collaborative style. People who prefer a competitive style tend to have a win or lose orientation favoring their personal interests. The complete opposite of the competitive style is the accommodating style. People who accommodate others tend to yield to another’s wishes for fear of offending the other or for fear of punishment from the other. The avoiding style is characterized by simply avoiding the conflict altogether: perhaps one might avoid a situation where conflict could take place, avoid a person, or deny that a conflict exists. A compromising style has elements of competition, accommodation, and avoidance strategies. To compromise means to win some and lose some in the interest of quickly resolving conflict or de-escalating conflict. Compromise also requires a certain amount of collaboration because one must consider both their own and the other’s interests and needs. Collaboration, considered to be the best in most cases, is a style that requires both high concern for one’s own needs and interests as well as those of the other. Collaboration is a process requiring considerable time, effort, and skill. Collaboration is integrative which means that its chief concern is joint gain, joint power, and joint satisfaction.

Conflict styles are not inherent to an individual (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 132). Instead, there are a number of factors which influence someone’s conflict style choices in a variety of contexts. For example, one is less likely to act competitively or aggressively toward one’s boss for fear of punishment or retaliation (Aquino, 2000). Instead, one might adopt an accommodating or avoiding style. Our conflict style choices often depend on our role in an integrated system. A “system” is a group of several subgroups or of people where each member represents one part of an interconnected whole (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 179). One person’s action can set off an entire chain reaction in the rest of the system thus making one more careful about the style she or he chooses. Systems may also have implicit or explicit rules for governing behavior such as conflict management. For example, family members might reward each other for competitive behavior. Both the chain reaction and system rules explanations provide reasons why context is important, especially in a system, when choosing a conflict style.

In the context of the man and his role in the helping interaction, it’s important to be aware of two things. First, disability in general elicits a mixed response from the public. On one hand, the non-disabled feel a sense of compassion, charity, and sometimes admiration. On the other, disability elicits fear, ethnocentrism, and even disgust. With these mixed reactions, many people without disabilities don’t know how to interact with the disabled. Second, blindness is a low incidence disability which means that the blind are a minority even in the context of the disability community. As a result, a blind person is a novelty. The man’s reactions to me are demonstrative of a much larger social system at work. The man at the Greyhound station may not have had social composure, or the ability to effectively and appropriately deal with the novelty at hand and the emotions it activated. According to McKinney, Kelly, and Duran (1997), the man’s lack of social composure and experience in this area may have caused the man to adopt a more competitive style of interaction. His competitive style is also noticeable given his high concern for his own face needs and low concern for mine. McKinney, et al. would classify him as having lacks in social confirmation skills which allow us to take the needs of others into consideration (1997). People with low social confirmation skills tend to display more competitive conflict styles. The man could have possibly been replaced by someone with more overall skill but still lacking in social skills related to disability and the results could have been more or less the same.

My conflict style in the helping interaction was heavily influenced by my place in two intersecting systems. As a blind person, I am often held responsible to both the blind and sighted communities: The sighted community often charges me with the responsibility of educating them on blindness and buffering them from their ignorance through grace and politeness at the same time. I’m responsible to the blindness community, too. I am a member of the National federation of the Blind (NFB), one of the organization-based co-cultures inside of the blindness community. Early on, we’re taught that we each represent everyone in the blindness community since we’re a heavily stereotyped minority. We are taught to believe that all of us will be judged based on a sighted person’s interaction with just one of us; we are often evaluated by our blind peers on our ability to successfully leave a positive impression on the sighted; how well one manages unsolicited help is one example.

We are evaluated on a three-tiered model explaining what Kenneth Jernigan, one of our key leaders, thought real independence looks like. Independence is not just doing for oneself, but also knowing when to accept help (Jernigan, 1993). The levels are: Fear and insecurity (afraid of blindness to the extent that one will probably cling to offered assistance with a death grip while believing there are no other options), Rebellious Independence (attempting to prove one’s independence to the extent of being rude to others), and Normal Independence (graciously accepting help or asking for help when appropriate). The question then becomes: what constitutes “appropriate?” Kenneth Jernigan answered that question, too. Except in situations where one’s space is undeniably invaded, one should accept offers of assistance as a courtesy to the sighted (Jernigan, 1993). While Jernigan’s recommendation was given as advice based on his own personal experience, some Federationists have taken it much further than that and have made his advice more on the order of an implicit rule of appropriate conduct. This implicit rule is important to the helping interaction because it created an invisible audience of evaluating peers.

In my paper regarding interests and goals, I mentioned that I experienced considerable threats to both my positive and negative face. My negative face was threatened by the man’s second-guessing my ability to do for myself. My positive face was significantly threatened not only by needing to make a positive impression on passers-by, but also to that invisible audience of blind and sighted peers respectively. Negotiators who experience face threats in front of an audience are more likely to experience a highly negative reaction to said face threats (White, Tynan, Galinsky, & Thompson, 2004). Face is associated with identity and the presentation of that identity. Face and identity are also highly linked to the resources we possess; negotiators who are more likely to experience negative affective reactions from face threats are those who more closely identify with the resources up for negotiation (White, et al., 2004). In my case, the resources I strongly identified with were perceived independence and positive regard by both the blind and sighted for how I interact in a situation such as this one.

While White, et al. (2004) have shown increased competitiveness in people with high face threat sensitivity (high negative reactions to face threats), my conflict style initially resembled an attempt at compromise. I first tried to avoid the interaction altogether by responding with “I’m fine” in order to get rid of the sighted man while not purposefully hurting his feelings and damaging my positive face in the eyes of my invisible audience. My attempts weren’t working; our prolonged contact increased the possibility of face threat. I adopted a stronger and more assertive style that could be interpreted as more competitive. In response, the sighted man retaliated with more competitive behavior. Our conflict styles weren’t getting us anywhere except into a destructive spiral.

. Looking at a range of possible conflict styles helps to narrow the possibilities for similar future interactions. Using an avoidance style didn’t work. In his study regarding the affects of structural power on perceived victimization, Aquino (2000) notes that an avoiding style might be seen as obliging or accommodating and would therefore signal to higher status people that their behavior is permissible or welcome (P. 174). In the context of the helping interaction, a lack of assertiveness on my part didn’t offer the sighted man the clue he needed to understand his behavior as unwelcome. As Aquino noted, an accommodating style, letting the man help me wouldn’t have helped either. Perhaps we could have both saved face if I’d just let him help me, but I would have felt invaded. A competitive style did not help either. If anything, it solicited more aggressive tactics from the sighted man which is consistent with victimology studies suggesting that aggressive tactics only provoke aggressors (Aquino, 2000, P. 175). Finally, a completely collaborative style would not have worked since the helping interaction tends to be short. Our interaction lasted less than five minutes if that. Collaboration takes time and skill on all sides (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 163-164). Neither the man nor I had the time or energy to employ collaboration effectively. Though these styles might not work, a combination of stylistic tactics might have been effective and can definitely be effective in the future.

Compromise might have been the best style, but a shift in tactics might have been more effective than the compromise tactics I used. The goal of compromise incorporates all of the goals in all of the various conflict styles. Compromise would have been in line with most, if not all of my interests: I would have been able to save face both mine and the man’s face to some extent while avoiding escalation of the conflict itself. I would have been able to use competitive tactics such as assertiveness to inform the sighted man that I wasn’t interested in his assistance while using accommodating tactics such as grace to coat the message. For example, I could have said, “I appreciate that you’re trying to help, but I think I’ll be okay on my own.”

Since conflict styles are closely associated with the systems that contextualize them, it’s reasonable to assume that solutions are also systematic, too. Aside from participating in continual efforts to educate the sighted about the blind, there isn’t much I can do about whatever systems and system rules the man operated under. I can, however, think a little more critically about the systems and system rules I operate under. Currently, system rules seem to demand absolute perfection lest I misrepresent the blind in some way. Frankly, such an expectation is unrealistic and doesn’t account for a wide array of difference in situations and situational actors. Jernigan’s advice for accepting and rejecting help is just that: advice. Each individual will have their own way of handling the helping interaction and its occasional conflicts. I can lessen the perceived face threat, lower the stakes, and thereby lessen my negative affective reaction to face threats by recognizing that I am only human. I can set a new rule for handling the conflict of unsolicited help by acknowledging others’ face needs while meeting mine and not evaluating the final outcome based on someone else’s opinion.

In this paper, I have explored conflict styles, system interactions, and how these two elements contributed to the interaction between the sighted man and me. In the final installment of this overall study, I will demonstrate how our conflict could have been completely redone using the elements of goals and interests, power balancing, and critical thinking about conflict styles and system interactions.

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