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Conflicting Affirmations

Jerry Tyrrell, Tanya Gallagher and Jan Vaclav
Caspers continue the debate on page six

Coli Fowler writes on the important work of
ANN O'NIMITY page three

Plus: DIY, Consensus and Events

Community Relations Council

COMMENT

All change?

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One change which preceded the last issue of *Journal* was the establishment of an editorial panel. This panel (members listed on this page) will share the workload of producing the magazine and hopefully broaden the base of both contributors and readers.

Thanks to those of you who returned the questionnaire that was in the last issue. The responses have been extremely useful and a number of changes and features will result. You can see the first of these in this issue, and others will appear in future issues.

Editorial panel members

Fergus Cumiskey
Rob Fairmichael
Roisin McGlone
Paul Murray
Colin Neilands

The deadline for articles
for the next issue is
15th November 1994

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Change is one of the outcomes that we in CR work strive for, and change is in the air at present. The big change has been the IRA's announcement of a 'complete cessation of military operations'. The question of how to respond to the IRA's ceasefire is one that everyone must answer. In particular there is an onus on us as CR workers to reflect the new situation in our work.

I belong to a school of thought which says that the fewer people being killed the better. I'd rather have a three month ceasefire than a three day one. Three (or 30) years would be even better. Many people believe that the IRA ceasefire is a cynical ploy to build their political credibility or the result of a secret deal between them and the British government. Either of these explanations may be true but if less people die I don't particularly care what their motivation is.

I know many people see acceptance of the IRA ceasefire as conditional on it being couched in the 'correct' terms. I think the insistence on the use of particular language is a way of avoiding having to deal with the possibility that the IRA campaign is over. Even if the word 'permanent' had been in the announcement would those who are sceptical believe it? I think not because their scepticism is not based on the language but on who is doing the talking. They don't believe the IRA.

People also say that 'peace is more than an absence of war', and that the real work of establishing peace will depend on much more than a ceasefire. I agree totally but would only add that peace cannot be built in the presence of war. The real work of establishing peace cannot truly begin until the violence stops.

In the absence of complete victory for one of the protagonists the only other way to peace is negotiation. Many of us in this community have deeply held and cherished political ideals. Many of us also have ideas or visions of how these ideals will come to fruition. The process of establishing peace will result in all of us having to look again at these visions. To those who can see no acceptable alternative to their current stated positions there is no way forward other than seeking a total defeat of those who disagree with them. It follows that such people will have no use for ceasefires.

For the rest of us the IRA ceasefire holds some potential for progress. If it is to last and contribute to the development of a permanent end of violence from all sources, then we all must play our part in building on it. Rejecting an open ended ceasefire is not the way to such a development. In the light of the responses from the British Government, the Irish Government, loyalist paramilitaries, political parties and many others the IRA will reconsider its position.

If this sounds like a negotiation process that's because it is. Despite all the rhetoric, the exchange of signals that has led us to here and the responses and responses to responses that will follow, are a form of negotiation.

Among the many things that need to be done now is some work on 'our next best alternatives'. If you can't have a thirty-two county unitary state what would be the next best constitutional arrangement you could envisage? If maintaining the union with Britain in its present form is not an option what would be the next best arrangement for you? The outcome of such work will not be a victory for anyone, it will probably not result in a solution but it may well lead us to a settlement of this conflict. ✍

Paul Murray

The diary of Ann O'Nimity (aged thirtysomething)

Colin Fowler

Once upon a time, in a far distant land, there was a young boy named Sammus - so called because his parents wanted him to get a job no matter where he might go! (for those of you who haven't caught on that's a mixture of Sammy and Seamus).

Now Sammus lived beside the sea and every morning he would get up early and walk down to the beach before he went off to school. When he got there he always found that the morning tide would have washed-up tens of thousands of starfish onto the sand. Now, not wanting to stand by and watch them die in the afternoon sun, Sammus would gather up as many of them as he could and throw them back into the sea. Every day he would do the same thing and the passers-by soon became very curious about this strange behaviour. One day, as Sammus was hurling the starfish back into the sea, a man came up to him and said: "What are you doing? You'll never be able to save all these starfish. There are just far too many of them. You are wasting your time. Indeed, who does it matter to anyway?" Now this outburst surprised Sammus and lifting up one starfish he said: "Well, it matters to this one!"...

I tell you that wee story for three reasons:

1. Because I always find it difficult to get myself started into writing anything.
2. Because I just heard it recently and it's still fresh in my mind.
3. Because it reminds me very much of the whole field of reconciliation work ... often you are on your own; it may seem like an up-hill struggle or even an impossible task; there is usually little glamour or recognition in it; your efforts may be mocked by others; you hope that what you are doing can make a difference to at least some individuals...

Now, for those of you reading this article who are seeking new academic insights, spiritual enlightenment and a critique of current theoretical perspectives to ponder, all I can say is move on to the next contributor's piece on "Relative Ethicalism" - because this is the wrong place to find that type of fulfilment. Not, you understand, that there isn't a place for these things or, indeed, that I am incapable of high-powered waffling with the best of them... but I hope that I can use this opportunity to talk simply about some of my experiences in this field of work and some of the lessons that I have learned over these past fifteen years or so.

I suppose that the best place to start is with my own background and experiences. I reckon that if you remember the words of that immortal, classic masterpiece (?) from *The Sound Of Music* ("Doe A Deer") then you can't go wrong (please sing along): *Let's start at the very beginning, It's a very good place to start,*

When you read you begin with A.B.C., When you do this work don't start with "them" but "me".

Well, by now I'm sure that some of you are probably tapping your feet and humming along - transported back in time to those romantic, sunny days of the past when Julie Andrews was considered to be a goddess and everyone was cutting-up their good curtains to make summer outfits for the kids!!! But hold on. Come back to the real issue in hand...

I was born before the present spate of the Troubles began in the late 1960's. I do not see this as a romantic, idealised time when everything was "rosy", but it was a time when it was possible for working class young people like myself to have some degree of natural integration with people from other backgrounds and religious traditions. It was only after 1969 - when the community that I lived in became more polarised and, ultimately, completely segregated - that I was able to recognise how important this time had been. Like many other young people of the day I was now launched into a life of almost total apartheid. Indeed, it would have been very possible to live out the rest of my days going to school, "signing-on" at the "Bru", working, socialising, marrying ... within my own community and never consciously meeting or building a relationship with someone from "the other side". Yet

these memories of “other times” and “other people” always stayed with me. I have no illusions. Those were not “the good old days”. I remember being very frightened and, like most people from that period, carry many painful memories of those times. However, it is only now that I am beginning to be able to understand these feelings more clearly.

1977 was a very eventful year for me. I was one of the first Northern Irish young people to be whisked-off to the U.S.A. on what seems to have developed into a regular annual trip. Now there were a lot of things about that visit that I would, in retrospect, like to have changed: Many of us were chosen because of our working class backgrounds and there was some sense of being “the deserving poor”. There was, occasionally, a degree of patronisation from some of the host families; many of us became an “accessory” to families who wanted to be seen to be “doing their bit”... However, a lot of positive things did come out of this experience: I was able to re-establish links with people from all over the North of Ireland; I did make some life-long friendships; we did recognise that we all shared a common sense of humour, set of life-experiences etc.; we realised that there was a need for diversity and difference and that it didn't need to be a source of conflict - in fact it could be a source of enrichment; we witnessed how a few dedicated people could make a real difference - even if they didn't possess a high level of “professional skills”... However, I also felt sad that we had to travel 3,000 miles (or whatever it is) to gain those very valuable lessons.

Yet there were two points of learning for me:

I realised that sometimes we all need some space away from day-to-day pressures to make sure that we can fully appreciate what is happening around us and to think or dream about how it may be different.

This kind of work can be done closer to home so long as there are people who genuinely want to do it and who are prepared to learn in the process. Furthermore, it is always, primarily about developing relationships between real, live human beings; about empathising with each other's situations; about offering new possibilities and opportunities to others; and about developing a deep sense of self-worth in ourselves and in others...

Aged 15, I went on an inter-school visit to the Corrymeela Community's residential centre in Ballycastle. My school (which

was a working-class, Catholic, Secondary school) was twinned with another school in Portadown (which was a middle-class, Protestant, Grammar school). I suppose, in one sense, there couldn't really have been many more differences between us!!! There were no grants available to offset the cost of the residential. The teachers had to undertake this project in their own time at the weekend. The staff who took us had no “professional” skills in this particular area of work; nor were they E.M.U. co-ordinators who had an interest in fulfilling a curriculum objective at some “Key Stage”; neither had they ever been to a “Prejudice Reduction And Conflict Resolution Workshop”. However, they did have something that many other workers that I have since met don't have: a genuine belief that bringing people into some form of structured contact is important. Indeed, they possessed the wit to treat those that they were working alongside as being unique and important people who were not “clients” or “victims” but were equal partners in the relationship. Thus, I gained a useful first-hand introduction to reconciliation work at its very best.

Now, most of the people that I meet in this line of work have told me that they became involved for many “noble” reasons. These have included: “To find myself” ... “To experience dialogue with individuals from various backgrounds” ... “To gain insights into other lifestyles” ... “To explore aspects of prejudice and sources of conflict in our society” ... Me? I came for the crack!!! (Fun, that is).

I suppose there was nothing particularly “noble” about my motivation for becoming involved, but I did discover something which was much more important. I felt a sense of freedom to say and do new or different things; I was given a level of responsibility that - as a young adult - blew my mind; older people treated me as their equal; I felt that my contributions were valued; I had an opportunity to meet with people whose whole life history was very different to my own ... and the list went on. I suppose that this experience was to shape the rest of my working days, as it was at this point that I decided that I really wanted to become a Youth and Community Worker and to help to offer this kind of experience to other people. I also began with a realistic understanding of what might motivate some people to come to this type of experience and of some of the things that they may seek to gain from it.

When I was studying at the “Poly” I used to have a lot of problems

with the course content. Every weekend I would resolve never to return on the Monday morning because I felt that I was only getting exposure to a load of theoretical nonsense! I was convinced that through my practical experience I knew more than all of the lecturers on the campus. Perhaps, in some cases I did. However, what I came to realise was that there is always something new to learn and that there are NO absolutely perfect or foolproof models: there are merely more appropriate ways to do certain things with particular kinds of groups. I also learned the value of sharing resources, information and ways of working. Indeed, once I got past the phase of trying to assert that my approach was best, I actually learned much more about potential ways to approach this work.

I quickly discovered that I needed to remain open to new ideas and possibilities and that the real secret was to adapt the most useful parts of all that I had seen and done and internalise these things. I found it easy to fall into the trap of trying to seek out the "only true way forward" or attempting to prop-up my school of thought by putting down the views and experiences of others. This is, perhaps, the greatest danger that awaits us all. Maybe it is an inevitable by-product of an emerging field of work which, by its nature, would appear to be vocational, but which also attracts some workers who feel a need to prove their worth and effectiveness by being seen to be "more professional" than the others. However, in the final analysis we will all be judged by those we work with on the basis of what we can do rather than by who we are or how good a show we can talk!!!

I am not a "Community Relations Worker" nor, I suppose, do I wish to be. The work that I try to do is more firmly rooted in the field of promoting reconciliation. For me, reconciliation work is a much broader concept than focused community relations work. Reconciliation is more about trying to restore balanced relationships between groups/individuals than it is about trying to "home in" upon one aspect of the human condition i.e. being a Catholic or a Protestant or a Republican or a Loyalist or a ... Thus, I see my work as trying to address the range of needs which people have: love, security, self-esteem, self-confidence, to be given responsibility etc. and to explore all areas of conflict in our lives: Male-Female, Young-Old, Town-Country, Working Class-Middle Class, Black-White, Employed-Unemployed, Disabled-Able Bodied, Catholic-Protestant and so on.

This approach tries to deal with the whole person; a person who lives on a number of planes at once. Thus, there is an acknowledgement that the work is not carried out in a laboratory vacuum situation where it is possible to isolate specific conditions such as being a "Catholic" or a "Loyalist" or whatever. The work is carried out against the background of our entire life-experiences and histories.

Community Relations work and cross-community work is, though, one part of the experience that I hope to provide and it is a very valuable part. However, I see the work as being holistic in nature and seeking to meet the range of needs that participants may have. Therefore, I acknowledge that all of this work needs to be of a developmental nature and needs to start (in the words of the cliché) "where an individual person is at". Consequently, if we are to address this spectrum of needs in the most comprehensive manner possible we, as workers, need to recognise

the high degree of interdependence between us and learn how to share our "specialities" without feeling that our own little kingdom will suffer.

If I am honest it took me a long time to get around to writing this article:

- I made myself believe that I was much too busy with other "more urgent" work.
- I wasn't sure where to start or how to condense fifteen years experience into a few words - after all, any particular point of learning could be a book in itself!
- I was anxious that, perhaps, I wouldn't be able to find the right words to express what I am feeling.
- I was worried that someone might think that I am (in the immortal words of that guru of culture and good taste - Rab C. Nesbitt): "A jumped-up wee numpty"...

... and the list of excuses continued. However, if I am totally honest with myself, the main reason is because I have a lot of fears for the future of this work. I do not doubt for one second that a massive amount of very valuable work is being/has been undertaken. Yet, in our quest to establish this area of work as a "valid professional entity" we may be signing its death warrant. Over the years I have witnessed, first hand a similar development in both youth work and in local community development projects.

There is, I feel, a danger that we could be setting-up a parasitic system: We may try to exclude the efforts of "amateurs" because this is now a "highly skilled" area of work which only so-called "Professionals" can cope with. We may be developing a "client culture" which actually disempowers people by treating them as "case work". We may be creating a false economy by subsidising a lot of programmes with monies from trusts or grant-giving agencies - knowing that this money does not come from a bottomless pit. We may be establishing a "Junket Circuit" for people who spend more time talking about what they are going to do rather than ever doing it. We may be falling victims to the tyranny of managerial effectiveness and measuring "success" by playing "numbers games". We may be in danger of losing our independence of programming by virtue of the fact that the vast majority of us are funded (partly or wholly) by some government body. We may be neglecting those people who are on the margins of our community because they are not easy to contact or, indeed, to work with. We may be setting-up a structure which is so bureaucratic it cannot respond quickly to current needs. We may be losing our integrity if we re-write our constitutions or aims and objectives with the sole purpose of attracting funding for community relations work ... Perhaps the biggest criticism, though, is that we may be earning our living on the back of the misery of people in the North of Ireland who suffer through the Troubles!!!

But, then, again, none of these may apply to us. ☺

Coli Fowler will be reflecting on Corrymeela work and practice in the next issue of Journal.

The Journal's purpose is to unpick the currency of community relations training and practice and expand upon effective possibilities for the work. This inevitably means encouraging practitioners to document their work, underpinning theories and assumptions, and current and long term implications for outcomes of the work, in the hope that this will lead to more accessible, more tested and a greater range of praxis. In writing up and exposing community relations work, a myriad of opportunities are initiated, not the least of which

includes the possibility of strong challenging dialogue and support for deepening the effectiveness and credibility of the work. The documentation process demands nailing our colours to the mast. Our focus, Achilles Heel, blunders and triumphs are exposed to comment, review and judgement. Continuing the Journal's commitment to dialogue we have included the two articles which follow on the theme of conflict, co-operation, communication and affirmation.

Fergus Cumiskey

Affirmation in conflict

Jerry Tyrrell

One of the key questions that Fergus Cumiskey raises in his challenging article is "How do you affirm someone you are in conflict with?"

Leaving aside some of Fergus' criticisms of "QPEP's training philosophy" (Quaker Peace Education Project), this query goes to the heart of the purpose of affirmation. When I'm in conflict with someone over their behaviour, if my emotions get the better of me, I feel that the person is the problem. A guiding principle of conflict resolution which I expect Fergus and I agree on is the need to separate the person from the problem. A scapegoat is an epitome of someone who has "become" the problem.

One simple, but not easy way of achieving this separation, is to affirm the person. It is not only possible but necessary to do this in order to change behaviour, in my experience.

An excellent example of what this looks like in practice is the work of Highfield Junior School in Plymouth - it is worth describing in detail because it illustrates the use of affirmation in creating an environment where conflict can be tackled effectively and rigorously. It also has a similar underlying philosophy and assumptions to those of QPEP.

I interviewed Lorna Farrington, the Principal of Highfield Junior School. She told me that in her first two weeks as Principal "28 children had run away, I had been nicked by a knife once, and held

up by the throat by three parents. (Teaching was) 90% crowd control, 10% teaching. The only discipline was 'time out'. There were more children in the corridor in 'time out', than there were in the classroom." Her first goal was to defend the rights of teachers to teach, and for children to learn "without interference". Teachers used assertive discipline to impose rules and sanctions; and used phrases like "Look, I like you very much, but you know we have talked about that behaviour, we don't want that behaviour again, OK?" A series of sanctions would start to be put in place. If unacceptable behaviour was repeated the children would be taken home to their parents. This first stage of the process represented survival.

The system was imposed, initially with no input from the children. The next step was to respond to the children's wish to be involved in making the rules. An induction week was introduced during which each class including the teacher would negotiate how they would like "life to be in the classroom for the next year".

Lorna Farrington gave two examples of how they used "circle time" to deal with conflicts. As the name implies the whole class would sit in a circle. Aims of circle time included building a "group rapport and self-esteem in the individual; to solve disputes through group discussion; for every child to have a chance to speak up and speak out".

She explained that if “we don’t like your behaviour we make you feel really comfortable by saying why we like you, then we say how we feel about certain behaviour”.

If a rule is kept long enough it became a “convention”. One induction week the children were discussing whether “no swearing” could be elevated from a rule to a convention. They told the principal they would have to leave it as a rule for “the teachers”. The principal asked why, and the children explained that the rule had been broken by a student teacher. The class decided to write to him and invite him back, to take part in a circle time.

In the circle, at first he denied ever swearing which shocked them - and they responded by saying that “it’s all right you know, we do like you, its just we don’t like your behaviour”. Another time a mother was invited in by the class because her son was bullying children. The mother denied it was possible but faced with the children saying on the one hand why they liked him, and on the other how he made them unhappy by his behaviour, she agreed to enter into a contract with the class.

For this to be effective the children have to be comfortable with affirmation, to be used to giving and receiving it. It is my experience that few of us have reached this point. Fergus implies several times in his article that affirmation is different from honest feedback. For affirmation to be effective it has to be honest, i.e. credible; also creative and thoughtful, consistent and rigorous. It is a skill and it requires practice.

From its first training workshop 6½ years ago, QPEP stressed - in the “rationale for the (workshop) exercises - that the goal isn’t for people to be nice to each other, as a kind of superfluous way of communicating. Rather (it is) empowering young people to take control of their lives”.

Affirmation is about pursuing excellence, doing better, improving our performance. If you want me to do better start by telling me how well I’m doing, once I know you’re aware of that, it’s easier to believe I can do better. Yes, oppressive behaviour has to be interrupted and challenged. However all too often criticism masquerades as a means of improving performance or changing behaviour, when its real effect is disempowering. The central theme of my two articles is that we have to be practised in the art

of giving and receiving affirmation if we are to be successful in peeling away the years of putdowns and internalised oppression.

There are occasions when affirmation has - in Fergus’ words - “to be the only form of feedback appropriated”, as Bowers points out, “some groups never get as far as self-evaluation, people who receive little or no personal affirmation are only too aware of their shortcomings, of which they are constantly reminded. Help in recognising their achievements is what they need above all.”

Affirmation is an essential element in creating the very support and safety that Fergus rightly states is a prerequisite “to meet(ing) the emerging conflicts guaranteed by such (community relations) work with confidence and courage”. Fergus’ programme is after all, advanced group work skills - and that implies an above average degree of self-confidence and self-esteem amongst the participants. I firmly believe that this degree is necessary before one is able “to take care of oneself” in a way that isn’t synonymous with isolation.

I disagree with Fergus over a number of points - not so much in relation to the basis for his advanced groupwork skills course which I am convinced complements QPEP’s approach.

I appreciate the fact that he took the trouble to analyse my article. I have to correct him on one point - I do agree that conflict is an element in the everyday dynamics of human relationships, I’m just not sure it’s essential. Helena Davis, who had considerable experience in mediation with school children in San Francisco, maintains that “conflict is a sign of a need for change”. I’ll go along with that. Darby says that conflict is neither good nor bad, but it is how we deal with it that is either constructive or destructive, I guess Fergus and I would agree on that. I guess Fergus and I would agree on a lot of things, once we accept that we aren’t in competition, even if we are in conflict about the relative merits of QPEP’s philosophy.

I own up to being sorely tempted to defend my “position” at the expense of Fergus’ “position” when I first read his article; instead I will take up his subsequent invitation to participate in the advanced group work skills course. Interesting that, he and I being men, and me feeling the need to compete. ✍

Affirmation & criticism as tools of conflict management

Tanya Gallagher, Jan Vaclav Caspers

The following paper outlines some thoughts on the need and nature of affirmation and criticism as well as an analysis of the condition (conflict) that make them necessary. The paper was originally written as a discussion paper for Q.P.E.P. (Quaker Peace Education Project) but has been recently updated as a response to the continuing discussion in the C.R.C. *Trainers Journal*, about the pros and cons of affirmation and criticism as tools of conflict management. We hope that it will be of some benefit to the ongoing healthy debate on the subject.

Definition of terms

In this paper, the terms “affirmation” and “criticism” are used in a strictly objective fashion, as is the term “conflict”. All three terms are as such neither of a positive or negative meaning, i.e. they are neutral, only put into perspective by circumstance. The affirmation of a negative action is negative as such, while criticism can always be either negative or positive (constructive). It is therefore not necessary to use specifications such as “constructive criticism”. Conflict is often a negative force, but can also be positive, e.g. the conflict between an old outmoded idea and a good new one.

Conflict

Originally, conflict is a term describing any state of contradiction or antagonism, and the reaction to such a state. In real life, the vast majority of conflicts are so small that they often go unnoticed. These can be the conflicts of body language interpreted in different ways, misunderstood communication, or even conflicting moods. Other conflicts include contradictions in analysis and methods, or even just style, difference of opinion and, very often, of interest. Conflicts can be caused by situations such as the neglect of individuals, groups, subjects and ideas, or by dishonesty, abuse and aggression (which can be the results of other, underlying conflicts).

“Positive” conflicts

Sometimes conflict is positive. Growing up is a process riddled with conflicts, many of them necessary and of purpose. Differences of opinion and point of view, both inherently conflicts, can result in the emergence of new realizations or ideas. Although there are countless other examples, these descriptions of positive conflict are likely to be challenged with the argument that if they are positive, they are not really conflicts. At the end of the day, this is probably a matter of opinion (and if a conflict here results in nothing more but thoughts being spent on this subject then that is already positive...) But for the case put forward in this paper, it is important to look at conflict from both angles, and to see it as a two-sided phenomenon. This helps to demystify conflict and to find ways of working with it.

“Negative” conflicts

It will not be necessary to describe examples of negative conflicts, as they are more openly recognized and recognizable as such.

Despite that many conflicts remain undiscovered or are ignored. This applies especially to smaller conflicts which are often considered petty or ignorable. A remark indicating a difference of opinion, an action contradicting common practice (or, more usually, not contradicting it where it probably should), or attitudes not addressed, questioned or challenged because they are not seen to justify the perceived harshness of such action. Taken isolated this may even be true to some extent. But it is very difficult to isolate individual conflicts, as they have a tendency not to go away and to accumulate when not being dealt with.

Many conflicts between individuals and in groups, but also in and between communities or even countries and peoples, are such accumulations of an amount of small conflicts. A popular image used to describe the process behind this phenomenon is that of a steam boiler: The conflicts are the water in the boiler. The addition of more and more water, or the increasing of its temperature (representing the influence of outside factors “fuelling” a conflict), result in an increasing pressure which ultimately results in the explosion of the boiler. A valve can help to avoid this development, but initially it is important to see the potential fatality of any accumulated conflict: at some point a stage can be reached where the pressure is so high that even a valve cannot operate, i.e. the accumulated conflict is so far developed that it becomes impossible to transform it in a controlled way: The boiler explodes. The effects of any “explosion” of accumulated conflict cannot be predicted: In the context of “positive” conflict, this can be the point where progressive change finally makes a breakthrough, in “negative” conflicts it can spell violence, injustice, misery or personal destruction. On the other hand in the “positive” example, the “explosion” may end up with old and outmoded ideas or ways prevailing, pushing aside the opportunity for change, while in the “negative” example destruction and suffering might trigger off a transformation which may eventually bring about positive change.

Managing conflict

In the example, the valve can manage the pressure in the boiler. Too loose a valve does not allow any pressure to be built up at all. In some cases that may be desirable, in other cases the pressure and the resulting steam play an important role in a wider process, e.g. learning. If the valve is too tight, the boiler may explode, with the inevitably unpredictable results of such an explosion.

Conflict can be managed by different ways of dealing with it. Without being dealt with, a conflict can become unmanageable. In the best case that means it eventually disappears of its own accord, as some conflicts do. However most linger around or only appear to go away and still accumulate.

The two main ways of managing conflict are to resolve it (open valve) or to process it (controlled valve). It is impossible to say which of these is more beneficial (as indeed it may sometimes be to the best to let the steam boiler explode). This depends entirely on the particular conflict and those involved in its management.

For both conflict resolution and conflict processing the general rule applies: The earlier the chosen path of conflict management is embarked on, the easier it will be to avoid overpressure. There are processes of conflict management evident in all parts of social life, i.e. everywhere that conflict may arise, such as the family, relationships, communities, groups, workplaces, etc. These processes are natural and designed to intervene in conflicts at those very early stages where small individual conflicts, the atoms or fragments of later major conflicts, can still be more easily dealt with. Most of those natural processes of conflict management are based on affirmation and criticism.

Affirmation and criticism

In our society today, the originally natural social skills of affirmation and criticism have often and widely been lost or distorted. In order to regain a natural skill in conflict management, we have to re-acquire the ability both to give and receive both of them (to others and from others as well as to and from ourselves).

It is impossible to see affirmation and criticism independent from one another. Strictly speaking, affirmation could be defined as the passing of positive, affirming judgement and therefore as a form of criticism. And good, honest criticism, be it positive or negative towards the action criticized, is also a kind of affirmation: It indicates an interest in the person or action criticized, whereas leaving a destructive or counterproductive state without criticism would essentially mean to be ignorant towards it, ignorance being one of the worst forms of social sanction.

It is here that a number of myths surrounding affirmation and criticism have to be addressed, and cautions spoken out. As a basis for the arguments below the following theory can be suggested: Affirmation without all the criticism that is necessary can be as destructive to the recipient as criticism without all the affirmation that is possible.

“Good” criticism

When criticism is lodged, great care has to be given that the person, group, etc. receiving it is given all the respect due to them. In most cases that means that the criticism should be based on the action, not on whoever is responsible for it. This is not to say that the person or group is not or should not be held responsible for what they are doing. But if the purpose of the criticism is a modification, alteration or another kind of change in the action, or even the negation of the action as such, it is usually the most effective way to let the person or group responsible undertake this change themselves. To be able to do that, they need space to develop themselves and to operate, and this space they are often denied when attacked personally or as a group. Criticism should take the form of constructive feedback, which in effect is criticism

of an action coupled with affirmation of the person or group responsible for it. In this way, criticism is a very efficient vehicle for learning, as it can help to avoid many of the “scars” that come along with experiential learning (although yet again sometimes those scars may serve a purpose also).

“Good” affirmation

There is a common myth that criticism is as bad as affirmation is good. This simplistic view is usually compromised towards the case presented in this paper by saying that there should be both, but only very little criticism and a lot of affirmation. It is true that affirmation is necessary, and effective. Without affirmation there can be no progress, and progress in return forms a basis for affirmation. But anybody who has ever observed a child being reared will know there has to be constant affirmation (not only of successful action but also of the loved child without any preconditions, as she or he has to experience and learn from success and so-called failure), but also decisive and clear criticism, too (unless it was assumed that a child should run onto a busy road to learn the dangers of traffic).

To say that criticism was not necessary or negative in its very nature, and that only affirmation should be given, suggests that criticism would somehow not be required. If criticism was not required, it would suggest that the person or group concerned would know everything, and never make mistakes. As that is plainly not possible, the suggestion to avoid criticism is not to the benefit, but to the disadvantage of the group as they are denied the constructive feedback, i.e. criticism, that they need or that would help them to see more and other things that they can see by themselves. Good affirmation is therefore always cautious not to become a comforting pretence - this is very dangerous as it can ruin the benefits of sensible affirmation where they are needed

Conflict management in groups

In any group, conflict management is not only of vital but often of crucial importance. With their delicate composition of different individuals, groups break apart very easily, disintegrating slowly or exploding in the way of the steam boiler. As it is impossible to determine the effects the exploding boiler has on its surrounding environment, it is also impossible to estimate the effect a break up of any group, family, community, country, etc. can have on the involved parties. Groups that work with other groups have to be especially aware of this, as the necessity to observe and react to the processes in client groups can easily lead to a neglect of the group's own conflicts.

It is important for a group to work out their own way of conflict management. The main tools are affirmation and criticism, being essentially basic skills of interpersonal communication and co-operation, conflict resolution or the processing of conflicts for creative, constructive ends. These skills cannot simply be conveyed in a manual, guideline or recipe for successful conflict management. It is however possible to increase the awareness for conflicts, so that the members of the group can activate their own potential for dealing with them. In furthering conflict awareness and encouraging the reclaiming of natural skills, there is not only a better chance to arrive at successful conflict management: The solutions or processes found or developed this way will also be more durable than any adopted approaches simply owing to the uniqueness of every conflict and the uniqueness of the conflicting parties' possible understanding of their own situation, and their potential for change. \

Making sense of consensus

Rob Fairmichael looks at some basics of small group consensus.

'Consensus' is a much used term, but usually without any explicit understanding of how it is to be brought about. This short piece is to help explore some possibilities regarding small group consensus. And why consensus? Simply because it is more efficient to involve everyone and their ideas - and more fulfilling.

Regarding the process, it is firstly important that all members of a group know the stages of decision making - they need to be explicitly stated rather than implicitly assumed. There is thus a common process that people can use to arrive at consensus. A particular model for arriving at consensus is shown on this page (taken from "*Speaking Our Peace: Facilitating Meetings and Workshops*", Quaker Peace Action Caravan). It is only one such model. A group can draw up its own... a useful exercise in consensus decision making! Obviously building up good group dynamics in general is important apart from the specifics of consensus decision making.

Some tools

which are useful in arriving at consensus are:

Go-rounds: in turn, everyone is invited to speak (perhaps very briefly, even half a minute if time is pressing) but they can 'pass' if they like.

Straw vote: by a show of hands, an indication is taken of how people feel. This is not a decision in itself, merely a snapshot indication of how people are feeling on the issue at that particular time. And consensus decision making has to deal not only with how people feel but how strongly they feel it.

Brainstorms: to generate everyone's ideas.

Small group/caucus discussions: to allow people to articulate concerns and develop ideas.

Silence: we all tend to be afraid of silence but it can be a strong and useful tool in allowing reflection and restoring calm.

Check for agreement on parts of proposal: if agreed, these can then be put to the side.

End options

As a group nears a decision, there can be a variety of stands taken by the group and by individuals if there is a problem in arriving at consensus.

Group options include:

Withdraw concern: the proposers withdraw the concern.

Sent to committee/working party: the issue is referred to a nominated and agreed smaller group for further reflection (this can also be a classic delaying tactic!).

Invite mediation: involve a third party mediator to help resolve the issue - if it is of sufficient importance to do this.

A process for consensus decision-making

Declare a block: recognise that there is no agreement. In this case there is still the opportunity for 'birds of a feather' (those in agreement) to go ahead but not under the banner of the group concerned.

Individual options include:

Non-support/ Reservations/ Standing aside: "I don't go along with this but go ahead anyway...."; "I think it's mistaken but I can live with it..."; "I can't personally be involved but I won't stop others from doing it..."

Blocking: Fundamental opposition where a person or people feel obliged to block a decision. Not a decision lightly taken.

Withdrawal from group: Individuals can decide to withdraw from involvement in the group. ✍

We will be reviewing Peter Emerson's The Politics of Consensus, a large group 'preferendum' model, in a forthcoming issue.

Do-It-Yourself Exercises

No.1 in a series: The Card Game

*Arising from responses to the questionnaire in Journal No.6, it has been decided to invite practitioners to share a particular exercise or approach they have used and describe not just how it is done but what has gone right or wrong when they have used it. One questionnaire response suggested pieces on "My worst mistake as a CR trainer" but that is for the particularly brave! Your experiences are invited. What we're looking for is: 1) an outline of the context 2) the mechanics or processes involved 3) reactions and outcomes, and 4) what you'd do again. To kick off this particular ball, **Rob Fairmichael** describes the Card Game.*

A walkout was imminent. I stood in the middle of the circle deliberately attempting to block eye contact between two people who were hurling abuse at each other. It was certainly exciting but it was also a facilitator's nightmare. The two community groups or structures involved had only this one meeting to sort things out, yet they arrived with mutually incompatible agendas. And there I was, facilitator in the middle. If there was a breakdown in this meeting it was going to be all-out strife with one group going to try to overthrow the other because of what they saw as their deficiencies. A lot rided on my shoulders; could I steel it out?

I had been invited to facilitate this meeting which took place in a neutral but community related venue 'somewhere in Northern Ireland'. I met some of the main protagonists the day before to get a picture of the different views involved; the rift was deep and while both sides were mixed (with both Protestants and Catholics in each) there were nevertheless considerable elements of politics, local and otherwise, involved. If the forthcoming meeting failed then it was all going to get decidedly worse.

The underlying fact, however, was that both sides had 'the community' at heart. They might have had different approaches and perceptions of how 'the community' should be represented but they all had genuine concerns. At the meeting I had deliberately arranged chairs in a reasonably tight circle rather than around a table to encourage openness and avoid the sides being reinforced by seating arrangements. After initial introductory business and agenda sharing we - the dozen people at the meeting - went straight into "The Card Game".

Everyone was given four file cards. They were asked to write down one point on each card about what they wanted achieved in the next six months in relation to the general issue at question. These cards were then taken, shuffled around, and placed on a table. Everyone was invited to take two that they identified with (not their own). These were then read out and written up on a flip chart. It wasn't magic because there were divisive terminology and concepts represented but there was also a good cross-over of ideas between the warring factions.

We then moved on to a fears list - what people feared in the situation - again listing these on the wall chart. This was followed by good old fashioned ventilation (including the verbal abuse mentioned in the first paragraph) and a couple of points where we got bogged down on definitions and other matters. Eventually the first reconciliatory offer was volunteered by a chief spokesperson for the more established side. This was followed by a reconciliatory exploration by a chief spokesperson on the other side of a tentative time line for joint involvement and participation. We were at truce point.

Bitter and damaging strife between the two networks was avoided. The proposals made at the meeting didn't happen because the side making the demands didn't follow through what they needed to do, but the bumper bust-up which could have come was avoided.

"The Card Game" was a good start to the meeting, and coupled with a fears list helped to show the humanity and genuine concerns of each side. There are situations where it would not be appropriate, and in any case would need to be carefully phrased. It needs a certain common interest and would not be appropriate on purely political differences unless the topic built on some overriding commonality (e.g. "The future I want for Northern Ireland" could invite stock political responses from each side but "How I would like to see relationships between Catholics and Protestants developing locally" might be possible in some situations). It is obviously open to some adaptation in that you could give everyone two or three cards instead of four, etc.

It was what you might call an interesting experience and an approach I would use again if required; a "card game" where patience and calmness are both trumps! ☞

EVENTS

Enclosed are brochures on the 'Alternatives to Violence' project, the WEA autumn programme and 'Dealing with Resistance through Action Methods' for those interested in a socio-dramatic approach to leading community relations group work.

WEA: Community (and other!) Relations

The WEA have a broad range of courses, workshops and seminars taking place throughout the autumn on community relations and allied issues. Venues include: Armagh, Banbridge, Bangor, Belfast, Cookstown, Craigavon, Derry, Downpatrick, Enniskillen, and Portstewart. There'll also be 'political discussion' sessions in a number of locations.

In **Belfast** there is a series of workshops on community relations issues taking place on Thursdays (daytime) starting on 13th October, and courses on human rights (with Mary O'Rawe) and an introduction to Irish history (with Michael Ritchie), both courses on Wednesday evenings. In **Cookstown** there is a series on community relations and allied issues beginning on Wednesday 12th October. In **Craigavon** there is a series of seminars on topical community relations issues, taking place on Wednesday evenings beginning on 28th September. **Enniskillen** has a variety of courses and seminars on topical CR issues.

Further details from; Colin Neilands, WEA, 1 Fitzwilliam Street, Belfast BT9 6AW, phone 0232 - 329718, or from Community Relations Officers locally.

PACE: Self-awareness & group facilitation

PACE (Protestant and Catholic Encounter) has a series of weekend residential trainings in self-awareness and group facilitation skills. The approach taken is person-centred in the encounter group tradition of the late Carl Rogers. Dates scheduled include; 25-27 November 1994; 14-26 February, 26-28 May, 25-27 August, and 24-26 November 1995; and 23-25 February 1996. Training administrator is David McKittrick, project officer of PACE and the staff are John Barkham, Anna Gilchrist and Deb Steele. Further information from: PACE, 103 University Street, Belfast BT7 1 HP, phone 0232 - 232864.

AVP: Alternatives to Violence Project

The Alternatives to Violence Project is an effort to help people creatively reduce the amount of conflict in their lives; it uses structured experiential exercises building on the life experience of the participants. There are two AVP basic workshops planned: you can choose either October 24th - 25th, or October 31st - November 1st. The venue will be central Belfast. Further information from Steve at Belfast 459000, or for general information contact Brendan McAllister, Mediation Network NI, 74 Dublin Road, Belfast BT2 7HP, phone 0232 438614.

Ulster People's College Irish classes

Starting on 5th October, these run from 7.30 - 9.30 p.m. on Wednesdays. There are 3 classes for differing levels of ability; the course is in its fifth year and attracts people from all sections of the community. The price per 10-week term is £40 waged or £20 unwaged. Contact: Paul Donnelly, Ulster People's College, phone 0232 - 665161.

Dealing with resistance through Action methods

A weekend workshop 14th, 15th & 16th Oct (7pm to 9pm) with Noelle Branagan.

Action methods: These are techniques which can involve movement, changing of roles, expression through action or activity thus, moving away from a purely verbal interchange.

About the trainer: Noelle Branagan qualified as an Occupational Therapist ten years ago. She is an experienced group therapist, specializing in psychodrama psychotherapy, currently working in Shaftesbury Square Hospital. She is in the final stage of her psychodrama psychotherapy training, and has been using Action Methods, in her work for five years.

Venue: WRDA (Women's Resource & Development Agency), 6 Mount Charles Belfast BT7 INZ

Fee: £50.00 (Deposit of £20.00)

Contact: Noelle Branagan, Shaftesbury Square Hospital, Great Victoria Street, Belfast. BT7 Tel: 329808.