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B. AUBREY FISHER MEMORIAL LECTURE

**CHALLENGES FACING
DISPUTE RESOLUTION
IN ORGANIZATIONS:**

*Twists and Turns in
the Role of Communication in
Conflict Management*

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CHALLENGES FACING DISPUTE RESOLUTION IN ORGANIZATIONS:

Twists and Turns in the Role of Communication in Conflict Management

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Managers and dispute resolution professionals are becoming increasingly involved in conflicts that have significant implications for organizations. These conflicts range from mundane disagreements over resources to grievances regarding discrimination and sexual harassment. No one denies that conflict is a fundamental aspect of organizational life. Managers spend as much as 35% of their time processing routine complaints, dealing with decisions in hiring and/or re-trenchment, and facing pressures imposed through a fast-paced, highly competitive marketplace.

This situation has accelerated in organizations engaged in downsizing, turbulent business environments, and global competition. Indeed, conflict is a fundamental aspect of organizational life. Most managers, however, view conflict as occurring elsewhere, not in their own organizations. Thus, while conflict is an inevitable fact of life, it continues to be treated with an aura of disdain.

I use the term conflict as referring to the expressed disagreements between people who see incompatible goals and potential interference in achieving these goals. Conflict, then, is defined by its mixed motive nature as entailing both cooperation and competition. This simultaneity of opposites pervades the treatment of conflict historically and continues to form ironies in the way that organizations face current challenges in managing disputes.

Communication plays a critical role in defining and shaping conflict processes through the occurrence of interaction patterns, cycles of behaviors,

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and meanings formed before, during, and after dispute. In like manner, communication shapes and is shaped by discursive practices that organizations establish to manage conflict, for example, grievance systems, labor-management negotiations, and managerial third-party interventions.

A careful examination of the way that conflict management has evolved over time and the way that institutional meanings are attached to disputes indicates that new directions in conflict management are characterized by a number of ironies. Tonight, I want to discuss these ironies as we examine two

developments in organizational conflict management: designing dispute systems and understanding hidden conflict in organizations. These ironies build on the dichotomies that infuse and surround conflict management, such pairs as public-private, formal-informal, and rational-nonrational as well as such oppositional terms as cooperation-competition, energizing-inhibiting, win-lose, resolve-manage, and functional-dysfunctional. I contend that the major challenge for dispute management in organizations today is recognizing these ironies, embracing them, and developing new options in the space between these antithetical forms.

These ironies will be unpacked through providing an overview of the way that conflict has been treated historically in the organizational literature. Next, I will highlight the directions and shortcomings of two new developments in organizational conflict management—designing formal dispute systems and hidden conflict in organizations. Then, I propose one alternative for address-

ing these challenges and finding space between these dichotomies to explore new terrain.

Historical Development

The dichotomies implicit in organizational conflict date back to the early schools of management theory—classical management, human relation approaches, theories of bureaucracies, and political/coalition models of organizations. In the classical management and human relation perspectives, conflict was placed in opposition to cooperation and harmony. Moral purpose in organizations was achieved through emphasizing technical analysis and rational administration. Conflicts of interest among employees had no legitimate place in a rational administration.

The dichotomies that surfaced from early organizational theory set the stage for oppositional tensions that exist today. Conflict was treated as disrupting organizational life and was viewed as a disease that must be eliminated. Because cooperation was so highly prized, conflict became a detriment to organizational life. The irony that evolved from this perspective was, "The more we ignore conflict, the more it appears in other forms throughout the organization." For example, even though proponents of the human relation schools aimed to suppress conflict, controversies surfaced in the guise of group norms, work piece production rates, and covert behaviors.

Theories of bureaucracy cast conflict in a more central and pivotal role than did classical management and the human relation schools. Conflict was rooted in organizational structures, for example, hierarchical levels, labor-management relations, and functional differences between units or departments. For example, Dalton's (1959) classic study of the gypsum mine wildcat strike demonstrated how labor organized a production slow down to counter management. Management responded by trying to camouflage the slow down, and the union reacted by calling a strike. The enactment of

conflict within and across structural levels then led to covert and contradictory ways of managing this dispute.

In the bureaucratic school, conflict was treated as inevitable, yet undesirable—a fact of organizational life that grew out of and reaffirmed such polar opposites as manager-worker, line-staff, salaried-hourly workers, and accounting-production. The irony that shaped this perspective was, "Locating conflict in structural differences required solutions that reaffirmed structural boundaries." For example, if a manager separated two teams who were engaged in an intergroup conflict, he or she inadvertently perpetuated the dispute by locating conflict in the structural differences between the units. Structural solutions then reified opposing positions by rooting conflict in fixtures.

The school of thought that has spawned the new developments in conflict management was the political or coalition model of organizations. The key approach to conflict management in this perspective was bargaining—negotiating across and between groups. Communication in this perspective focused on persuasion, strategies and tactics of negotiation, and sequences and types of messages. Interactions became social dramas in overt rituals. Even though conflict assumed a prominent position in this perspective, the political model treated all stakeholders as having a level playing field. Groups that lacked voice or necessary alliances typically avoided or tolerated conflict, thereby reproducing their marginal nature in organizations. The irony that surfaced from this perspective was,

"To empower or legitimate some groups through negotiation, typically marginalized others." The political/coalition model of organizations highlighted a different set of dichotomies than did previous theories. Emphasis switched from harmony-disharmony and functional-dysfunctional to such pairs as expressed-suppressed, actual-displaced, and dominant-submissive. Thus, oppositional tensions continued to contribute to ironies within each of these schools of organizational theory.

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Designing Formal Dispute Systems

Recent developments in organizational conflict draw from the literature on alternative dispute resolution and center on the way that disputes unfold over time. Disputing in this perspective assumes a quasi-legal perspective—one that follows steps and stages in the grievance process. Led by Ury, Brett & Goldberg (1988), proponents of this perspective set forth principles and practices for implementing formal dispute systems in organizations. This work incorporates negotiation, mediation, and arbitration as formal processes for managing organizational disputes. Designing conflict management systems, particularly as modified by Costantino and Merchant (1996), has gained a stronghold in health care organizations, city governments, school systems, and corporations.

Guided by advances in alternative dispute resolution, proponents of this development differentiate among three types of issues that characterize conflicts—power, rights, and interests. Disputants in power-based controversies treat underlying issues as resulting from control or force. These definitions lead to conflicts pursued through win-lose contests, strikes and walk-outs, withholding benefits, engaging in bribes, and imposing costs on the other side. Conflicts defined as issues of rights center on standards, criteria, fairness, equity, and legitimacy. Rights-based disputes are enacted through adjudication and legal procedures as disputants seek due process and fair outcomes. Conflicts rooted in interest-based concerns center on the needs, desires, and concerns of the parties. Interest-based disputes seek negotiation and mediation as avenues for conflict management.

Proponents of formal dispute resolution systems urge organizational members to root conflicts in interest-based issues. Interest-based conflicts are lower in costs to participants and place a primary emphasis on relationships. In this system, individuals should intervene early in a dispute, should engage in face-to-face oral communication, and should move disputes to the lowest organizational level. Organizations should develop

steps for processing a grievance, ones with loopbacks to negotiation and with low-cost methods such as voting and advisory adjudication. These procedures might rely on formal third-party intervention through the use of ombudsmen, mediators, and negotiators to vent emotions, provide advice, and facilitate interactions. Communication within this system resides in the grievance procedures and in the labeling of issues as power, rights, or interest disputes.

A university grade appeal process illustrates this type of formal dispute system. When students have a grade complaint, they are told to talk with their professors first, then appeal the grievance to the Department Head, the Dean's office, and finally a formal committee that hears both sides and arbitrates a settlement. A dispute defined as a power struggle between a student and an instructor often moves to the arbitration level. The existence of sequential appeal steps contributes to a redefinition of the conflict as it moves through levels of the process. The decision of whether or not to move forward in the system, then, is shaped by the win-lose nature of the case rather than by the needs and interests of the disputants.

This emphasis on designing formal dispute systems incurs a number of ironies. First, the more the system relies on experts who diagnose, implement, and evaluate stages of a dispute, the less the organization will own the conflict itself. When ombudsmen and specialist relieve organizational members from handling disputes, employees miss important opportunities to collect information and learn about the organization. A second irony is that the more organizations seek to prevent disputes, the more conflicts becomes detrimental and costly rather than normal and healthy. One of the major causes for the escalation of disputes is avoidance of conflict rather than the abundance of too many disagreements. A third irony that surfaces from designing formal dispute systems is, "The more an organization develops stages, steps, and procedures for avoiding litigation; the more it replicates the legal system." By acting as a safety valve to keep disputes in check, formal systems often preserve power

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imbalances and protect the status quo rather than address underlying issues.

One arena that illustrates the shortcomings of formal dispute systems is diversity disputes. Diversity disputes have become more prominent through the changing character of the organizational workforce. An examination of the discourses for managing diversity disputes, that is, the accepted ways of thinking, talking, and acting in organizations, demonstrates why women and minorities may be reluctant to pursue complaints through the formal system. Reliance on stages or steps for filing grievances tends to root conflicts in individuals and to keep them from being heard on their own terms. When disputes become individualized, for example, between a boss and a subordinate, the organization ignores the institutional factors that contribute to the grievance.

Hence, ironies arise from formal dispute systems and from advocating them as panaceas for managing conflicts. Specifically, this development relegates conflict to experts, operates primarily at the individual level, obscures underlying issues, and suppresses the very disputes that the system seeks to expose. Formal dispute systems privilege the public, formal, and rational aspects of conflict management.

Hidden Conflict in Organizations

On the opposite end of the conflict management spectrum, another recent development focuses on informal or hidden disputes that occur off-line, behind closed-doors, or in the crevices of organizations (Kolb & Bartunek, 1992). Unlike the formal system, the communication tactics of hidden conflict include bitching, ignoring requests, gossiping, sabotaging, retaliation, hidden agendas, and informal peacemaking. Emotional expressions such as venting feelings, being hurt, and showing displeasure become legitimate vehicles for handling conflict. This approach highlights the unconscious and spontaneous aspects of organizational disputes. Sensitivity and situational adaptation serve as guiding

principles for effective conflict management.

Calvin Morrill's (1995) classic ethnography of CEO disputes serves as an exemplar of hidden conflict in organizations. He demonstrated the way informal grievances developed into scripts of punitive, conciliatory, and therapeutic patterns. Overall, top executives used both confrontation and nonconfrontation strategies to handle conflicts while simultaneously pretending that they did not exist.

In studies of hidden conflicts, disputes surface as performances in which parties assigned different meanings, negotiated alternative perspectives, and provided ways to name, blame, and claim a dispute collectively. Communication was the medium for enacting the performances.

Even though there is much to acclaim about studying hidden conflict in organizations, several ironies surface from this recent development. Informal and private management of a dispute often leads to avoidance or accommodation as the most common by-products of the process. Managing conflict through informal and hidden strategies tends to preserve

boundaries, reinforce existing patterns of authority, and sustain current modes of operation. Ironically, informal peacemakers parallel formal interventionist in their outcome of preserving the status quo.

By keeping disputes out of sight and managed off-line, the organization rarely addresses the systematic causes of inequities. One example of this side effect of informal conflict management is the way that sexual harassment becomes sequestered in organizational narratives that continue to suppress gender conflicts (Clair, 1993). Thus, while attention to hidden conflict in organizations focuses on the private, informal, and nonrational aspects of disputes, many of the shortcomings of this work parallels problems with designing formal dispute systems—namely, preserving the status quo, failing to unearth underlying causes, and placing conflict at the individual level.

Both developments, designing formal dispute systems and understanding hidden conflicts, have lost sight of the essence of a disputing perspective. A disputing perspective centers on how con-

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licts grow and develop over time and how participants assert their respective interests in defining and shaping a disagreement. For example, an individual who is upset about being denied a promotion might cast this conflict differently for diverse audiences at different times. Namely, it might be labeled as inability to reach personal goals when talking with subordinates, as a violation of rights when complaining to upper management, and as discrimination at a later time when representing it to an appeal council. Thus, a disputing perspective should center on the interpretive processes that underlie the way a disagreement takes on different meanings that become transformed over time.

Alternatives and Next Steps

No easy answers exist for alleviating the ironies that surface in organizational conflict management. Communication scholars and conflict researchers need to return to the basic assumptions of the disputing perspective and to examine the interaction patterns and interpretive processes that characterize the unfolding and ongoing nature of a dispute. By returning to these basic assumptions, scholars can strive to embrace the paradoxes that evolve from oppositional forms and to search for options in the space between formal dispute systems and informal hidden conflict. These options should draw from the strengths of both pairs—formal/informal, public/private, and rational/nonrational approaches.

One option for building a new perspective between these oppositional forms is the idea of conflict orchestration or the staging of informal disputes in the formal arena. Orchestration falls between the formal and informal systems by introducing issues for discussion and moving conflict from an individual to a systemic level. Conflict orchestrators might be peacemakers, opinion leaders, or even enlightened managers who probe for underlying causes through eliciting definitions, breaking up coalitions, and challenging the interests that are served through different proposals. Conflict orchestration centers on improvising a

dispute, rather than resolving or managing it. Resolving implies elimination and prevention; managing suggests control, direction, and formal stages. In contrast, staging or orchestrating a dispute centers on enacting it. Emphasis is placed on setting the stage and allowing the conflict process to unfold.

Orchestration, however, is a communication function in that the individuals who perform these activities must give careful attention to the timing and contextual features of an evolving dispute. They might act as facilitators who help participants uncover the naming, blaming, explaining, and joint claiming of a conflict. They might seek a view of the system as a whole and see ways of tying issues, particularly the naming and claiming of a dispute, to an organizational level. Orchestrators help participants recognize the transformative potential of a dispute. Transformation refers to gaining new insights or acquiring a new sense of recognition from enacting a dispute. Unlike the formal dispute system, however, orchestrators are not necessarily experts or designated third parties. The goal of orchestration, then, is to bring hidden conflict to a formal arena and to enact it in ways that

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cut across organizational levels.

The following incident depicts the features of conflict orchestration. Prof. Rosenbloom became upset with Prof. Wheeler when he heard that a graduate student, named Tom, had submitted the same term paper for the classes that each professor taught. During the last month of the semester, Tom had asked Prof. Wheeler if he could write a longer and more involved term paper to meet the requirements of both classes. Prof. Wheeler said that graduate students often concentrated their time and energies by submitting similar papers to two different classes. Neither Tom nor Prof. Wheeler checked with Prof. Rosenbloom about this matter.

Prof. Rosenbloom labeled the conflict as deception and inequity—he thought the situation was unfair to other class members and he planned to penalize Tom by giving him a low grade on the paper. Prof. Wheeler regarded the situation as Prof. Rosenbloom's fault because he misunder-

stood the departmental norms. Tom, who felt trapped and powerless, saw the problem as one of meeting the needs of overworked graduate students. Hence, the labeling or framing of the dispute across parties fell into the categories of interests, rights, and power—Rosenbloom with a rights definition, Wheeler with a power perspective, and Tom focusing on student interests. Processing this conflict through a formal dispute system would probably result in privileging one of these definitions. The parties also blamed each other for the situation and refused to own the conflict as their own problem. The conflict was being lived out in the informal crevices of the organization through gossip among organizational members and with several faculty members acting as informal peacemakers who tried to reconcile the professors.

One individual recommended to the Department Head that the faculty hold a meeting to discuss the issue. The meeting began with several graduate students explaining the situation from their perspective. Other faculty members, but not the parties involved, reviewed the conflict from the different faculty positions. But rather than looking for an integrative or win-win solution to this particular dispute, organizational members altered the naming, blaming, and claiming of the conflict through interpreting the situation differently. They decided to treat it as a policy issue and to develop procedures that would appear in the Graduate Handbook about the submission of papers in classes. As they worked out a policy that seemed fair and equitable, they reframed the current dispute, owned it collectively, removed blame from the parties, and provided new guidelines for handling it. Thus, the Department orchestrated a conflict by moving this interpersonal dispute to a system level and finding ways to embrace both the formal-informal and the public-private nature of the dispute. In the final analysis, Tom revamped the paper to fit the new policy and Prof. Rosenbloom followed the new policy in accepting and grading

Tom's paper. Prof. Wheeler apologized for not consulting with Prof. Rosenbloom about the situation. The actual agreement, then, did not differ markedly from a typical mediated settlement. However, the orchestration of the conflict addressed underlying issues and provided a way to reframe the organizational roots to transform issues in the conflict for future interactions.

Not every organizational conflict can or should be orchestrated. Disputes that fit the following criteria seem best for orchestration. Ones that: a) entail issues, people, and functions that cross multiple organizational arenas, b) are rooted either implicitly or explicitly in collective norms, policies, and beliefs, and c) have implications for future collective actions. Clearly, there are situations in which conflicts should be handled interpersonally or through the formal system. In particular, a problem with an individual's performance might be a disciplinary action at the interpersonal level. However, once a problem crosses organizational levels, orchestration of the dispute might be most appropriate.

Staging a conflict is time-consuming and emotionally involving. It entails risks since the interaction processes and outcomes of enacting a dispute are unknown. Organizational members may prefer to use formal grievance systems or to get managers to arbitrate disputes. Managers, who are time-driven and decision-oriented, often pressure disputants to settle or arbitrate solutions based on inadequate knowledge of the case (Kolb & Sheppard,

1985). Moreover, fear of confrontation often relegates conflict to informal arenas in which it is lived out through tacit maneuvers, sabotage, gossip, and retaliation. The long-term gains from orchestrating and potentially transforming a dispute may override the risks involved in enacting the process.

Conflict orchestration also embodies assumptions that differ from designing formal systems and informal conflict in organizations. Staging of a dispute makes conflict a normal, expected occur-

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rence in organizations. Since conflicts are inherent in the very fabric of organizing, they lie at the heart of a collective and add to its durability. Just as we have decision making in organizations, we have organizational conflicts. Moreover, conflicts are rarely fully resolved; rather they are rephrased, repressed, suppressed, redefined, and then surface again in different forms. Thus, the inception of one conflict is a transformation or residue of a past one. For instance in a university setting, a disagreement about whether a department should offer a special for another department grows out of and relates to past disputes on what constitutes a core curriculum and which students should take core courses.

Communication in conflict orchestration focuses not only on interaction patterns but also on the way that these patterns evolve over time and constitute the episodic nature of a dispute. Thus, the micro-processes of interaction merge with interpretations to show how conflicts are named/labeled, blamed, and explained. That is, the role of communication centers on the way interaction, meanings, and context alter the nature of an unfolding and ongoing dispute.

Throughout history, theorists have wrestled with the role that conflict plays in organizational behavior. Scholars typically have advocated approaches clouded by one end of the continuum—conflict is either functional or dysfunctional; formal or informal; rational or nonrational. Future developments need to move beyond these

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dichotomies and embrace the tensions of these oppositional forms. Both theorists and practitioners need to search for options that exist in the space between these pairs and to find ways to encompass the full scope of conflict processes. Communication scholars have a unique contribution to make in analyzing the discursive practices and the systems of meaning created from and embodied within conflict interaction. We need to accept these challenges and make our contributions to both the literature and the practice of dis-

puting in organizations.

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B. Aubrey Fisher

B. Aubrey Fisher served as a faculty member in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah from 1971 to 1986. He began his professional career as a high school teacher and radio announcer in South Dakota. After receiving his Master's and Ph. D. degrees from the University of Minnesota, he spent four years on the faculty at the University of Missouri.

Professor Fisher was a prominent scholar in interpersonal communication and communication theory. His published work includes three books and more than thirty-five articles and book chapters. He was considered one of the most notable and influential communication scholars of his time. He held numerous offices in professional organizations, including president of the Western Speech Communication Association, president of the International Communication Association, and editor of the *Western Speech Communication Journal*.

The B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture was established by the Department of Communication in 1986 to recognize Professor Fisher's outstanding achievements and to provide a forum for presenting original research and theory in communication.

Linda L. Putnam

Linda L. Putnam is Professor and Head of the Department of Speech Communication at Texas A&M University. She holds a Ph. D. degree in Speech Communication from the University of Minnesota and was a professor of organizational communication at Purdue University prior to her appointment at Texas A&M University.

Her current research interests include narrative analysis of negotiations, hidden conflict in organizations, designing organizational dispute systems, and language analysis in organizations.

She has published over sixty-five communication and management articles and book chapters. She is the co-editor of *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication* (in press), *Communication and Negotiation* (1992), *Handbook of Organizational Communication* (1987), and *Communication and Organization: An Interpretive Approach* (1983). She is the 1993 recipient of the Charles H. Woolbert Research Award, given by the National Communication Association for a seminal article in the field. She is also a Fellow of the International Communication Association.

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