

# Conflict Resolution: An Invitational Approach\*

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*When Yen Ho was about to take up his duties as tutor to the heir of Ling, Duke of Wei, he went to Ch'u Po Yu for advice. "I have to deal with a man of depraved and murderous disposition...How is one to deal with a man of this sort?" "I am glad," said Ch'u Po Yu, "that you asked this question ...The first thing you must do is not to improve him, but to improve yourself."*

Taoist story of ancient China (Reported in Bennis & Nanus, 1985)

One criticism of invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1984; Purkey & Schmidt, 1987; Purkey & Stanley, 1991) is that it does not address itself to difficult situations. It is easy to be inviting when things are going well, say critics, but in times of conflict it's time to get tough: To forget inviting and start demanding. This article refutes this criticism by first reviewing the basic assumptions of invitational theory and then explaining how the theory can be used to handle conflicts, both minor and major, that occur in one's personal and professional life.

## Basic Assumptions of Invitational Theory

Invitational theory is unlike any other system reported in the professional educational and counseling literature in that it provides an overarching structure for a variety of approaches and models that fit with its four basic assumptions. These assumptions give it purpose and direction and take the form of four propositions: trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality (Purkey, 1992).

### Trust

A basic ingredient of invitational theory is a recognition of the interdependence of human beings. This interdependence is based on mutual trust. Trust is established through an inviting pattern of action as opposed to single acts. It is also established by recognizing the rights and self-directing powers of others. Each individual is trusted to be the highest authority on his or her personal existence. Given an optimally inviting environment, each person will find his or her own best ways of being and becoming.

*\* This article is an adaptation and expansion of a chapter by the author and Paula Helen Stanley in Invitational Teaching, Learning and Living, 1991.*

## **Respect**

A second assumption of invitational theory is that people are able, valuable and responsible and should be treated accordingly. An indispensable element in any democratic encounter is shared responsibility based on mutual respect. This respect is manifested in the caring and appropriate behavior exhibited by people, as well as by the places, policies, programs and processes they create and maintain. It is also manifested by establishing positions of equality and shared power.

## **Optimism**

A third assumption of invitational theory is that people possess untapped potential in all areas of human endeavor. The uniqueness of human beings is that no clear limits to potential have been discovered. Invitational theory could not be seriously considered if optimism regarding human potential did not exist. It is not enough to be inviting; it is essential to be optimistic about the process. No one can choose a beneficial direction in life without hope that change for the better is possible. From the viewpoint of invitational theory, seeing people as possessing untapped potential in all areas determines the policies established, the programs supported, the processes encouraged, the physical environments created, and the relationships established and maintained.

## **Intentionality**

The final assumption of invitational theory is that the realization of human potential can best be accomplished by places, policies, processes, and programs intentionally designed to invite development and by people who are inviting with themselves and others personally and professionally. In invitational theory, an invitation is defined as an intentional act designed to offer something beneficial for consideration. Intentionality enables people to create and maintain total environments that consistently and dependably invite the realization of human potential.

The four assumptions of invitational theory: trust, respect, optimism and intentionality, offer a consistent "stance" through which human beings can create and maintain optimally inviting environments, even in the most difficult situations. These four assumptions serve as a foundation for a practical "Rule of the Five C's" that can be used to apply invitational theory to situations that involve real or imagined conflict.

## **Rule of the Five "C's"**

Those who accept the assumptions of invitational theory face troublesome situations the same as all others in society. Personally, these vexing situations may be as minor as a family member not refilling the ice trays, a roommate leaving the twist-ties off the bread wrapper, or someone flushing the toilet when someone else is taking a shower. Professionally, the troublesome situation might be as small as borrowing a stapler and not returning it, failing to forward an important phone call, or smoking a cigarette at a business meeting. Other troublesome situations are not so minor. Issues of major concern include those that involve ethical conduct, public safety, moral principles, or legal requirements.

Whether minor or major, invitational theory advocates the resolution of conflicts at the lowest possible level, with the least amount of energy, with the minimal possible costs, and most importantly, in the most humane and respectful manner possible. To do this, the "Rule of the Five C's" is employed. The rule is to employ the lowest "C" first, and to move upward through higher "C's" only as necessary. The Five C's are *Concern*, *Confer*, *Consult*, *Confront*, and *Combat*.

In any situation that involves potential or real conflict, the person who accepts invitational theory as a model, first asks oneself: "How can I resolve this situation at the lowest possible level?" Anyone can escalate a conflict. It takes trust, respect, optimism and intentionality to resolve the conflict with the lowest "C" possible, beginning with Concern.

### **Concern**

In any situation that involves real or potential conflict, the professional who employs invitational theory asks oneself:

1. Is this situation really a matter of concern?
2. Can it be safely and wisely overlooked without undue personal stress?
3. Will this conflict resolve itself without intervention?
4. Does this conflict involve a matter of ethics, morality, or legality?
5. Is this the proper time to be concerned about this conflict?
6. Are there sufficient resources and information available to successfully address or resolve this conflict?
7. Is this conflict due to my own personal prejudices or biases?
8. Can the conflict be conceptualized as a simple "situation," or better yet, as an opportunity in disguise?

Real or imagined conflicts can often be successfully handled at this lowest level by simply asking and answering the above questions. The apparent conflict sometimes solves itself.

There are times, of course, when a situation is sufficiently troublesome that it requires more than analysis; it requires action. Yet, even here invitational theory fits. It is time to confer.

## **Confer**

To confer is to initiate an informal and private conversation with another person. One who applies invitational theory begins by signaling the desire for a positive interaction (using the person's name, eye contact, perhaps a smile or handshake). Then briefly explain, in a nonthreatening and respectful way, what the concern is, why it is a concern, and what is proposed to resolve the concern. For example, "John, when you borrow my stapler and don't return it, I spend unnecessary time looking for it. Please return the stapler when you borrow it. Would you do it for me?" At the conferring level it is helpful to consider these questions:

1. Is there clear understanding of both parties regarding the nature of the concern?
2. Do both parties know why the situation is a concern?
3. Is it clear what is wanted?
4. Is there room for compromise or reconceptualization of the concern (i.e., buy another stapler)?
5. Is the concern important enough to move to a higher "C" if necessary?

In the majority of situations, a one-on-one, respectful, and informal conference will successfully resolve the apparent conflict. In the few cases where conferring does not work, the third C, consulting, is appropriate.

## **Consult**

Consultation is more formal than conferring. Consultation involves clear and direct talking about what has already been discussed and not yet resolved. For example, "John, last week you said that you would return my stapler when you used it. This morning my stapler was on your desk. You told me you would return my stapler when you use it, and I expect you to keep your word." Questions to be considered at the consultation stage include:

1. Is it clear to both parties what is expected?
2. Are there ways to assist the parties in abiding by previous decisions.

3. Have the consequences of not resolving the situation been considered?
4. Will confrontation solve the situation?

When a direct and clear discussion has not resolved the situation and it continues to be troublesome, then it is time for the fourth C: Confront.

## **Confront**

Confrontation is a no-nonsense attempt to resolve an apparent conflict. At this stage it is important again to explain in careful detail the situation. Once again, explain why it continues to be of concern. Point out that this situation has been addressed previously and repeatedly, and that progress has been insufficient. Now is the time to speak of consequences. For example, "John, if you continue to take my stapler and not return it, I will lock it in my desk drawer." Questions to ask at this fourth level include:

1. Have sincere efforts been made to resolve the conflict at each of the lower levels?
2. Is there documented evidence to show that earlier efforts have been made to resolve the conflict at lower levels?
3. Is there sufficient authority, power, and will to follow through on the stated consequences?

When the first four levels have been applied in turn, each party is likely to know that the stated consequences are fair and impartial. Should the conflict persist in spite of the effects of the first four "C's," then the final C is appropriate: combat.

## **Combat**

In this final level the word "combat" is used as a verb rather than a noun. The goal is to combat the situation, not the person.

The word "combat" stresses the seriousness of the concern. It also indicates that because the concern has not been resolved at the lower levels, it is now time to move to the consequences.

For obvious reasons, combat situations are to be avoided whenever possible. At the combat level stakes are high and there are winners and losers. Who wins and who loses is often unpredictable. Moreover, having to combat situations requires a great deal of energy that could be better used in more productive endeavors. Yet, when lower C's have not resolved the concern, it is time to enter the arena. In preparing to combat concerns at this highest level, it is useful to consider the following:

1. Is there clear documentation that other avenues were sought?
2. Even at this late date, is there a way to find avenues of compromise?
3. Are there sufficient support and resources available to successfully combat the situation?

Regardless of the level at which the conflict is resolved, the individual who employs invitational theory consistently maintains a "stance" of respect, trust, optimism, and intentionality towards oneself and others, personally and professionally.

By handling concerns at the lowest possible level professionals who employ invitational theory save energy, reduce hostility and avoid acrimony. By thinking in terms of respect, trust, optimism and intentionality and applying the rule of the 5 C's, it is possible, even in the most difficult situations, to resolve conflicts at the lowest possible level. This is a major strength of invitational theory.

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