Avoidance as an active mode of conflict resolution

Julia Richardson

The "art" of conflict resolution has, and quite deservedly, been the topic of much debate in terms of its implications for team building and group dynamics as well as for related organizational issues. Thomas[1] described five modes of conflict resolution. These were based on two conflict management dimensions:

(1) How assertive or unassertive each party was in pursuing its own concerns.

(2) How cooperative or uncooperative each was in satisfying the concerns of the other.

Four conflict-handling strategies

These two dimensions, he suggests, produce four conflict-handling strategies:

(1) Competition (assertive and uncooperative).

(2) Collaboration (assertive and cooperative).

(3) Avoidance (unassertive and uncooperative).

(4) Accommodation (unassertive and cooperative).

Thus we observe how different modes of conflict resolution have been identified to enable classification of adopted behavior into its "appropriate category", i.e. behavior exhibiting a desire to satisfy one's own concerns at the expense of others, aggression, "win-lose" mentality, combined with attempts to dominate a given situation, has been classified as a "competing mode of conflict resolution"[2].

Implications for team building

Although recognizing the importance of this topic of study in terms of its implications for team building and group dynamics, this article argues that it is not appropriate for hard and fast categories of conflict resolution to be established. In particular, issue is taken with the third of the above categorizations, i.e. that of "avoidance" as an unassertive/passive mode of conflict resolution. In much of the related literature, be it concerning organizational/group/team building implications, avoidance behavior has been labeled as unassertive/passive[1,3,4]. In the light of this, I shall also be considering the important implications for group dynamics and team building – not in terms of alienation and distancing, rather in terms of consolidating and creating group solidarity even where previously there may have been difficulties. I shall also demonstrate how the team whose members are united by the use of avoidance as a method of conflict

resolution is not necessarily different in nature to the teams built through the new models of team building[5-7]. By the same token, these teams also demonstrate transactional skills and transformational skills – which have been recognized as essential for successful team building and positive outcomes[8, 9].

An active form of conflict resolution

This article argues that "avoidance" should, in some instances, be recognized as an active form of conflict resolution. At a superficial level it may appear that in seeking to avoid contact with the perceived "opposition"/situation pertaining to the conflict, we are behaving in a non-assertive/passive manner – giving control to the "opposition", that we have "essentially given up responsibility for ourselves and our actions"[3]. A more in-depth analysis reveals that some forms of avoidance behavior are distinctly active. Through avoidance we may be actively achieving our goals – although they may be distinct from the goals of the organization/individual we are opposing. A case in point would be that where avoidance is adopted on a group level it may have the effect of team building and creating a definite sense of cohesion and solidarity – thus revealing its active/ productive rather than passive/unproductive nature.

Although this article is based on a specific case study, reference will be made to other studies to corroborate conclusions made. The approach taken is anthropological in nature and has, therefore, wider intercultural applicability.

Case study

Research project

In 1994 The Stapleton Educational Institute (SEI), Singapore, was the subject of a research project concerning adopted modes of conflict resolution and their effects on group dynamics. SEI was an organization offering degree courses in management and economics to both full- and part-time students. Although small in terms of number of staff, student numbers were relatively large, thus creating a heavy workload for incumbent lecturers and administrative staff. Given that both full- and part-time courses were offered (evenings and weekends), hours were long and the majority of staff were working a six-day week. To add to this, there were several intakes for courses which resulted in no clear terms or holiday periods – this was very different to other educational institutions. The latter was a source of much contention between staff and management – the former having been accustomed to the usual fixed holiday structure of academic employment. Also there was a cultural dimension to add to existing difficulties. The majority of academic staff were expatriates recruited on the principle that an expatriate lecturing team would be an excellent marketing tool – which market research proved correct. This, however, brought with it specific difficulties – cultural adaptation to both students and management strategy, higher salaries commanded by expatriate staff resulted in their having to "earn their money" – thus the heavy teaching loads/limited vacation time. Clearly there were a number of potential areas for conflict. Research revealed that there was indeed a great deal of conflict within the organization relating to all of the above issues plus several others – lack of trust from management, administration/faculty relations, general style of management.

In theory, the management comprised the managing director (MD) and the director of studies (DOS). In practice, however, it was the MD who made all major decisions while the DOS simply attempted to see that they were carried out or communicated to staff. It should, however, be noted that the

MD and DOS were recognized as the "opposition", against whom all anger and frustration was directed – although covertly rather than overtly. Relations between them were sufficiently close for the rest of the staff to feel a distinct sense of "them and us", and communication was terse and frequently strained between the MD and staff and the DOS and staff.

Conflict resolution

What is significant, for the purposes of this article, is that the mode of conflict resolution adopted by staff, both academic and administrative, was avoidance. According to Huczynski and Buchanan[10] and in keeping with other definitions[1] the category "avoidance" is characterized by behavior where:

> One party may recognize that a conflict exists but chooses to withdraw from it or to suppress it. This style therefore involves ignoring conflicts in the hope that they will go away; putting problems on hold; invoking slow procedures to stifle conflict; using secrecy to avoid confrontation; and appealing to bureaucratic rules to resolve conflict. The desire to evade the overt demonstration of a disagreement or indifference can result in withdrawal. If withdrawal is not possible or desirable, the individual may suppress it, that is, without airing their differences. In situations where people have to interact because of their work requirements or because they are living together, suppression will be more likely than withdrawal[10].

In keeping with some characteristics of this category, staff avoided overt demonstration of disagreement. Appeals concerning time off and lecturing hours were done by making specific reference to bureaucratic rules rather than by open discussion. "Closed" discussions were held among staff about management strategies and employee frustrations. Secrecy ensued, where applications for posts elsewhere were made and extra tuition was provided by academic staff using the company's facilities, but income was not declared. Informal staff gatherings frequently resulted in airing grievances and complaints among themselves rather than confronting management; in some ways this served as a release. Although senior academic staff adopted a different method of avoidance – rather than demonstrate disagreement they became apathetic and were reluctant to become involved in new projects or, if required to do so as a result of contractual duties, did so with minimal interest. General characteristics of avoidance were demonstrated by all staff as a means of resolving the conflict they experienced both as a group and as individuals.

A lack of enthusiasm

Whether or not management perceived this avoidance and the effect it had on them is not a major concern of this article, however, suffice to say that from time to time both the MD and the DOS noticed a lack of enthusiasm. The MD frequently made comments that the organization had "lost its initial life and friendly camaraderie". However, neither party felt that there were problems within the organization and that the behavior of staff was in any way a reflection of their dissatisfaction or discontent.

Theoretical issues
Elsewhere, it has been suggested that avoidance as a mode of conflict resolution is passive/unassertive behavior and, going even further, that:

> People who practice the avoiding style tend to behave as if they were indifferent both to their own concerns and to the concerns of others. The avoiding orientation is often manifested through non assertive and uncooperative behavior. Those who avoid conflict tend to prefer apathy, isolation and withdrawal to facing conflicts. They tend towards letting fate solve problems instead of trying to make things happen[1].

As discussed earlier, the general tendency is to see avoidance behavior as an indication of passivity/lack of interest in improvement of current situations or relationships/willingness to place one's destiny in the hands of fate. This article argues otherwise.

Staff were avoiding conflict

With reference to the case study, it may have been that staff were avoiding conflict but their avoidance had positive outcomes for themselves as individuals and for uniting them as a team. I would argue that, in this case, the process of avoidance is conducive to team building. It was a common denominator which served to increase the effectiveness of staff, ease their relationship with management and provide support for individual members in a time of unrest. It therefore becomes predictable that they would seek to maintain those group dynamics and the relationships they produced. The outcomes of those group dynamics were beneficial to staff. Resultant cohesion and support made the failures of the management and general ill-health of organization more tolerable. In this particular case, collective avoidance, because of its positive outcomes, becomes the impetus for increasing and maintaining group relations. We therefore observe, as Pfeiffer[11] suggests:

> If a relationship gives the parties partial or complete satisfaction of their individual needs, they must apply some of their individual efforts and resources to the maintenance and growth of the relationship itself.

That adopting avoidance as a method of conflict resolution can be an active method of team building is demonstrated if we consider the staff of SEI. Their method of conflict resolution was avoidance; it gave them a common identity and a sense of unity. Reilly and Jones[5] state that not all work groups are teams, that teams have four essential elements: goals, interdependence, commitment and accountability. In this sense, SEI staff satisfied all of these criteria – they were a team rather than a group. The method of conflict resolution they had adopted had a team building effect – it had in fact changed them from group to team status. In keeping with the criteria of Reilly and Jones[5], members had mutual goals or a reason to work together; there was an interdependent working relationship between them, as individuals they were committed to the group effort and they were accountable to a higher level in the organization.

New models of team building

As a team, SEI staff also exhibited the new models of team building presented by Kormanski and Mozenter[6]: awareness; conflict; cooperation; productivity and separation. The first stage, awareness, was where they realized that management was not willing to resolve personal and organizational difficulties through open discussion. They accepted this but became committed to one another for support and cooperation. During the second stage, conflict, they discussed ideas and were frank about their frustrations with the organization and in some cases with each other. They expressed their desires to seek employment elsewhere. The third stage, cooperation, involved helping each other through supportive discussion or, more practically, supplying leads and references for alternative job applications. The fourth stage, productivity, was where they enjoyed the camaraderie of their "team of avoiders", private ventures were successful and efforts were made to increase contact networks. Stage five, separation, would not be achieved until either the difficulties with the management had been resolved or they were successful in finding employment elsewhere.

As mentioned above, individual personality differences between staff which had previously resulted in the formation of "cliques" were put aside and

replaced by greater tolerance of one another. Indeed the sense of homogeneity within the group increased dramatically, and tacit understandings were created and adhered to by all members. This is stage two of Kormanski and Mozenter's[6] new model of team building. Feelings of hostility between some members of staff were resolved and replaced by understanding of one another. The desired outcome of clarification and belonging was achieved.

Informal, implicit bonds

It may be argued that it was the lack of confrontation with management which resulted in the formation of these informal, implicit bonds. Direct confrontation or discussion with management would have required precise organization coordination with an underlying acceptance of the unity of the group. However, as this case demonstrates – avoidance can also create group cohesion and bonding. Unity created by avoidance was more permanent than that which would have been required for confrontation – for confrontation it is only required during and for a relatively short time after the event. Avoidance as a more general and long-term mode of conflict resolution resulted in more permanent cohesion. Scott[12] argues that avoidance is more of a continual process and that its quality of "continuity" results in it becoming an inherent part of the everyday lives of the respective group and its members. Just as the avoidance becomes an everyday event, one might argue that so cohesion and unity become even more entrenched. Thus, in seeking to understand avoidance it is important to note its implications not just for resolution of conflict but also for individual bonding, and team building and maintenance.

Ethnographic evidence demonstrating the implications of "avoidance" as a mode of conflict resolution for group dynamics is clearly demonstrated in Jellinek's study of Kebun Kacang, a suburb of Central Jakarta, Indonesia. In the face of economic and physical hardship caused by government housing and employment policies – i.e. slum clearance schemes which did not supply adequate alternative accommodation and laws making the use of becaks illegal, a source of employment for many of the male residents of the community, the people of Kebun Kacang adopted "avoidance" as a way of dealing with their predicament. This involved avoiding government officials and policies, unwillingness to make use of government facilities, retreating within their community for self help and support rather than seeking confrontation with the authorities. As in the case of SEI, there were direct implications for the group as whole; avoidance influenced the structure and quality of "community" relations since it demanded a specific kind of relationship between members:

> To survive they needed to help one another[13].

A group akin to "camaraderie" develops

Those taking part in the avoidance formed a group in which something akin to "camaraderie" develops, thus holding members together. This provides an example of Kormanski and Mozenter's[6] stage one, awareness. Of course, as Colchester has pointed out[14], similar group cohesion is required and develops in the case of adopting other modes of conflict resolution. However, the point I argue is that rather then seeing avoidance as a passive phenomenon it does in fact produce strong and in some cases positive effects. It is important to recognize that it carries much more than a behavioral response to perceived conflict. It has underlying symbolic and conceptual qualities, constructing a divide between "sides" of the conflict but also having implications for the psychological bonding between group members.

Another theoretical point is that avoidance may not always be an indication that the group or individual has necessarily handed their destiny to the opposition. In the case study, staff were avoiding confronting management but they were not becoming apathetic toward their own destinies. Quite the contrary, many were making specific plans to either move on elsewhere or take on extra work on a private basis. Admittedly, they were avoiding resolving the conflicts within the organization but they were not passive toward their own destinies. It was significant as an indication of group cohesion and camaraderie that members showed great concern not only for their futures as individuals but also for the future of one another. Help and cooperation were offered in terms of supplying references and providing open access to one another's social/professional networks for job searches. Thus, we see a significant departure from the more widely accepted view of avoidance as an individual distancing phenomenon which results in denial and apathy toward our own professional development and that of our colleagues. Avoidance behavior, in this case, resulted in team building rather than team destruction. It gave an increased sense of cohesion and unity which, ironically, the MD felt had disappeared.

Implications of team building
Of course it would be a short-sighted manager who encouraged avoidance behavior as a means of facilitating group cohesion among his/her staff! Similarly, no trainer would encourage avoidance as a strategy toward effective team building. The aim of this article has not been to support this method of conflict resolution nor to recommend it for the development of a healthy organization. What is important, however, is for team managers and trainers to recognize that when staff avoid, individualism is not an inevitable outcome. Failure to address problems within an organization has severe implications for its continued existence. In the case of SEI, staff were avoiding and as a result cohesion and solidarity were increasing, but the avoidance and resultant team building were detrimental to the wellbeing of the organization as a whole. In a positive sense, the group dynamic was becoming stronger – individual differences had been reconciled and replaced by a common aim to help one another in terms of support for the present and future – but the strength and bonds created were then being used against the wellbeing of the organization.

If we accept the above argument, we must also recognize that avoidance is a powerful weapon against the wellbeing of an organization. This is in direct contrast to the aspect it is usually given – i.e. that of passive apathy. On the contrary, although it can be beneficial for team building, avoidance can simultaneously be detrimental in that conflicts are never resolved but also because it results in and could even be said to exacerbate (through the construction of an "anti-organization team") opposition to management and reduces even more the likelihood of conflict resolution. Cohesion among a group of people may be beneficial in some ways but, as in the case of SEI, it was proving detrimental – because of the principle on which it was based, i.e. a common strategy of adopting avoidance as a method of conflict resolution.

What emerges is that although effective teams can increase efficiency and effectiveness and quite rightly the creation of teams has become a key strategy in many successful organizations, depending on the nature of the team it could be dysfunctional toward organizational wellbeing. In the above case, the team was cohesive and unified, it had a common goal and members

received the support they needed in the face of difficulties and frustrations. To all intents and purposes the team was productive – and indeed it was, as far as individual members were concerned. However, its cohesion and solidarity, unspoken rules and commitment to a common goal were in the long run not conducive to the success of the organization.

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Julia Richardson

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Julia Richardson is Sociology Lecturer at Stansfield School of Business, Singapore.