

Written communication and energy transfer to fix a dysfunctional team: a case study in conflict resolution in an educational institution

A case study in
conflict
resolution

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Abstract

Purpose – Task conflict and relationship conflict are common in organizations. This paper aims to present a unique case of the use of the targeted conflict-resolution technique. The revival of positive group dynamics is aptly shown.

Design/methodology/approach – This descriptive case study is developed as a practice insight to showcase how a peculiar case of misunderstanding is resolved in the most unconventional way through the intervention of a mediator who unearths the real cause of contention. The mediator works through logic and emotion to remove negativity. Narration, a necessary component of the case study approach, peeps into the research subject involving flashbacks, flash forward, backstories and foreshadowing. The mediator uses reframing as a tool very efficiently, encouraging the people in conflict to understand the nothingness in their cold war and eventually prompting them to collaborate and compromise.

Findings – The shifts in communication dynamics post-mediator's intervention are subtle and full of wisdom, encouraging introspection and constructive interaction, eventually bridging the differences. The possibility of achieving a state of homeostasis in the future magnifies. The belief in the power of affirmation and manifestation is validated. The heavy, difficult, hardened negativity loses ground and gets transformed.

Social implications – Conversation/prayers at the deepest level in several meetings are the communication tools that have immense social relevance in the Indian context.

Originality/value – A unique combination of intermediation encompassing written communication and energy transformation is adopted to resolve ongoing conflict by stroking the positive psychology of the partakers. To some, the method may appear to have a spiritual connotation.

Keywords Intermediation, Groupthink, Narrative style, Transformative method mediation

Paper type Practitioner paper

1. Introduction

The elders of the village settled disagreements in the past through intermediation (Cohn, 1965). However, modern conciliation differs slightly since the mediator doesn't suggest to the

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partakers what to do. Instead, they aid in equilibrating the power in the affiliation, ensuring that everyone gets an opportunity to have an impartial go and that their anxieties are well perceived and understood. From time immemorial, a disagreement or conflict that arises between close associates or family members is settled by unbiased and sorted individuals through mediation who have no vested interest in the case. However, a delay in dispute settlement may lead to several problems. Invariably, this intensifies into conflict as the disagreement and disharmony become deep-rooted. That eventually risks things mounting up to where the possibility of resuming a cooperative relationship becomes a far-fetched dream.

In this paper, a simmering conflict amongst a team of faculty members of an educational institution is taken to understand the complex and intertwined nature of the conflict, and the newness in the paper lies in the method adopted to resolve it. The members of this department worked together very cohesively for years together succeeded in bringing laurels to their department and the college through their joint intellectual capital. However, after fifteen years of close cooperation, cracks appeared in the fabric of this alliance. Somehow constituents got delineated from each other to become too visible, and their delineation affected them to the extreme. Regular professional communication almost became impossible. The negativity around the stalwarts amongst whom the differences took birth started impacting the newcomers in the department unknowingly. In this scenario, the most common issues that the team experienced were a complete lack of trust and commitment, a distraction from results leading to unaccountability (Lencioni, 2012).

The intense negative emotion, sometimes called anxiety, needs to be addressed to resolve a conflict that may or may not manifest itself openly. There is a need to identify the trigger and reason. The anxiety experienced amongst the group members and the felt emotion needed an expression enabling people to think precisely and clearly and thereby prepare them to unravel the problem. Comella (1996) has beautifully presented the emotional side of organizations.

This paper focuses on the conflict resolution approach through mediation offered by the mediator without being asked by any aggrieved party. In this unique case, the observer (also a co-worker) who sensed the negativity amongst the colleagues during a couple of meetings essentially initiates to end the cold-fighting and attempts to rekindle the lost amicable relationship. The initiatives taken are unique and unconventional. The uniqueness of those initiatives is enough motivation to document them. As is well known, mediation diffuses and de-escalates disputes by shifting the center to problem-solving rather than cold fighting. Here, the charisma and character of the mediator also assume a critical role. By not being involved in an issue, they are the people who could perceive the minor nuances of the problems amongst the professionals and co-workers from an unbiased perspective. However, some facilitation of reconciliations in an unconventional way is desirable. The case study discussed here and the approach taken was slightly different because the mediator attempts to strike a reconciliation amongst the concerned individuals after sensing the differences without a call by aggrieved parties. The facilitator's approach of this type comes in the category of "Mavericks at Work" (Taylor, LaBarre, & Whitener, 2006). These individuals may be non-conformists, but they look at every issue from a moralistic perspective. They are the people who believe in the goodness of beings in general but also accept "all rose bushes have thorns." Given this realization, such people are fully aware that one may experience negativity from people who have been very close at some point in time.

2. Review of literature

Conflict is ubiquitous, pervasive in nature and has assumed numerous connotations and meanings as expressed in the writings of many. Coser (1956) considers it a struggle for scarce status and personal values. Robbins (2005) observe conflict arise while performing assigned

tasks. The cause of conflict in organizations is competitive supremacy, the paucity of resources that are required to be shared, and due to differences in leadership style (Bernard & Ashimi, 2014). Offering to resolve conflicts means challenging normal procedures and processes to increase efficiency and productivity or introducing systems that are innovative (Robbins, 2005).

Mediation as a conflict-resolving technique is a social process that is intricate and facilitates not only intergroup but international negotiations as well (James & Wall, 1981). Transformative mediation is also not uncommon. In the process of resolving the dispute, each method has its place. Mediators select a blend of styles depending on the peculiarity of the case conflict and the type of parties involved. Transformative mediation is often a subject of criticism because it has received less focus, is considered too idealistic, and is less useful for business and court matters (Zumeta, 2018). However, such characterizations are challenged by mediators using evaluative and transformative techniques. Riskin (2003) believes these styles to be the most interventionist. They consider it to be more of a continuum than distinct differences.

Pizarro *et al.* (2020) in "The Mediating Role of Shared Flow and Perceived Emotional Synchrony on Compassion for Others in a Mindful-Dancing Program" and Kolb and Bartunek (1992) states that non-rational approaches are more often used in informal conflict resolution and consider this method as stressing "the unconscious or spontaneous aspects of a dispute governed by feeling and impulse of participants and not by their cognizance." They are endeavoring to claim that the manifestation of emotions in any form does not essentially suggest a loss of reason. On the contrary, emotion is considered an adequate expression in conflict resolution. Moreover, rational methods of conflict resolution score over emotional methods of handling conflict resolution because the latter is considered an informal method.

The transformative structure centers on and reflects relational ideology. Human beings are fundamentally socially formed in and through their relations with other human beings, essentially connected to others and motivated by a desire for both personal autonomy and constructive social interaction. However, empowerment shift, recognition shift and positive dynamics and regenerative interaction are recognized in transformative models (Bush & Folger, 1994).

However, the transformative model theorizes that despite ensuing conflicts amongst people, they have an innate ability to change the quality of communication and interaction to reflect upon relative personal strength or self-confidence (the empowerment shift) and relative openness or responsiveness to the other (the recognition shift) to avoid the potentially destructive effects of conflict. Furthermore, as these affirmative subtleties and dynamics feed each other, the relations can revive to assume a humanizing character. It is a unique approach to conflict intervention (Bush & Folger, 1994) as an alternative framework based on personal strength and compassion.

The parties' rights, needs and interests are the primary focus of mediation, and it essentially is a "party-centered process." Optimal solutions for the involved parties are case-specific. They require diverse techniques that direct the processes constructively and pragmatically. The facilitation is done by the mediator in a manner so that open communication is possible. Mediation is evaluative if the mediator analyzes issues and relevant norms and refrains from giving prescriptive assistance to the involved ones.

The validity and power of emotion should be given appropriate weightage to gain an all-inclusive picture of conflict dynamics. A word of caution is that intense emotion can sometimes be so reactive that it creates smoke around resolution. As per Gilbert (1992), "The problem that triggered the emotions is never addressed; emotions are merely generated and circuited and re-circuited through the system" when seen in the context of a family from a systems perspective. From this perspective, emotions are neither good nor bad and the level

of duration and intensity of feeling in which it occurs matters. Table 1 presents the selected literature review, which is relevant to the methodology chosen in this study.

3. Methodology

As illustrated in this paper, workplace conflict is a gamut of emotions and the consequent connection with wise reasoning. The mediator role is essential in unearthing and working through emotion. For making the way toward resolution, the mediator’s role is vital in

Name	Technique used	Focus/findings of research
Van and Schaller (2008)	integrates knowledge from diverse social group- relating psychological adaptations	Produces unique hypotheses about group psychology, showing the probability in generativity of psychological adaptation
Lencioni (2012)	Business fables	The book explores the causes of team failure and politics in organizations
Bartunek, Kolb, and Lewicki (1992)	Review of literature	Focuses on understanding how social conflict arise in collaborative group settings
Connell (1987)	Discussion of theories on gender and sexuality	A systematic framework for the social analysis for the gender and sexuality
Friedman (1985)	Study of emotional fields with positive and negative effects	Innovative perspective on leadership
Gilbert (1992)	Study of extra ordinary relationships	How to better the relationships at workplace and yourself
Gold (1993)	Indirect techniques and strategies that promote self-healing	Mediation within a healing paradigm
Taylor (2000)	Focus on steps to resolve conflict: Case study	Informal conflict resolution by working on emotional side
Rowe (1995)	Ombudsperson’s role in dispute settlement	Basic options, functions and skills of the ombudspersons and role in changing a process in the workplace
Wall and Lynn (1993)	Reviews of mediation literature	The choice of mediation techniques, its outcome and for future research
Bush and Folger (1994)	Book on transformative model of mediation	Use of transformative model in diverse arenas
Mitchell and Egudo (2003)	A review of narrative methodology	Narratives through implicit knowledge helps implement or assist organizational change
Klerman and Klerman (2015)	Case study involving employment related disputes, discrimination at workplace and wrongful termination	Role of mediation can be extremely effective in assisting and expediting settlement
Zumeta (2018)	Comparative study based on case analysis	Compares various mediation forms like evaluative mediation versus facilitative mediation and concludes that success depends on the peculiarity of the case
Keashly and Harvey (1994)	Based on survey of North American literature	Found evidence of hostile bullying behaviours at organizations negatively impacting community wellbeing
Riskin (2003)	Applied a grid approach representing mediator’s role and facilitative and evaluative form of mediation	The mediators’ orientations towards mediation would essentially depend upon continuums intersection of mediator’s customary approach and his personal notions adding to ambiguity

Table 1.
Glimpses of the literature on the connotation of the study

Source(s): compiled by authors

unearthing and working through them. Therefore, the narration is an essential component in the case study approach of this paper. This Narrative [1] style peeps into the research subject involving flashbacks, flash forward, backstory and foreshadowing. Common technique relevant to the narrative perspective is the practice of double listening, counter-story construction and mapping the effects and externalizing conversation.

In social sciences, storytelling methodology is revelatory and exploratory. The background story of the team covers the reasons for differences amongst the group members without too much detailing of specific events. The story becomes an object of study that focuses on individuals or groups who either make sense or non-sense of actions and events that happen and influence their lives (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). The mediator's letter (appears in section IV(ii)) serves as a supporting tool for the members in conflict to have an unbiased perspective/assessment of a well-wisher on reasons for the conflict. The request to end the conflict in the interest of all is also the clear intent of the mediator. The push is on nurturing positive psychology (Seligman, 2002).

The theoretic substructures to narrative approaches are drawn in the letter since they can facilitate sense-making and help construct identity. The path of mediation chosen by a co-worker leads to some thawing of negativity and paves the way for initiating conflict resolution within a department of an educational institution, followed by consequent **cleansing of negativity through the transfer of negativity onto paper/papers and then surrendering those papers to flames. Introspection and sharing and discourse analysis** all find a place under the section titled bringing to the negotiating table. In addition, the choice of a peaceful setting to finally draw a curtain on differences to be remembered as an experience to learn from, has been used by the mediator for the affected parties to accommodate, compromise and eventually collaborate.

True self-discovery is about viewing the resolutions and comprehending those meticulously, leading to the most authentic discoveries emanating from within. However, most of the time, psychodynamic perspectives (Bornstein, 2005, 2006) are not known to people.

Some signs are visible in the current literature that the narrative approach (Kim, 2016; Winslade & Monk, 2000) is progressively gaining acceptance in many disciplines, including the ones that are outside the realm of social sciences. The method is said to capture social representation in the form of processes involving imagery that raises positive emotions but is indeed time-consuming. It offers the potential to address complexity and ambiguity in the approach followed by individuals and groups, which are part and parcel of organizational phenomena. (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003). Creating healthy and productive organizations is so very important (Costantino & Merchant, 1996).

Hypothesis

- H1. The person taking the lead in solving differences amongst people may not be an expert in the mediation process, yet can solve the problems if the mediator has a fair intent.
- H2. The case offers a new direction in future research because the relationship rekindles after following not the set but an unconventional procedure in the intermediation process.

The study hinges on three-phased detailing done under the case study section in line with the methodology adopted to achieve informal conflict resolution. The background of the team presented will indirectly hint at the nature of the conflict. Moral appeal through written communication will present a generalized analysis of the conflict from the mediator's

perspective. Burning the negativity comes under the realm of an unconventional conflict resolution technique which may have a placebo effect. Reframing [2] (Schütte, 2015) was used effectively by the mediator to have willing participation. This indicates the mediator's triumph since the mediation (Bush & Folger, 2004) process became voluntary, and the mediator participated the least in the outcome. The disputing parties themselves have control over the tacit agreement.

It hinges on a five-phased approach adopted to achieve informal conflict resolution. (1) The background of the team presented will indirectly hint at the nature of the conflict. (2) Moral appeal through written communication will present a generalized analysis of the conflict from the mediator's perspective. (3) Burning the negativity comes under an unconventional conflict resolution technique that may have a placebo effect. Finally, the practical insights are concluded by covering (4) discussions amongst the group and (5) the outcome of the social science experiment. The sequenced approach sets the structure of the paper as well.

4. The case study

The case study (see Figure 1) appears in the form of anamnesis (Allen, 1959) i.e., recollection, an account of the whole case, which is the subject of analysis in this paper.

The three subsections cover: (1) Background of the team presents the shades of the relationship of past and present amongst the team members. It is desirable to wake the department from slumber and encourage them to overcome the inertia by ending the negativity in the group. (2) Moral Appeal through written communication details the letter

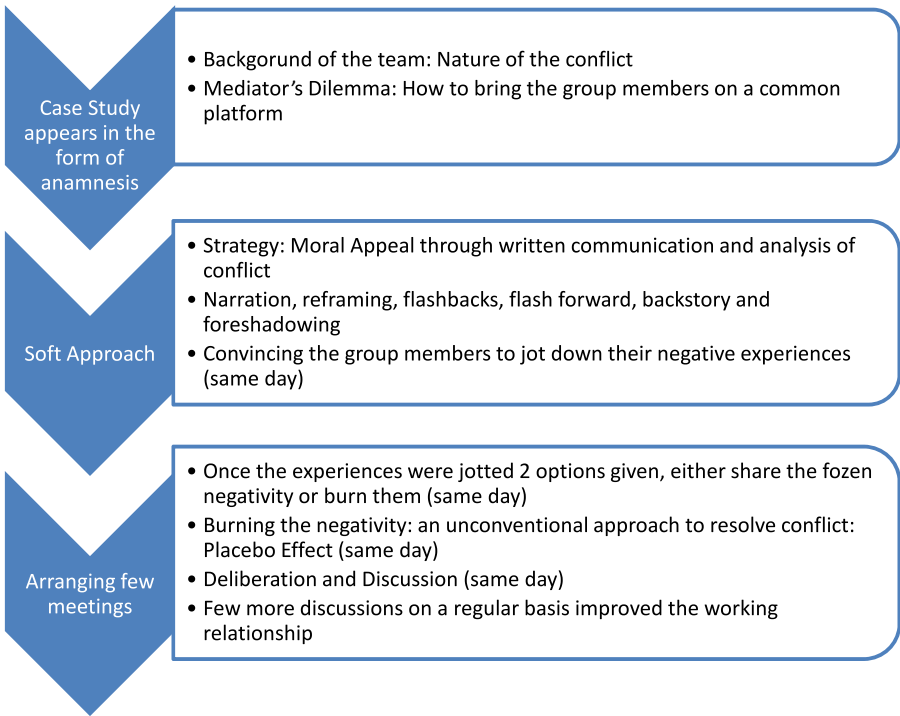


Figure 1.
The case study approach presented in the flow chart

Source(s): Figure by authors

written by the self-styled way of a mediator to resolve colleagues' conflict, which gives a fair and unbiased analysis of the nature of the conflict. (3) In this section, the technique that may appear to have spiritual connotation is discussed, christened as burning the negativity as an unconventional conflict resolution technique.

A case study in conflict resolution

4.1 Background of the team: the conflict

A cohesive team of an educational institution belonging to the same department achieved milestones in their career by setting Robotics Laboratory, Fab Laboratory. It carried out research with joint efforts and much more. If the work centers within the department, all members share great affinity and bonding. They work as a close team, and they hardly participate in activities beyond their department. There was an element of groupthink. Each member believed that all members approved of a particular decision taken by anyone of them. No one expressed dissenting opinion because each person thought that it is in the larger interest of the group and it would undermine the cohesion of the group. To preserve the group's harmony and well-being, they had become increasingly out-of-touch with outside (external) reality (Rummel, 1991). Groupthink (Janis, 2008) is probable in cohesive groups that are socially homogenous that are separated from outsiders.

Cracks appeared in this harmony as this groupthink (Wekselberg, 1996) tendency started to wither away since some members had to work outside the group to meet higher institutional goals. The members' readiness to accept this situation was very poor; hence, the blame game, distrust for each other and other differences started raising ugly heads. After a couple of heated discussions and continued infighting, the whole department fragmented into two subgroups, generating negativity. As a result, communication broke between the two groups. The faculty who did most of the talking with the administrative head started getting appreciation and recognition while they engaged themselves in working outside the group. The result of such recognition being given to only one member by the institution's administrative head was looked upon by other members as a violation of a tacit agreement broken by the member because they always worked in-group (one's own group) and not out-group (other groups).

4.2 Moral appeal through written communication: analysis of conflict

This situation of tacit infighting and broken communication due to differences created continued for a couple of years, around four years. Another colleague makes a fair assessment of the hostile work environment and considers it to be an outcome of collective doing. As a realist, this colleague assumes the role of a mediator and floats a letter to all department members to bring out the positive group psyche. Another colleague working in a different department gets a chance to work with this department. The communication by the mediator was like Hyperbole. There was an element of over-exaggeration to make a point. A spiritual mantra to lead a worldly life is to either forgive or seek forgiveness.

Dear colleagues,

A small initiative is taken since I chose to respond to Angel's whisper.

A lot of hope backs this initiative. This is written with an expectation that at least it would be read carefully. Whatever differences are within the department are not right. It is worthy of close observation because the harms caused are known to everybody, but none consider themselves responsible for it. Instead, the blame is on others. Deep analytical introspection and soul searching would reveal the delusion. The journey of life, including a professional one, is being led according to lessons learned from a set of experiences, belief systems and a certain fixed way of looking at things, issues and events. If you can respect this effort, the transmission will be effective; else, it will remain an effort only. Both conditions are acceptable.

In professional decision-making, sometimes the decisions taken may be correct in a relative sense but not appropriate in an absolute sense. The decision can be considered accurate in a complete sense when it does not hurt anybody and deems it to be correct in relative importance when it may be correct when seen from a specific perspective but maybe hurt someone. If seen from the lens of the person deciding from a particular perspective, it may appear valid. Every individual, in a contextual sense with a compartmentalized outlook, tries to make a correct decision. In the process of decision-making, harm to an individual may occur. The person attempts to justify oneself on one plea or the other rather than looking at it in its entirety. Whenever one reviews the decision taken in totality, the lacunae in the decisions appear. The options that could ensure no one is harmed and hurt in the decision-making were overlooked and not exercised. The failure to acknowledge the situation generally is under a supreme false ego. The ideal situation would be if such a miss happens unknowingly, then it is the archetype to seek forgiveness or forgive the other person who commits the mistake unknowingly (Bell, 2008). The problem is we never seek forgiveness from within nor forgive. We create distances unnecessarily. There is an urgent need to bridge these distances. The persistence of such a state kills infinite possibilities that are neither good for an institution nor suitable for any individual associated with that institution.

A spiritual mantra to lead a worldly life is to either forgive or seek forgiveness. 'A quote by a neighbor-friend impacts me as if some cosmic force or angel whispers these words. The question before me is whether I share this churning of thoughts. There were multiple reasons for not sharing, but sometimes one reason is sufficient to take a decisive call. This initiation did flash a fear in the mind of the mediator that the collective impression would be an 'attempt to pose as a leader or an uncalled-for intervention.

It is essential to reiterate that the motivation is not to prove superiority in understanding situations. Under professional compulsion, small time-bound responsibilities are taken and accomplished, and many times there is a complete lack of consistency at a personal level. However, the situation is analyzed better by a third person who is not an aggrieved party. A group whose contribution has been immense can contribute more if harmony comes in the department is the forthright opinion of the third person. Hence, the third person wants acceptance from the team to at least allow to try to resolve the matter as a mediator. Society has given immensely, and we owe it and should pay it back. Therefore, if an opportunity comes by, one should take it as the will of the Almighty to reduce one's dues, and who knows, this could be part of a larger "scheme of things." The role of the mediator should be seen in this light.

The internal differences in the department and even at the institution level could be due to several factors. One, while resolving contemporary issues, we hurt each other's interests unknowingly, and the one who is hurt takes it as a deliberate attempt by the other. Second, administrative decisions by the head of the institution leading to role change also sometimes create unnecessary confusion between the core group and hurt the members. The frequent change in job roles by the administrative head sometimes leads to confusion and misunderstanding. The work done by the team of faculty at the committee level is quite extensive and requires passionate pursuit. The change in job roles appears to be a decision taken in consultation with associated faculty, a close associate. However, sometimes it is dictated by the whims and fancies of the authorities, but the suspicion is on one's own colleagues. Third, a friend or colleague not expressing disapproval on the hurts inflicted by the seniors on the fellow colleague impairs their relationship. One should not disregard the fact that such situations are for self-evolution and self-actualization and the best way to move on is to forgive all people who are knowingly or unknowingly the cause of one's pain (mental forgiveness) (Bauer *et al.*, 1992).

Firstly, working to accomplish the task with a sense of detachment is the highest way of action. When a certain task is being taken away without one's will (and one has exercised all

ways of fairness in one's control to restrain it), then it should be considered by the doer as an indication of the need to change the direction of action governed by some positive cosmic forces. This realization leaves no space for negativity to breed. This may appear to be an ideal thing, but achieving the ideal state is the objective of life that cannot be refuted. Another way of looking at it is that one allows the administrative head to become unbridled and autocratic and allows unfairness. But this is going to continue the storm unabated within, which is not good.

Second, when a group works continuously on a project, the credit sometimes goes to the faculty who leads the project. There may be practically no realization of this fact because the one who leads the project thinks the group to be a collective identity of persona. When differences start appearing, the team members may manifest such trivialities. The departmental bonding and affinity, as displayed in yesteryears, could be an example, a precedent to be emulated. There is a need to rejuvenate and revive the same. Another question that may arise is that if the 'larger scheme of things governs events ([Kendrick et al., 1990](#)), then why do cracks appear in the first place? A satisfactory answer could be that while members worked as a team in the past before the differences emerged, the individual members had lost their identity. The mutual dependence amongst some members had crossed limits that had started affecting their respective personal family life. In fighting the differences, some emerge as strong individuals who gain the ability to work independently. Groupthink will not appear now if they combine their energies. There can be a host of possible explanations, maybe debatable or un-debatable.

Third, the divisive functioning style of the administrative authority is the leading cause of the differences among the faculty. This line of argument is disputable. All members have worked closely with the executive head, and they have a host of positive experiences and negative experiences to share. Again, to restore positivity to dissolve the negative experiences, the best way is to seek forgiveness and forgive at the mental level. The position of the head of the institution comes with a host of administrative powers and restrictions. These powers may sometimes be misused/abused while meeting administrative challenges. Giving a benefit of the doubt that the abuse or misuse might have happened unknowingly will keep us away from undesirable hopelessness, cynicism and skepticism. Running an institution while accommodating multiple idiosyncrasies of the staff would not be a cakewalk. Discharging duties while maintaining the dignity of administrative positions would not be easy. If the idea that the institutional fragmentation is due to the administration's policies is entertained, then the differences would have been only with the head of the institution. Often, the faculty errs and does not accept the erring done against one another, creating impregnable walls around them. While working in small committees, the faculty take positions under certain circumstances and look from that perspective the decision is right. However, from the outside, we hold each other responsible without taking cognizance of the complex decision-making process.

Deeper introspection may lead to a convergence of views somewhere ([Freeberg, 2002](#)). All will be able to understand the rigidity of the stands of subgroups holding amicable communication amongst the members. Although this writing is an outcome of an analysis of one person, there may be many unaddressed issues that may have been deliberately or otherwise avoided because of several opposing personal nuances. Further detailing may end up in bad taste. Whenever pearls are broken from a string, and then they are bound together after catharsis, they unite with spiritual strength. The strength of spiritual tie becomes very strong. However, if they reunite to serve personal gains due to situational convergence of interests, then the knot in the string will always leave scope for a snap to occur in the knotted string.

Warm Regards,
Your colleague.

4.3 Burning the negativity: unconventional conflict resolution technique

The members of the group did not respond immediately to the letter. Sometimes, the conflict as seen on the exterior does not convey in totality what's wrong, and sometimes deeper issues are simmering beneath the surface that makes it more problematic. Repeated requests by the mediator by being assertive and politely persuasive led to some thawing. Eventually, two members of the team wrote back to the mediator, the content of which was quite intense that revealed the prior too close an affinity and relationship. The hurts went beyond professional boundaries. The two who belonged to the opposite gender were carrying personal pains and complaints against each other that were more emotional in nature. The two were romanticizing the hurts given to each other. After seeking polite permission, the two letters marked to the mediator were exchanged with the respondents. This was meant to share the sensitivity on both sides. As a result, further thawing happened. The group members were talking to the mediator separately but were sidestepping coming to the negotiating table. There were certain nasty occurrences of the past holding them from going to the negotiating table. The mediator finally decides to write again to the two respondents of the team. The mediator had a straightforward approach and strong belief that, in certain circumstances, written communication is more powerful in creating an impact than verbal communication and vice versa.

The writing of this case clearly brings to the fore that mediation could work only if aggrieved members come across the table. Further reiteration by the mediator that how there was a longing on his part to see the department together, happy in their coziness of fraternity and respect for each other, probably made a desirable impact on the group. Generally, no difference lasts for so long if mistakes are not on both sides.

The letters and communication of the mediator, written with clarity and pure intent, created a crack in the vicious cycle of negative dynamics feeding each party's sense of self-absorption and weakness. The mediator was considered unbiased and sort of revered by all the members. These two members convinced the other members to come to the negotiating table. The colleague who had assumed the role of a mediator by some intent that flashed across now had no clue how to handle the parties on the negotiating table. An evening before the meeting, while browsing through the internet happened to hit on a video of Dhandapani. In this video, the spiritual guru, the motivational speaker, linked beautifully how experiences have emotions attached to them that feed the human mind. When one tries to relive it or write about it, it goes from the subconscious mind to the conscious mind, flows through hands into the piece of paper, and if the paper is surrendered to fire, it changes its form, eventually transforming the negative energy.

This motivated the mediator to try something new. The following day when the members met at 9 a.m., the mediator handed a piece of paper to each and asked them to jot down the hurts that they had received while working, partly working or not-working with each other in the same department, in the order of intensity of the hurts/grievances. The mediator also asked them to reflect upon and write about their own personal misses and omissions in avoiding the situation of conflict. This was a challenge for the mediator to motivate the group/department members to willfully transfer the hurts on a piece of paper (guided by [Jensen, 2020](#)) article in Harvard Business Review). The mediator continued, "Well, whatever we observe, test and validate, we believe it, and we can make the world believe it. There are many finer, deeper, complex nuances and processes of the human brain beyond human (scientific) comprehension. For instance, the chemical secretion in response to certain human brain triggers is not in the same amount. Maybe after meditative experiences, the chemical processes in two human brains may not be the same even if the two humans are undergoing those experiences in a controlled environment, so we say the receptivity levels are different. There is a lot of subjectivity, philosophical angles and scientific challenges in exploring this space." This route is a kind of reframing tool that the mediator was trying to make use of.

Reframe is a simple tool/strategy of holding the mutuality of the challenge in view to see what they can attempt together to resolve the conflict. The choice of a frame that best supports resolution is a key question for the mediator. The primary task of the mediator is to support the participants in experiencing a shift, whether it pertains to how they perceive the conflict situation, how they feel about one another, or how they view the world. A reframing from a negative to a positive perception removes the sting. In conflict resolution, the primary reframe is from conflict as a problem to conflict as an opportunity. This is not easy to appreciate when people conflict, but it's easy for people outside the conflict zone to understand and facilitate as a mediator even if they are not experts in intermediation.

However, the participants were not too convinced with the rationale behind the writing/detailing about their hurts and their own mistakes in not managing conflict situations. After observing the members' reluctance, the mediator continued that this effort would prove fruitful and unless the unanimous decision is reached, the written content of each would be kept confidential and secret from everyone, even the facilitator would not read it. Some willingly and some unwillingly followed the instruction. After they were done with this exercise, the obvious question asked was how they felt. Two of them said that they felt lighter, few others also agreed that, to some extent, they felt better. All these writings were sealed in one envelope. The mediator requested the members to assemble again before leaving for the day in the evening. The mediator further suggested that they observe their inner self for a couple of hours and see if the lighter feeling stayed for a couple of hours or just fled in an hour. In the second meeting at 4 p.m., the mediator felt that the group was more peaceful, and the group also accepted the same. The mediator then asked them if some of the group members felt like transferring some of the remaining Negativity on a piece of paper, they could do it. Some of the members again wrote. These sheets of paper were sealed in the second envelope. After the experiment, there were two options available: One to read each other's hurts jotted on paper and the second to burn the negativity transferred in the form of writing.

The mediator suggested the second option to save them from embarrassment and further entanglement. The members were a little unsure but did not question the surrealism of the act and finally agreed to the mediator's suggestion. The facilitator took the group to the open field and lighted the two envelopes with a matchstick, the two thick envelopes slowly caught fire and all the members saw them burning to ashes in the silence of nature. The facilitator continued to share the rationale behind the experiment. If anyone desires to unveil the mysteries of the universe, one should strive hard to think in terms of energy, frequency and vibration. Everything is made up of energy, and it vibrates at a certain frequency. It's true for emotional energy as well (Hunt & Schooler, 2019). There was an unresolved negative emotional experience sitting in the subconscious mind of everyone here, consuming a tremendous amount of energy. Every experience had emotion attached to it; it was vibrating in the subconscious mind. In the process of writing, it passed from hand to the paper, and now the sealed envelopes were surrendered to fire; the emotion could get transformed into heat, flame, ash smoke and a bunch of different things. Obviously, the fire will not destroy emotion since it has certain energy but will transform it.

The mediator could see awe and disbelief on specific faces. This kind of expression took the explanation further. The mediator continued that this whole experimental process may appear surreal, obscure and may appear to have a spiritual connotation. When a four-year-old baby makes a birthday card for the mother or the father, it may not be significant in terms of quality of creativity, but what makes it priceless is the love that is transferred while making the card. The deep emotion, as in this case, gets transferred into the piece of paper. The warmth of the emotion of love is felt whenever the card is held by the parents, even after several years have passed. Likewise, one can transfer the emotion from inside to another matter. Likewise, neither energy can be created nor destroyed, but it can be transferred or transformed from one thing to another.

5. Discussions: an outcome of the social science experiment

The biggest challenge in this case study was to bring the group to the negotiating table. Some members were very rigid and refused to come to discuss their traumas and their hurts. However, the open discussion with three members, A, B and C, helped a lot. Their share appears in the excerpts I and II.

5.1 Excerpt – I - discussions with member A and C

Member A- I and member B joined the college in the same year as ad-hoc faculty way back in 1997. In 1998 member B became permanent, and in the same year, two more members, C and D, joined the department as ad-hoc faculty. Member B, as senior most faculty, was pally with all the members. He shared special bonds with me. We all were from the science stream; laboratory sessions kept us in college till 4 p.m. We sometimes stayed back in college even if the laboratory class was that of our colleague. These long stays brought us very close. We all had faith in member A. We tacitly accepted him as a leader. Sometimes I shared my family issues, personal goals, and aspirations with him. He, too, did the same. The whole college knew about our friendship and bonding, which was so apparent among all four of us. I also became permanent in the year 2001.

We all used to work on tasks taken by senior faculty member-A since he was functioning as a Teacher-in-charge of our department without ever questioning him, but all the credit for the work was taken by him, and this continued for years in the department. Even when his tenure as a TIC was over, the administrative head discussed infrastructure and facility-related issues with him and assigned him tasks. We collaborated to complete the job assigned, yet the leadership quality of member B was acknowledged and recognized, and we felt we were equally competent, and this began to irk us (members A and C). Right from establishing an electronic laboratory for our course to setting up an advanced Robotics laboratory in several phases was collaborative teamwork. I always felt overshadowed. I was not happy with this situation and felt hurt sometimes, but I never talked to him about it.

We kept on ignoring our personal discomfort for several years. I started feeling that I am suffering from an identity crisis. However, our relationship and friendship at outer level seemed to continue.

Member C

In the meantime, I (member C) lost my job for technical reasons when the appointment for permanent faculty happened. I was very hurt since I blamed member B for not letting me know beforehand about the prerequisite for seeking a permanent appointment. Even if a faculty is working in the same college before the selection committee meets, his name is to be registered in the panel of the ad-hoc list of the parent department. I felt that as a senior faculty (member B) should have informed me about it and ensured this.

However, after six months' time, the posts got advertised again, and I performed extremely well in the interview and then joined back the college. I internally continued to carry personal hurt and a grudge against member B.

Both members A and C had a feeling that he takes us and others in the department for granted. They felt that member B had narcissistic (Self-absorbed) attitude.

When member B was on long leave, the administrative head changed and he started contacting the faculty next in seniority, i.e., the two of us. We started doing the work, and obviously, our efforts got recognized. This was good for our self-esteem. The new administrative head different functioning style. However, when member B joined back, he found that there wasn't the same kind of affinity between the three of them.

In one of the departmental meetings, he screamed at the two for a valid reason for taking a stupid position which was, according to him, not in the interest of the department. This incident created a visible rift among them, and member B stopped communicating with the two. We thought probably the feeling of dilution in his leadership was the cause for his conduct. The department got divided

into two groups member B with five other faculty in one group, and members A and C formed another group.

Departmental meetings did not go well after this incident. The petty differences started surfacing now and then.

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5.2 Excerpt – II - meeting with member B

The mediator shared the gist of discussions with members A and C. Member B was taken aback, especially for the phrase narcissistic used for him. He was so surprised to know that members A and C suffered from identity crisis. He clarified that in all the meetings, he did mention that the work done is the outcome of all the faculty members of the department. He could do nothing to change the functioning style of the erstwhile administrative head. He never realized his colleagues felt like that, and unfortunately, they never mentioned it. He felt sorry because they used to communicate so much earlier, but what was professionally bothering them was never shared. He could have got a chance to explain. He probably never realized that there was a kind of discontent amongst the colleagues due to the reasons mentioned by member A and C.

He also shared that he was instrumental in getting the appointment of member C, which out of magnanimity, he never shared. He had met the department head in person to inform him that due to technical reasons, member C was not selected as permanent faculty in the last interview and hinted at the areas of his expertise and strengths.

There was a lot of other unpleasantness that happened between the two groups that is too petty and not so significant to elaborate. All was reactionary and counter reactionary outbursts due to negativity amongst us. We all did that in the state of child ego.

He further went on to add that how I wish I had read psychology and cognitive behaviour theory to be more perceptive. Human behaviour is so complex, and I realize that to be successful one needs to have a balance between art and science. Probably whatever happened was for good because members A and C worked very hard during the years when differences had appeared, and they made several publications and rose to new heights professionally, converting potentiality to achievable possibility. Sometimes, it is designed by the Almighty to ensure you achieve desired goals by moving out of the comfort zone.

In addition, reliving the memories of extreme negativity and confronting them across the table, however, was averted through the technique of writing the hurts on paper. The mediator also convinced the group to sit together and have a couple of meditation sessions. The group saw the videos of Joe Dispenza: How to unlock the full potential of the mind, <https://youtu.be/La9oLLoI5Rc>, You are the Placebo [3] How to exercise the power of the mind, <https://youtu.be/0Uw0hJxy7Y4>, Learn How To Control Your Mind (Use this to brainwash yourself), <https://youtu.be/v7KQsS2kLM4>. All this was done to maintain the modified state of mind of the group members.

They continued to remain positive and exhibited faith and, therefore, the possibility of achieving a state of homeostasis got magnified. Homeostasis is a core concept necessary for understanding the many regulatory mechanisms in physiology. Bernard (1974) originally proposed the idea of the constancy of the “milieu Interieur” [4] but his discussion was rather abstract. Walter Cannon introduced the term homeostasis [5] and expanded Bernard’s notion of “constancy” of the internal environment explicitly and concretely.

Harmony kept on increasing day by day. Once they started inching towards that state at the individual level, the friction and inertia started dissolving at the group level. Interestingly, no one was compelled into any agreement or decision. The unique technique of the mediator transformed the negativity, and facilitated self-determination, empowering the members in dispute to look at the differences that had caused their conflict and consider what they could accept, what had to change and how they could accomplish the change. The experiment

seemed to have a Placebo Effect. Accomplishment is assessed not by resolution but by the way the members having group conflict shifted toward personal strength, constructive interaction, and interpersonal responsiveness through this transformative mediation (Bush & Folger, 2004). The results were entirely in the members' own hands and were essentially based on their own choices.

In this case, intuitive sensitivity and imagination came into play. The subconscious mind (Affendy and Nurilia, 2014) is the memory recall domain. When attention is paid, the imagery stored there gets activated. Dreaming is considered a good illustration. The levels of the subconscious also vary while dreaming. Sometimes recall of the dream is there, sometimes recall is faint, sometimes not. However, when some people experience negativity, they have trained themselves to throw it away even from their subconscious instantly not to affect them. They are generally more forgiving people. A mix of these must have been experienced by some of the team members. Probably, some of them felt an urgent need to end the conflict since it was adversely impacting their psychological health. Some people need some placebo effect type of thing to happen, like writing it on a piece of paper and burning it, leading to the transformation of the negative energy. This could be considered a purely intuitive and experiential way of looking at things. Neuro mapping [6] may help to decipher these conditions.

6. Conclusion

Interestingly, the dysfunctional group of the college department, in a short span of three months, resumed a working professional relationship. Since the mediator was a colleague of the group, hence kept on meeting them regularly and acted as a catalyst to bring the group together and was immensely satisfied with the outcome of the experiment. Once each of them identified the cause of the anxiety and emotions expressed (transferred), members could think more clearly, and come out of the hurts felt due to their earlier groupthink syndrome. They felt equipped to settle their departmental issues. The constructive interaction, and communication amongst the group, grew, and broken ties started strengthening. This was particularly because member A now knew that members A and C felt that he had a narcissistic attitude, and introspection made him realize that. Members A and C went through an identity crisis, unknowingly inflicted by member B. This realization diluted the differences to a great extent. However, the older ties of friendship never got revived due to changes in the relationship dynamics.

Although various qualities could describe the communication dynamics required in mediation, however, here the pure intent of the mediator, not too expert in the domain of mediation, could remove the bitterness and negativity that had set in amongst a group. The intervention and shifts in communication dynamics (Mattsson & den Haring, 1998) were so subtle and full of wisdom that the heavy and difficult, hardened negativity lost ground by being transformed.

6.1 Implications

It remains to be validated whether the placebo effect (Wei *et al.*, 2018) or actual transformation of negativity or bitterness got removed by adopting the transformative method. Therefore, more case studies using the technique need to be initiated in the future to test the efficacy of this technique. When the people involved were amid resolving the hurts and healing the contextually generated sensitivities and sensibilities, no one had in mind to bring this intense experience on paper. The mediator felt that it is an experience worth sharing with the people, and so it is seeing the light of day to find a humble place in the repository of knowledge sharing.

The mediator used Reframing as a tool very efficiently, transforming the conflict from being combative and contentious and bringing them on a collaborative and compromising platform. This proved to be most amenable to reaching a desirable, creative resolution. The mediator builds an argument that the past is history and can only serve to teach us lessons. The future epitomizes where the participant members are going and has the conceivable potential of hitting something superior. Therefore, the participants are encouraged to choose a future orientation.

Notes

1. Understanding narrative Inquiry, The Crafting and Analysis of Stories as Research, by Jeong Hee Kim (2016).
2. Reframing (Schütte B., 2015) is used as a tool to change the view of something. It acknowledges that the setting or reframe that is utilized to make complete sense of an incident, state or relationship is not something neutral. The judgment as to the use of a specific frame, consequently, involves a mindful-conscious choice. Any times, reframing may be intellectualized as refocusing since the influence of the reframe leads to an innovative focus. For the mediators to function most effectively, the two 'refocuses' that are especially significant may involve the reframe from past to future and – demands to need.
3. Placebo effect causes miracles in your body, health and life. It can transform the experience and influencing the matter: by taking control of thought and emotions, we can reprogram our cells; We have the biological and neurological machinery necessary to do it. A placebo is a substance without any pharmacological power that, however, causes a positive effect on the patient (<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mental-health/the-power-of-the-placebo-effect>).
4. "Milieu Intérieur" refers to the physiological regulation of the internal environment emphasized by Claude Bernard. In the field of medicine and physiology, it occupies an important position describing the interstitial fluid and its physiological capacity to ensure protective stability for the tissues and organs of multicellular organisms (Bernard *et al.*, 1974; Holmes,1986).
5. Homeostasis is the word derived from the two Greek words "homeo" meaning "similar," and "stasis" meaning "stable." Homeostasis refers to stability, balance or equilibrium within a cell or the body. Maintaining a stable internal environment which requires adjustments as conditions change inside and outside the cell. The maintenance of systems within a cell is called homeostatic regulation (Yadav, Jain, Bissi, & Marotta, 2016; Rodova and Kim, 2016; Singh and Shoab Mansuri, 2016; Andrey and Vladimir, 2016; Cooper, 2008).
6. Brain (neuro) mapping is done to evaluate brainwaves and identify opportunities to improve communication between several regions of the brain and attempts to capture a window of brain activity, analyze the data and create a visual representation for each lobe of the brain and each specific brain wave (Delta, Theta, Alpha, Beta). The mission of brain mapping is to define the structure and function of the human brain in health and disease (<https://www.uclahealth.org/neurology/brain-mapping>).

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