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In a Network, All Concerns Are Your Concerns: Applying the "Dual Concerns" Conflict Management Model to Communication Networks

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Abstract: The core premise of general systems theory (summarized by Bertalanffy, 1968) establishes that the elements within a given system have an interdependent and reciprocal relationship that creates a system-specific pattern of function. For some time, this analytical perspective of interconnectedness has been applied in many disciplines, including the study of human interaction (e.g. Ruesch & Bateson, 1951). Conflict situations, as with all systems, are not static and manifest with changing linkages and relationships. A more holistic attention to the structural complexity and the ever-changing features of conflict in systems can provide a more pragmatic, network-based understanding of group operations in general and conflict in particular. This paper advocates for the reframing of the ubiquitous "dual concerns" model (Blake & Mouton, 1970) as a useful perspective for understanding the unique, interdependent operations of communication networks and systems in the context of conflict. Rather than manifesting two distinct and opposing dynamics, the model can show how concern for "other" is concern for self. The principles of systems theory reinforce the application of more collaborative sensibilities to enrich our communicative practices.

Is it too simplistic to say that systems make the world go around? Or is this statement deceptively profound? A systems-based lens has been applied to a wide variety of investigative contexts. The core premise of general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) establishes that the elements within a given system have an interdependent and reciprocal relationship that creates a system-specific pattern of function. Consequently, systems-based analytical approaches have proved useful to many disciplines. For example, some applications have featured an objective, explanatory goal, such as in the study of biological and ecological systems. Systems theory also has informed purposeful, pragmatic applications, such as the development of the guided missile systems that constitute the atomic bomb. Several humanities disciplines have drawn on the principle of systems to better understand behavioral dynamics of groups, families, and even alcoholism. Similarly, the current scholarly and curricular involvement with the contemporary network connections as created by our "new" social media include a comparable attention to interdependence and mutual influence.

By definition, communication networks are systems. That structural degree of interdependence invites the use of more collaborative, less individualistic approaches to all facets of such co-constructed communication contexts.

The dual concerns model, and its many variations, depicts various styles of personal conflict management behaviors. It locates "collaboration" as the behavioral style in which a party has as much concern for the achievement of his/her own goals as for the goals of the "other". This paper asserts that such a dual concern approach isn't a simple juxtaposition of personal interests vis-á-vis concession or accommodation to others. Rather, the systems-based interdependence that characterizes/defines all communication networks—both in-person and virtual—creates a dynamic whereby the parties are not actually in opposition. In other words, when you help others satisfy their needs, you really are helping yourself. From this perspective, dual concern is really self concern.

Using Systems Theory to Understand Communication Processes

Systems theory, as summarized by von Bertalanffy (1968), informs much of the research in human interaction. Represented by a variety of labels (general semantics, cybernetics, structuralism, control theory, etc.) this perspective focuses on the reciprocally influential relationship of elements coexisting within a context. Originally associated with the natural sciences, an early application of general systems theory to the psychological analysis of human behavior was expressed by Ruesch and Bateson (1951), who used the systems/cybernetics perspective to reveal the hierarchical and patterned nature by which communication is organized. They advocated for a focus on the larger situation in order to assess what contextual constraints led to *that* particular structuring of events rather than to other possible constructions. Bateson (1972) also said that cybernetics is actually a theory of differences and alternatives.

Nowak, et al. (2006) expanded upon the basic systems premise by using a social psychology standpoint and incorporating a temporal dynamic by considering the evolution of the system over time. They also sought to examine the changing linkage relationships within the system's network. This more holistic attention to the structural complexity and the ever-changing features of conflict in systems can provide a more pragmatic understanding of group operations in general and conflict in particular. Conflict presents as an evolving phenomenon—both in its manifestation and its effects on the other elements of the system. Such complexity calls for management strategies that are equally multifaceted, or at the very least, "dual" in focus. This model will be discussed more specifically below.

Thinking with a systems mind acknowledges the complexity of diverse phenomena—including all formats of human interaction, whether mediated and face-to-face. Far beyond the familiar perspective that actions lead to "equal and separate reactions," we find that such phenomena are subject to multiple causes and multiple effects. In communication contexts, we never act alone. When seeking to manage a conflict (either dyadic or multiparty or networked), the parties involved would do well to employ a collectivistic mindset with an

awareness that "we are in this together and we need to resolve it together." By definition, anything labeled as a "network" epitomizes that kind of internal influence in which the component entities must relinquish some degree of autonomous control in order to gain the power of a collective existence. If we are to manage our *communities of communicative practice,* these connections and the resultant structures of mutual impact affecting the elements themselves require as much study (if not more) as the message content.

Consequently, to some degree, every scholarly consideration of a communication community will include some attention to the manner in which the component elements must adjust and adapt in order to maintain the larger ability to function. Just as the game of volleyball is "about" the rules of play, not the people playing, this type of inquiry seeks to understand human interaction by trying to understand the rules and norms by which we structure our communication communities.

Conflict as a Mechanism of Interdependence

Human interaction is complex and operates on multiple levels simultaneously. Furthermore, if one accepts that all human communication contexts are locally co-constructed and the persons involved are linked through a dynamic of mutual influence, then the popular views of conflict management/resolution as mandating adversarial, competitive, and self-interest-focused interaction styles begin to appear quite limited. In fact, conflict exists only in an interdependent context. Only when one party is linked to another can incompatibilities exist—whether over objective tangibles—what Fisher called "real conflict theory"—or over the more subjective, personal factors, which he categorized as "social identity theory" (Fisher, 2000). Such complexity calls for management strategies that are equally multifaceted, or at the very least, "dual" in focus.

Actually, conflict can be thought of as part of a system's self-correction mechanism. Rather than focusing on the source of the conflict in order to effect a resolution, the dynamical systems approach illuminates that conflict is a process, not a static condition. Whether presenting in a more momentary or a more ongoing way, the conflict is actually an evolving phenomenon—both in its manifestation and in its effects on the other elements of the system. In order to understand the dynamics of that evolution, it is necessary to note how the various behaviors and actions are constantly ebbing and flowing and inducing the interactants toward or away from the potential "catastrophe point" at which the system will implode (Nowak, et al., 2006).

Furthermore, these researchers observed that the stronger the interpersonal connections between communicants, the more the parties exhibited accommodative reframing and cognitive assimilation (rationalization); but at the same time, any eventual negative reaction would manifest in particularly dramatic ways. In other words, when dealing with friends, subjects initially would offer the offending party some accommodation, but when the *blow up* did occur, it often was disproportionately intense. Whereas, when the communicants had a more superficial linkage, they were more likely to move immediately, yet incrementally

up the conflict scale. Such a "dynamical" expansion to systems theory reinforces that conflict is a process with multiple causes and dimensions and varying degrees of influences, rather than being an easily localized problem within the group/community/system.

This finding correlates with my experiences in teaching, working with, and studying natural groups. The stronger the interpersonal connections between communicants (e.g. level of interdependence), the more they initially exhibit accommodating, reframing, and cognitive assimilation (rationalization), and the more dramatic and intense the eventual negative reaction. Whereas, when the communicants have a more superficial linkage, they are more likely to exhibit a gradual build of conflict behaviors—manifesting at more consistent increments.

Dual Concerns, Perspective Taking, and Empathy

The above discussion argues that all elements within the various levels of a given network are inextricably linked and further asserts that any approach to intragroup or intergroup conflict management must extend beyond "concern for self." Whatever happens to the other elements within a system ultimately will alter the "self" as well. Consequently, the parties involved would benefit from seeking an understanding of the perspective of the other(s).

Despite considerable research on the effectiveness of using more cooperative resolutions in network-based contexts, perceptions persist which characterize such conflict resolution as competitive and results-based—with a presumption that someone will win, someone will lose, and those roles will be determined via combative strategizing (Deutsch, 2000). However, not all negotiations need to follow this "distributive" pattern (i.e., with a competitive, fixed-pie mindset.) An alternate approach, known as *integrative negotiation*, actually resembles what is often referred to as the win-win, "collaborative" style of (individual) conflict management behavior (see Figure 1, the dual concerns model adaptation used by Blake & Mouton, 1970). Rather than having a debate about who is right, the interactants engage in an empathic dialogue to develop a new state of satisfaction and growth for all.

> For a negotiation to be characterized as integrative, negotiators must also: (1) Focus on commonalities rather than differences; (2) Attempt to address needs and interests, not positions; (3) Commit to meeting the needs of all involved parties; (4) Exchange information and ideas; (5) Invent options for mutual gain; and (6) Use objective criteria for standards of performance. (Lewicki, 2003, p. 95)

The integrative negotiation approach to conflict resolution puts forward a premise that the disputants are committed to working together to create alternatives acceptable to all parties on the emotional as well as the material level (even though the participants disagree and may do so at highly impassioned levels). Unlike the combative bargainers of distributive negotiation, the integrative negotiators consider themselves as having the same goal despite an undesirable

divergence in the details of their respective current states. Both negotiation approaches share the need for awareness of one's own, as well as the other's needs and motivations. However, integrative negotiators seek *reframing* of their own as well as the other's perceptions of the situation, concentrating on their respective common ground. Such *standing-in-a-different-place* helps to encourage empathy and induces behavioral changes which then can lead to a co-constructed transformation in the perspectives of the participants and the landscape of the situation. All elements within the various levels of a given network are inextricably linked and any approach to intragroup or intergroup conflict management must extend beyond "concern for self."

Various models exist which depict the juxtaposition of the level of concern for satisfying one's own needs with the relative concern for ensuring the satisfaction of the needs of the others in the situation/conflict. The "dual concerns" model is quite ubiquitous and has been adapted to the study of group dynamics, individual conflict management style, and managerial/leadership style (Blake & Mouton, 1970).

Figure 1: The "dual concerns" model (Blake & Mouton, 1970)
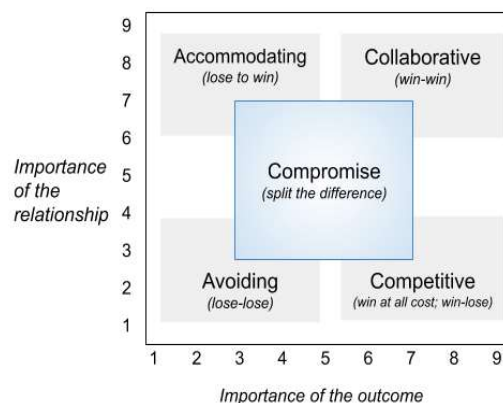
Implications for Future Research

Traditional approaches to exploring conflict management/resolution strategies have commonly, but not always, been based on a presumption of opposition. Cultural mores likely play a role in such attitudes mandating an eventual winner and a loser. One can also find contemporary references to the practice of *giving-up-something-in-order-to-get-something* (i.e., compromise) as a negative resolution whereby no one is fully happy with the result. However, it may be more valuable to consider the phenomenon of conflict as a networked entity rather than a matter of "either/or," "us against them," or "my needs versus your needs." The practical reality of effective conflict management/resolution is to reframe a situation so that the parties are able to reach a mutually satisfying solution. Future research/investigation into the dynamics of conflict resolution techniques in its various contexts—particularly in networked communities—would benefit from

more conscious application of the multiple causes and multiple effects awareness which characterizes thinking with a systems perspective.

Conclusion

Although originally devised as a means to classify innate behaviors commonly displayed in conflict situations, the juxtaposition of the imperatives to pursue one's own goals vis-à-vis attention to the goals of others provides a useful perspective for understanding the unique, interdependent operations of communication networks and systems. Rather than constituting two distinct dynamics, concern for other IS concern for self. The principles of systems theory reinforce the applicability of using a more collaborative sensibility to enrich our communicative practice.

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