Does Your View of Conflict Get in Your Way?
by EdreeAllen-Agbro

Returning to work with early childhood leaders after 20 years of consulting and coaching in corporations, nonprofits, and school districts, I had an epiphany. Even though early childhood leaders and educators are in a gentle, caring profession, they are not exempt from the statistic showing that most leaders of organizations spend 50-80% of their time handling some kind of conflict.

The early childhood work world is extremely complex, which makes it fertile ground for conflicts to rise between the competing interests, needs, and perspectives of diverse stakeholders. Parents and boards and government regulations! Oh my! There are also many cultures, many types of programs, and different approaches to child development — the list goes on.

Forty early childhood education leaders who recently showed up and stayed for my two-day workshop on transforming conflict were not just brave and dedicated. They were desperate for some hope that there is a better way; there is.

I believe that familiar strategies of conflict resolution and conflict management are insufficient to address the complexities that early childhood leaders and communities face. The primary reason is that these approaches are founded on a limiting assumption about the nature of conflict. These approaches are based on the premise that conflicts occur as undesirable intrusions upon normal life. Viewing conflict in this manner is a distortion of the nature of conflict. The distortion begins with metaphors that misshape how we think about conflict, how we talk about it, engage in it, and the results we achieve from it. Let's take a closer look.

Conflict Resolution

The most common approach to conflict is 'conflict resolution.' In fact, it has become the default term for handling conflict much as 'googled' has become a verb meaning 'searched the web.'

Conflict resolution is based on the idea that conflicts are discreet, disruptive, and potentially dangerous problems to be solved or 'resolved.' This approach is primarily a reactive strategy, much like firefighting. It emphasizes developing conflict resolution skills, much like firefighting skills. That way, leaders and staff can resolve the conflicts whenever they erupt. Sometimes programs hire professional 'firefighters' called mediators or coaches to help resolve the 'wilder' conflict fires. Conflict Management

Conflict management

Conflict management is an alternative that builds upon the conflict resolution model. This approach looks at conflict more systemically. It involves taking 'pro-actions' that include anticipating conflict and putting policies and procedures in place on how to handle it when it arises. Some conflict management approaches also include systems thinking to look for more contextual causes and solutions to conflict, in addition to conflict resolution techniques and tools.

The basic assumptions of these conflict resolution or conflict management approaches are limiting. As I mentioned earlier, they are based on a distorted view of the very nature of conflict itself. They operate on the often unspoken, frequently unconscious, and broadly unquestioned idea that conflict is bad. That it is a negative energy that needs to be controlled or conquered.

Conflict resolution and conflict management are not wrong. I am not declaring 'war' on them. In fact, in the approach I am about to suggest, it is still useful to develop skills and tools for handling conflict, and it is still wise leadership to plan and agree on procedures as well as hold people accountable. The difference however is quite profound, for it involves change at a fundamental level — changing our basic assumptions about what conflict is, who we are in conflict with, and the potential inherent in conflict.

Conflict Transformation

Unlike resolution and management, conflict transformation operates under the assumption that conflict is neither good nor bad. It's not inherently evil or benevolent. It is a 'spark.' In addition to the possibility of destruction, within it lies the opportunity to create something new. The potential for innovation. The promise of new vitality or beauty.

Think of diamonds and pearls. They are the result of conflict. The beginning of a pearl, for example is the conflict or friction between a grain of sand and the delicate innards of an oyster. The oyster transforms the irritation between the sand and itself by creating a beautiful, iridescent orb. It creates treasure out of the conflict. We can do that too. For humans to create a treasure out of conflict, we have to call upon resources different from oysters or clams. We don't possess pearl-making fluids, but we do have fluid minds. This is the foundation of our treasure-making power — our minds. We can learn to transform conflict by changing the way we think about it.

John Paul Lederach (2003), pioneer of conflict transformation and author of the internationally recognized *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*, explains that instead of trying to eliminate or control conflict, we need to understand the true nature of conflict. We need to work with its 'dialogic' nature, so we can actually benefit from its constructive potential.

Conflict Metaphors

Our concepts of conflict are often reflected in the metaphors we use as we talk about them. The old ideas of conflict as 'bad' are quite often, in many cultures, expressed with

metaphors associated with war. For instance, many think of conflict as combat — something to win or lose by fighting, either face to face or 'behind backs.' This view results in many casualties. And as with any fighting or war-like activity, the damage is rarely limited to the people directly involved in the conflict. There is collateral damage.

In fall 2001, a few short weeks after a national trauma in the United States, I had the privilege of co-facilitating a weeklong retreat for early childhood educators. During that time, I introduced the possibility that early childhood leaders and educators unconsciously ascribed to the war metaphor and its behavior. At first, there was strong resistance based on the gentle, nurturing mission of early childhood professionals. However, it did not take long before people started admitting that sometimes working with families was described as 'being in the trenches.' They realized that the early childhood culture was full of war references and that different stakeholders often took automatic 'us against them' stances — even among people who were working for common outcomes.

What is important here is the relationship of our underlying metaphors and language to how we act and interact with each other. In his book, *Metaphors We Live by*, George Lakoff (1980) reminds us:

> The concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of intellect. They govern our everyday functioning, down to the smallest detail. Our concepts determine what we perceive, how we handle situations, and how we relate with other people.

Think about the metaphors that underlie conflict in your work community:

- Is it ever a 'scary monster' that people avoid at all costs until it grows so hairy and roars so loudly that it cannot be ignored?

- Does conflict show up as an invisible 'ghost' that hovers invisibly and silently, yet presents a distinct 'chill' in the air that everyone can feel? n Or does it mostly show up as a fight?

- Do you think about 'choosing your battles'?

- Is there an 'us against them' enemy metaphor at work?

- Do you refer to working with children and families as working 'in the trenches'?

When all you have is a battle metaphor, everything looks like war. There are at least three major themes that show up over and over again with the conflict as battle metaphor:

- People take sides and assume their side is right and the other wrong.

- No one is willing to listen, acknowledge, or learn from any part of the other side's perspective.

- Most of the energy of the conflict manifests as blaming, attacking, and defending sides.

I remember working with an elementary school principal and her staff. Upon initially interviewing the staff, I heard people on one side of the coin or other, with very few people willing to see both sides. I actually heard this principal described as both a 'saint' and a 'Nazi.' More than a few of the teachers revealed that they felt under pressure to declare which side they were on. We explored metaphors to describe the initial emotional climate, and they almost unanimously agreed upon 'war zone.' The stress was unusually high and people did not feel safe with each other. The principal said she felt under siege and needed to defend herself. The staff revealed that they felt under attack and saw no choice but to counterattack. This included getting families and community members on 'their side.'

Change the Foundation — Change the Effect

Conflict transformation provides a platform for creating new metaphors to live and work by. When conducting conflict transformation workshops, I invite leaders to consciously choose alternatives to the default war metaphor:

- What if conflict was not perceived as a fight or battle?

- What if you changed the metaphor to gardening, dancing, or simply a community working together?

- What if the metaphor for working with conflict reflected the kind of world you want the children to grow into and to inherit?

- How would your behavior change?

- How would you change the way you communicate and relate with others?

Think about things you do, know, or love to help you find a new metaphor that transforms your view of conflict. One of the most popular alternatives is the gardening metaphor. Immediately, gardening is about cultivating something to grow. Think of the language of gardening. It combines the stuff of life, while leaving space for the natural flow of decay and emergence.

This metaphor did wonders for the elementary school staff who initially saw themselves as embattled. Rumors began to circulate about what mystery turned the school around. The principal told me she learned to believe in herself and her staff again. The 'mystery' began with a change of metaphor.

An Invitation

How would you think about people with whom you strongly differed if you were gardeners instead of warriors? How would you speak differently if people were plants or flowers instead of 'enemies'?

Conflict transformation has been part of peacemaking strategies in cultures all over the world for many years. It has been successful helping people bridge across intense and deadly conflict such as gang wars and cultural wars. It may certainly be a viable option for early childhood leaders and communities. It starts with changing mindsets. I encourage you — as an early childhood professional, a leader, and a co-creator of the world we are developing for children to inherit — to change your mind about conflict. Stop thinking about conflict as something 'bad' that happens to you — something that is undesirable and scary. Stop wasting precious energy avoiding conflict, stressing out about conflict, or wishing it would go away. Begin letting the irritation of differences cultivate 'pearls' of new possibilities in yourself, your team, and your entire work environment. Start at the basics. Change your metaphor — your basic assumptions about conflict. Change your mind and let great results follow.

References

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