Constructive Conflict: How Controversy Can Contribute to School Improvement

CYNTHIA L. ULINE

The Ohio State University

MEGAN TSCHANNEN-MORAN

The College of William and Mary

LYNNE PEREZ

The Ohio State University

Conflict, though often unsettling, is a natural part of collective human experience. It can leave participants ill at ease, so it is often avoided and suppressed. Yet conflict, when well managed, breathes life and energy into relationships and can cause individuals to be more innovative and productive. Conflict is present within our schools whether we like it or not. Educators must find ways to legitimize critique and controversy within organizational life. This article examines constructive conflict within the context of a comprehensive Midwestern high school engaged in significant reform efforts. Here conflict is employed as a means to promote individual and organizational learning and growth.

Conflict is a natural part of collective human experience. In our efforts to cooperate with one another, we have differences of opinion about how best to accomplish our common goals. We seek to protect our individual interests within these efforts and forestall outside influences, fearing discord in the face of these conflicting forces. Conflict is often unsettling. It can leave participants shaken and ill at ease, so it is often avoided and suppressed. Yet conflict, when well managed, breathes life and energy into relationships and can cause individuals to be much more innovative and productive. Differences of opinion, individual interests, outside influences, even active discord all have the capacity to inform and advance our collective efforts. Each might provide a provocative stimulus, moving us to think more deeply and, ultimately, to act more prudently. Thus, conflict can become a necessary locus of energy, rather than a source of harm.

The idea that conflict is potentially beneficial is not new. In the early part of the last century, Mary Parker Follett (1924) extolled the virtue of conflict saying, "one of the greatest values of controversy is its revealing nature ... by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all concerned" (p. 301). Dewey (1938/1961) advanced active deliberation as the means to resolve problems. Nowhere did he imply that these methods eradicate conflict. Indeed, he suggested that conflict and uncertainty are inevitable. He observed that living itself "may be regarded as a continual rhythm of disequilibrium and recoveries of equilibrium" (p. 33). Learning to appreciate and make constructive use of participants' different perspectives and experiences helps to create a context where trust and respect are cultivated rather than depleted (Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Woolfolk Hoy, & Mackley, 2000). This requires a certain social adroitness and emotional dexterity not necessarily fostered by the norms within schools (Uline & Berkowitz, 2000).

This study examines constructive conflict within schools as a means to promote individual and organizational learning and growth. It does so by scrutinizing the conflicts within a high school engaged in a significant reform initiative, how conflict was employed in service of such learning and growth, as well as how it interfered with these same goals. Following is a brief description of this high school and the methodologies employed within the study. We then draw on various philosophical, theoretical, and empirical understandings of conflict.

Understandings of the constructive role of conflict in schools stem from closer study of common responses to conflict (Deutsch, 2000), the cognitive and affective aspects of conflict (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Baron, 1997; De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997), the effects of cooperative versus competitive organizational climates (Deutsch, 2000), and theories of and strategies for the employment of constructive conflict (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, & Tjosvold, 2000, Nutt & Backoff, 1987, 1993). These dynamics are discussed in the next sections. Then we consider how a particular school experiences and uses conflict. In the school examined, conflict among the faculty resulted from ongoing, rigorous reform efforts. It was channeled through various structures and strategies employed to tap the creative potential of such controversy. Some of these practices were more successful than others and both are explored. Finally, consideration of these practices leads us to recommendations for the use of the conflicts inherent within schools.

METHODS OF INQUIRY AND ANALYSIS

Brandonburg High School, the comprehensive Midwestern high school under study, was chosen for a yearlong in-depth case study because it was

identified as a high performing school and had made significant progress in school-based, systemic reforms.[1] The aim of this study was to understand the nature and process of the ongoing improvement efforts within this school. A common conceptual framework guided the exploration and analysis of change at each school in the original study. Case study teams investigated change processes in multiple contexts—the classroom, the corridors, and the community—and in relation to three key processes of learning within organizations: collaboration, inquiry, and integration. Each case study was to reflect the unique character of school change at each school. Brandonburg emerged as an organization that learned from and thrived on active dissent. Controversy was present across all three contexts, within each of the three types of processes studied.

Researchers spent 1 to 2 days each week at the school interviewing staff, observing classes, shadowing teachers and students, and attending school meetings and presentations. A purposive sample of teachers was chosen from the 110 faculty members for extended interviews. Of the 110 teachers, 48 were male and 62 female, 104 were White and 6 Black, and 65 were involved in one or more of the reform efforts. The interview sample purposefully tapped the range of perspectives and teaching philosophies on the faculty, with reform participants and nonparticipants equally represented. Interviews with faculty, staff, district-level administrators, a former principal, community representatives, students, and parents included both focus group and individual interviews. Approximately 47 interviews were conducted, including interviews with 21 teachers, 4 administrators, 14 students, and 8 parents. Interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours. Eight focus group interviews were conducted, and approximately 18 formal meetings within the school were observed. These included faculty meetings, principal advisory committee meetings, teaching team meetings, school improvement committee meetings, and Critical Friends group meetings.

All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Data were then organized, classified, and coded using HyperResearch software. The investigators employed a qualitative thematic strategy of data analysis making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of text units, searching for emerging themes as well as teasing out anomalies and contradictions, across various interviews (Holsti, 1969; Merriam, 1988). Potential problems of validity and reliability were addressed through triangulation of data, that is, using multiple data sources to provide multiple indicators of the same phenomenon (Denzin, 1970). In addition, member checks were conducted with key participants, asking if the data were accurate and interpretations plausible (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). School representatives to the research team participated fully in validation of research findings. The draft report was made available to school personnel for review providing a check on confidentiality, accuracy, and the opportunity to submit alternative interpretations of findings.

Initial data analysis revealed that the school's corporate experiences with reform had produced tensions, unresolved conflicts, and unanticipated problems (Mackley & Uline, 1999). Administrators and teacher leaders were constantly struggling to maintain a balance between harmony and creative tension. The advantage of their collaborative problem solving was its involvement of many people and its generation of more and better ideas. However, this broader range of options sometimes resulted in confusion and a sense of chaos. Recognizing that conflict was a necessary antecedent to institutionalizing new habits of school life, administrators and teachers accepted dialogue and debate as crucial to the change process. They asked challenging questions about what to teach, how to teach, and what students should know and be able to do as a result. Teachers differed in their opinions about whether the level of conflict at Brandonburg was invigorating or debilitating. These varying points of view begged a closer look at these dynamics and a more detailed analysis of the structural supports, organizational policies, and cultural norms put in place at Brandonburg to encourage a constructive level of controversy. This secondary analysis furthers our understanding of these norms, policies, and supports and suggests additional strategies for fostering constructive controversy.

CONFLICT

Conflict is expressed as a struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and rewards, and potential interference from the other party in achieving their goals (Baron, 1997; Boulding, 1963; Deutsch, 1962, 1973; Hocker & Wilmot, 1985; Rubin, Pruit, Kim, 1994). People are in conflict when the actions of one person are interfering, obstructing, or in some other way making another's behavior less effective (Tjosvold, 1997, p. 24). Conflict in organizations often has been conceived of as a pathology to be diagnosed and treated (De Dreu & Van de Vlirt, 1997). People in organizations often avoid or suppress conflict because they fear uncontrollable consequences resulting from a lack of self-efficacy and skills to manage the conflict constructively. They may also fear retaliation. They may be hesitant to break the general norm of behaving peacefully, feeling a need to protect their reputations and save face. Or they may suppress conflict from an urge to reach decisions and to be productive (De Dreu, 1997). Whatever the motivation, the costs of suppressed conflict can be great. Tjosvold (1997) warns, "Conflicts that are avoided and poorly managed can wreak havoc on both individuals and organizations. Problems fester and obsolete ideas are implemented.

People remain aloof, skeptical and angry; they become rigid, fixated and ambivalent. Both individuals and their organizations lose" (pp. 23–24).

Exploring the nature of conflict as a natural part of collective human experiences encourages us to consider its benefits. When we begin to accept conflict as a natural companion to the frank exchange of ideas, controversy can become a creative force for individuals, teams, and organizations (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). There can be significant payoffs when conflict is well managed. Successfully weathering controversy can develop people's individuality so that they feel more powerful, capable and efficacious, as well as more connected to others. People can grow to trust each other more as their needs and ideas are incorporated into joint solutions. As they come to believe their joint efforts will pay off, people are more prepared to contribute to their groups and organization. Collective success in turn further strengthens relationships and individuality. With the positive resolution of conflict, "individuals continue to mature into persons who are fulfilled. To reap the potential benefits of conflict, and avoid its costs, a greater understanding of the processes involved is required".

COMMON RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

Individuals respond to conflict in various ways. They make choices, sometimes consciously and thoughtfully, other times in the heat of moment, reacting without intention out of fear and anger. Deutsch (2000) analyzed these common responses and organized them across six continua, reflecting a number of choices people make in response to a given conflict.

- Along the first continuum, people at one extreme tend to avoid conflict (denying, suppressing, or postponing it), whereas at the other extreme they confront it, involving themselves to demonstrate their confidence and courage in the face of conflict. Within schools, Peterson and Peterson (1990) found both children and adults employed conflict avoidance twice as often as confrontation.

- The second set of responses Deutsch characterized as being along the spectrum from hard to soft, that is, participants respond in an aggressive, unyielding fashion at one extreme or they may be excessively gentle and unassertive.

- A third continuum of choice runs between rigid and loose responses: people may attempt to organize or control the situation on the one hand, or lean toward avoiding all formal responses on the other.

- Yet another continuum spans the divide between intellectual and affective responses to conflict, in that some individuals may respond to conflict with calm detachment, whereas others express intense emotions.

- Fifth, individuals at one end of this continuum may attempt to escalate the conflict, expressing it in its largest possible terms, whereas at the other extreme individuals seek to minimize the seriousness of the differences between themselves and others.

- Finally, in attempts to communicate with others about the difficulties at hand, disputants at one end of the continuum will choose bluntness, revealing all they think and feel, whereas the disputants at the other will hold their cards close, concealing what is on their mind.

Along these six continua, the problem space as well as the tone and style for any given conflict will be defined. Individuals' own history and biases regarding conflict affect their responses. As individuals continue to engage in conflict, learning new strategies for productive resolutions, the range of possible responses is extended and enriched.

AFFECTIVE AND COGNITIVE ASPECTS OF CONFLICT

A helpful distinction in cultivating constructive conflict and avoiding dysfunctional conflict is in discerning the difference between cognitive and affective conflict. Cognitive conflict pertains to a conflict of ideas and disagreement about how to accomplish some task; it involves disputes over procedures and policies, over opinions, and over the distribution of scarce resources. Cognitive conflict can enhance problem solving and improve decision quality. On the other hand, affective conflict involves a perceived threat to one's personal or group identity, norms, and values; it exists when personal relationships within the group are characterized by personality clashes, friction, and frustration (Jehn, 1997). Affective conflict can result in dysfunction, tending to lead to poorer decision quality and acceptance (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Jehn, 1997). Although theoretically distinct, in the rough and tumble of actual conflict, the distinction between cognitive and affective conflict can become blurred. When the stakes are high, the issues are serious, and there is potential for great personal gain or loss, affective conflict can overwhelm the cognitive features of a disagreement.

The distinction between cognitive and affective conflict do not suggest that our deliberations regarding one conflict or another are ever devoid of feeling. Feelings are almost always engaged to some extent in a conflict, ranging from the excitement and challenge of a lively but friendly debate to the other extreme where feelings become the most salient issues and interfere with the search for constructive solutions. Indeed, Dewey (1938/1961) maintained that feelings are critical to deliberation.

He elaborated:

> Of course, intelligence does not generate action except as it is enkindled by feeling. But the notion that there is some inherent opposition between emotion and intelligence is a relic of the notion of the mind that grew up before the experimental method of science had emerged. For the latter method signifies the union of idea with action, a union that is intimate; and action generates and supports emotion. Ideas that are framed to be put into operation for the sake of guiding action are imbued with all the emotional force that attaches to the ends proposed for action, and are accompanied with the excitement and inspiration that attends the struggle to realize the ends. (p. 38)

In acknowledging the important role emotions play within deliberation, Dewey (1922/1988) warned against allowing personal feelings precedent over "actual facts" admonishing that, "Self-contained sentimentalism leads nowhere. Scientific findings must direct a person's intuitive appraisals. ...Physical, biological, and historical knowledge placed in human context ...illuminate and guide the activities of men" (p. 182). Neither facts nor emotions are sufficient unto themselves. It is the integration of informed thoughts with energetic feelings that moves deliberation forward.

How disputants think and feel about conflict influences their behavior and the ultimate outcomes experienced by both sides (Baron, 1997). When individuals discover that another party has thwarted their efforts, they generally engage in sense making, trying to determine the cause of the other person's behavior. However, interpreting another person's action is not a simple task as their behavior can often be ambiguous. Disputants may misinterpret disagreements as personal criticism or personal animosity. The attributions the disputants make then influence the effects of conflict. If the cause is determined to be malevolence, affective responses are likely to erupt. Once affective mechanisms are activated, decision quality tends to deteriorate. Individuals experiencing strong emotional arousal often appear to suffer a cognitive deficit, evident in a reduced ability to formulate rational plans of action or to evaluate the potential outcomes of various behaviors (Zillermann, 1994). Arguments may degenerate into personal attacks if one or both sides decide to use intimidation as a strategy to protect their interests and reach an end result more favorable to their needs (Amason & Schweiger, 1997). Thus, maintaining a careful balance between the affective and the cognitive aspects of any conflict is essential to its successful resolution. As participants learn and employ structured processes and protocols for managing conflict, they are better able to maintain such a balance.

COOPERATIVE VERSUS COMPETITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATES

Whether conflict holds promise or peril depends in part on the context in which it takes place and the fit between the context and the conflict resolution strategies employed. In a competitive context, individuals work against each other to achieve a goal that only one or a few can attain (Deutsch, 1973; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Communication tends to be avoided, and it frequently contains misleading information and threats along with misperceptions and distortions of the other person's motivations and position. Likewise, distrust and exploitation characterize relationships. Individuals tend to deny the legitimacy of the other person's wants, needs, and feelings, trying to maximize their own gain at the other's expense.

In a cooperative context, individuals work together to achieve mutual goals. Communication of relevant information tends to be open and honest with each person interested in informing the other as well as being informed. Perceptions of others and their actions tend to be accurate and constructive. Similarly, in a cooperative context, trust and responsiveness characterize relationships. Individuals recognize the legitimacy of each other's interests. The elements that make for a cooperative context are a sense of interdependence and goal congruence. In schools, these elements are fostered within a culture of cooperation where participants are aware of their need to cooperative with other members toward meeting their common objective.

One of the essential elements of constructive conflict is a sense of interdependence. When organizational participants recognize that they need the cooperation of other members, this awareness fosters open communication, resource exchange, perspective taking and mutual influence that tend to result in increased productivity (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). In addition to a sense of interdependence, the recognition that both parties hold compatible goals is facilitative to constructive conflict. Tjosvold (1997) cautioned that people's incompatible actions do not necessarily reflect incompatible desired end-states. The incompatibility of goals should be discovered, not assumed. "With compatible goals, protagonists welcome open discussion and realize it is important to work out settlements so that they can continue to assist each other" (Tjosvold, 1997, p. 26). Compatible goals create a willingness to consider and incorporate opposing views. Participants are motivated to combine the most reliable information and the best ideas, resulting in a high quality decision they are willing to implement.

BENEFITS OF CONSTRUCTIVE CONTROVERSY

Organizations as well as individuals can reap the benefits of constructive controversy. Groups performing nonroutine tasks that require problem

solving experience a high degree of uncertainty and can therefore benefit from the diverse ideas of group members (Jehn, 1997). To realize the potential for high-quality strategic decisions, "a team's diverse skills, abilities and perspectives must be identified, evaluated and combined into a decision" (Amason & Schweiger, 1997, p. 102). Yet capitalizing on the cognitive diversity within a group requires processes that can tap that potential. High-quality decisions depend on the cognitive resources of the decision-making team and the interaction processes that the team uses to produce its decisions (Amason & Schweiger, 1997). Constructive controversy has the potential to improve the effectiveness of group processes as well as the quality of decisions and their implementation.

Improved Group Functioning

To be truly effective, teams must maintain affective relationships that allow them to consistently produce high quality decisions. They must consistently reach agreement on those decisions to continue working together (Amason & Schweiger, 1997). Constructive controversy relies on open-minded discussion of opposing views. Protagonists must maintain mutual respect while disagreeing in order to sustain open-mindedness and integration of opposing views (Tjosvold, 1997). "Teams must argue, debate and disagree, but must also create facilitative interpersonal conditions" (Tjosvold, 1985, p. 32). An awareness of shared goals and of goal interdependence helps create a cooperative context for the integration of divergent viewpoints.

Through debating their different perspectives people combine and integrate their ideas to solve problems. People voice their concerns and create solutions responsive to several points of view. This conflict serves to strengthen their relationship allowing them to become more united and committed (Tjosvold, 1997). Conflict is necessary for true involvement, empowerment, and democracy. Discussing openly, seeing issues from another's perspective, integrating views, and reaching agreement are critical skills for positive conflict. In many schools, group functioning is impaired rather than facilitated by conflict because of the lack of conflict relevant skills of organizational participants.

Better Decisions

Conflict can lead to improved thinking. Cognitive developmentalists have proposed that interpersonal debate among people of different developmental stages promotes the adoption of more adequate ways of reasoning for the individuals involved (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1962). As individuals

espouse their positions and respond to questions, they clarify their thinking and make their arguments more logical and evidence-based. Tjosvold (1997) noted the following:

> As they argue their positions, people may come to see the inadequacy of their ideas and the value of opposing ones. Then they combine them in ways neither person has considered previously. ...They accept imperfect solutions to their problems because they realize that resources are scarce and others' demands and interests must be accommodated. (pp. 32–33).

Taking in new, vital experiences often requires more than placing the new insights and information on top of what was previously known. Rather it may involve a reconstruction of knowledge structures, a process that can be destabilizing. Piaget (1962) maintained that disequilibrium and the striving to restore a balance results in cognitive growth. Purposefully stimulating conflict may increase an individual's cognitive flexibility and their ability to handle complex information (De Dreu & Van de Vlirt, 1997).

One of the problems of suppressed conflict is that it leaves the false impression that people understand each other. Through the give and take of conflict, people shed their illusions and assumptions of each other and can come to know and understand their opponents' actual positions and needs (Tjosvold, 1997, p. 32). Researchers have found that people steeped in controversy asked their antagonist more questions, demonstrated greater interest in understanding the opposing perspective, resulting in higher quality decisions. In one study of decision quality, constructive controversy accounted for more than 40% of the variance in effective decision making (Tjosvold, 1997). Teams who relied on integrative means of conflict management felt confident that they could deal with their many differences. This conflict efficacy resulted in productive and innovative work as rated by both their managers and themselves.

High quality decisions are of little value without effective implementation. Implementation depends on securing the cooperation of all parties to the decision (Amason & Schweiger, 1997, p. 102). Team members must both understand and commit to the decision if it is to be implemented effectively, especially in organizational contexts such as schools where participants have a certain degree of autonomy.

In sum, schools that wish to reap the benefits of constructive controversy will need to understand common responses to conflict and support organizational participants toward conflict strategies that lead to constructive outcomes. It is also helpful to recognize the potentially destructive influence of affective conflict and to guard against personal attacks and threats in the midst of organizational conflict. And organizations will more

likely have constructive conflict where a cooperative organizational context is fostered. Finally, the benefits of constructive controversy include high quality decisions and improved group functioning.

THE CONTEXT FOR CONTROVERSY: UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT AT BRANDONBURG

Among high schools in this Midwestern state, Brandonburg High School has been a leader in school improvement initiatives. Association with the Coalition of Essential Schools led to the creation and development of the programs and practices that now characterize the school (Sizer, 1984, 1992, 1996). The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) is a national school reform initiative founded on the research and writing of Theodore Sizer. CES is "a robust collaborative community of educators, parents, students, and policy makers ... working together to create schools where each child is known well and learns to use his or her mind well" (www.essentialschools.org). Rather than a highly prescriptive reform package, schools in the coalition apply a set of 10 common principles to develop their own unique plan of reform designed to strengthen student learning through the reordering of school priorities and the simplification of school structures. Their efforts are supported by a national organization and a network of regional centers.

Coalition schools stress the professional perspectives of teachers through collaborative forms of school management and emphasize the central importance of students by focusing on student social and academic behavior. Brandonburg's plan included a master schedule that incorporated extended double blocked teaching periods; team teaching options that included grade-level teaching teams; staff development opportunities that featured a daily common planning time for all teachers and small group support teams, known as Critical Friends Groups; a collaborative management system that invited teacher input through participation in School Improvement Committees; and a learner-centered teaching philosophy that placed a greater emphasis on group work, independent research projects, and authentic assessment activities. The high school's emphasis on authentic instruction, exhibition, in-depth senior thesis experiences, school and business partnerships, advisory groups, and mentorship programs resulted in reforms that extended beyond the confines of the school building and into the surrounding community.

From the inception of the reforms there were some faculty members who were skeptics. These teachers saw the Coalition principles as overly concerned with socialization and processing skills, at the expense of a focus on rigorous content-based standards. In their opinion, the school should be more accepting of traditional teaching practices aimed at equipping students with the knowledge they would need for more advanced levels of formal education. Said one such skeptic: "I'm not a believer in what Sizer is trying to do. I come out on the Hirsch side of the argument, although the two approaches could be combined. It's OK as long as it is an alternative. It's good for those students who don't have a place here." Another teacher added:

> I think it's probably mostly good for bringing kids up from lower levels to competence, but I think it works against intellectualism. I think it puts so much emphasis on the masses that it doesn't leave much for the kids who want to excel, and in fact, need to excel.

These philosophical rifts are by no means uncommon in Coalition schools. Quite the contrary. Muncy and McQuillan (1996) found such divisions in many of the Coalition schools they studied. As a consequence of this controversy, Muncy and McQuillan noted that all their study schools were "somehow changed as a consequence of this collective reflection about whether current practices were in students' best interests" (p. 18). In spite of the reservations about Coalition principles held by some teachers and the lack of clarity that was expressed by others, the principles espoused by the Coalition of Essential Schools were the basis for many of the instructional emphases and educational goals of Brandonburg High School.

THE FLUX OF REFORM

As all these strategies were being developed, the high school also experienced a significant increase in student enrollment. Some of this increase was due to the general growth of the school district's population, but a sudden and dramatic change at the high school came as a result of the reassignment of approximately 500 ninth-grade students from the middle school to the high school, bringing the total to almost 1,800 students. This rapid growth resulted in focused and sustained efforts to personalize management and instruction of students and to ensure efficient communication among the roughly 120 teachers and support staff.

Asking schools and teachers to change their fundamental beliefs and practices presents a formidable challenge. This challenge is all the more substantial as schools attempt to change while in the midst of conducting their everyday business. Engaging in significant change involves a period of disequilibrium that can leave teachers and administrators anxious, uncertain, and stressed even if the changes also bring renewed excitement and vigor. At a large school like Brandonburg, moving significant numbers

of teachers toward common understandings about the work to be done is a daunting task. With many teachers come many personalities, many opinions, and many preferences. Progress is neither easy nor smooth.

The school year under study was a rather frenetic one at Brandonburg High School, although some said it was a fairly typical year. Many structures were in transition. School Improvement Committees, Critical Friends Groups, and certain teaching teams, for example, were just barely past the initiation stage and were in their first year of true influence on the system. Other initiatives, such as arena scheduling and curriculum review, which were started or extended, and changes in personnel contributed to the need for flexibility and adaptation by administrators and teacher leaders.

THE TONE OF REFORM

Add to these differences and challenges the stress of educating so many students and keeping them safe day to day. At Brandonburg, the halls and grounds were constantly monitored. The school was orderly, clean, and free of significant tension among the students. Students moved freely about the halls and there was an atmosphere of relaxed freedom about the school. The two security professionals adopted a friendly, respectful attitude toward the students and were generally well respected in return. Matters of student discipline were shared by three deans of students, by teaching teams, and by assistant principals. Parents were contacted and included in discipline matters. This generally orderly atmosphere did not eliminate all problems, however. With almost 2,000 students in the building, disagreements and code of conduct violations inevitably arose. Not all classes proceeded and concluded with clockwork precision. Students were sometimes uncooperative and disrespectful, and teachers were not always successful in their efforts to provide instruction. A sting operation and resultant drug bust, which involved eight student drug dealers, made local headlines and, for a time, forced the school to address publicly the shadier side of student life at Brandenburg.

THE TENSIONS OF REFORM

Friedman (1997) suggested that from a learning perspective, the challenge for school reformers is creating "conditions in which opponents to change will be open to experimentation and the advocates of change learn to appreciate resistance as an opportunity to rigorously test their own ideas" (p. 360). In almost every case, the new policies and practices at Brandonburg were seen favorably by some staff members and viewed unfavorably by others, creating a dialogue or debate between proponents on one side and critics on the other.

At least four core tensions stood out. First, teachers struggled with the balance between teacher autonomy and preferred practices. Although choice was identified as a corporate value, some teachers doubted their right to follow their own preferences in matters of curriculum and scheduling. Second was an unresolved tension about discipline-based or interdisciplinary instruction. This concern underlay numerous concerns, such as emphasis on process over content, on more interactive teaching strategies and less directive approaches; worries that subject integration could results in some disciplines controlling and overwhelming other disciplines; a belief that background skills and knowledge cannot be as effectively developed in interdisciplinary activities; and a doubt that students can be successful on subject-based proficiency tests if they spend a lot of time on interdisciplinary work. Third, a certain discontent or dissatisfaction existed about teacher work profiles. Here the tension stemmed from a debate about what the job of teaching entailed and just how varied duties and responsibilities could become before parity and equity among teachers were threatened. There was resentment and jealousy when significant differences in workload were perceived. Fourth, the change process was demanding on everyone. Those who were trying to bring changes about were often consumed by the time requirements and drained by the battles that must be fought. Those who were resistant to change were filled with frustration and anxiety, weary of the struggle to conserve and protect cherished practices.

Such an atmosphere stands ripe for affectively charged conflicts in which threats to personal or group identities, norms, and values begin to cloud and disrupt necessary discussions about the substance of important issues. The potentially negative outcomes to poorly managed conflicts include lower achievement in students as well as high stress and reduced self-efficacy in teachers and students (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). In fact, "very high levels of stress due to intense conflict results in consideration of fewer alternatives, rigidity, reduction in dimensionality of thinking and increased tendencies to perceive threat and to use power" (Walton, 1969, as cited in De Dreu & Van de Vlirt, 1997, p. 13). When participants grow frustrated and weary, emotions can run high. Affective conflict can predominate within disagreements, overshadowing the facts and realities of the situation. Open and honest communication falters and decision quality suffers as a result. No doubt, excessive conflict is to be avoided (De Dreu & Van de Vlirt, 1997).

Still, the controversy at Brandonburg had the potential to fuel school improvement efforts. Brandonburg's leaders understood that these debates about curricular content, pedagogy, and the nature of teacher work held transformational possibilities. The challenge was to encourage cooperation without squelching controversy all together. The hope was to nurture a

dynamic school culture within which sustained engagement with ideas might move participants toward consensus about, and affective acceptance of, the various improvement efforts.

MAXIMIZING COOPERATION AND MANAGING COMPETITION

Maintaining a constructive level of conflict requires not only skill but also an open, respectful attitude. Many teachers are uncomfortable with any level of conflict and prefer isolation to the tensions involved in joint work. Faculty members need carefully structured forums as they begin to develop new norms of practice. Organizational systems can help overcome potential barriers to cooperation through attention to cultural norms, structural supports, and organizational policies (Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). Cultural norms can facilitate constructive controversy by encouraging parties to see controversy as a normal, indeed necessary, dynamic within their daily interactions. Norms that acknowledge and value the open expression of diverse points of view are more apt to encourage opportunities to review, critique, inquire into, experiment with, analyze and investigate these ideas. When these activities happen within a context that also accentuates participants' common interests and goals, individual and organizational growth can flourish. Structural supports may include creating greater perceived and actual interdependence across and within organizational levels. Formal policies must demonstrate an expectation of cooperative behavior on the part of organizational participants, but means must also be available to respond to breaches of trust (Coleman, 1990). Leaders should pay deliberate attention to organizational culture, structures, and policies in fostering an organizational climate conducive to constructive controversy. Some of the supports in place at Brandonburg are described in the following sections.

CULTURAL NORM OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The right of teachers to choose their own methods of instruction was an important consideration to many teachers at Brandonburg. There were prominent and well-respected teachers at the school who had not implemented team teaching, assessment by exhibition, cooperative learning, or other Coalition-related practices, and they were under no requirement by the school administration to move in this direction. Some of these teachers believed, however, that certain instructional methods seen as sympathetic to Coalition principles received undo recognition and endorsement from school administrators. These teachers saw an inappropriate bias toward teaching methods that featured group work and

independent study, and a rejection of traditional methods of direct instruction. They feared that the balance between traditional instructional approaches and reform-based methods was too heavily weighted on the reform side. One teacher described the tension this way:

> I don't want to say to you here every classroom should be formed like [my] classroom, but sometimes I get the feeling that there are people who are saying, "I want to clone everything the way the reform model works." I don't think that works in our high school.

The effect of these feelings among the staff was a kind of polarization. It was an informal dichotomy, which the staff freely acknowledged, and which was discussed openly and passionately. A large number of teachers suggested that this polarization was a clear product of Brandonburg's school reform efforts. As one teacher said, "We have a fissure in the staff. There are those that are looked at as the in-people and those who are the out-people; or the white hats and the black hats."

The Role of Leaders

These opposing positions made open discussion risky. School leaders at Brandonburg attempted to foster the necessary climate of safety, encouraging participants to see issues from a range of perspectives and worked to integrate contradictory views. Facilitative leaders, according to Conley and Goldman (1994), create and manage tensions to "keep the school in motion [and] keep the culture actively reflective. ... Facilitation promotes, not a 'feel good' culture, but one characterized by dilemmas that require constant resolution to keep the school supple" (Firestone & Louis, 1999, p. 315). Brandonburg's principal spoke to the diversity of opinions represented on his faculty:

> I don't expect that 120 plus staff members are all going to have the same ideas about educational philosophies. It wouldn't be rational to think that we would all think the same or believe the same. To some degree, inherently, there's going to be some discontinuity in terms of how we think as a staff because there are too many of us. Some people think we should have tracking, we should serve these elite kids and get them ready. Other people think we should be more democratic and they can learn just as well. You're not going to solve that.

To maximize the positive benefits of conflict, principals and teachers should lift up a vision of the school or classroom that inspires cooperation toward

group goals that are shared by all. Leaders should find ways to acknowledge and reinforce the interdependence of all organizational participants in meeting those goals, frequently reminding individuals of their vital contributions. They must also set the tone for acceptable behavior and take the initiative in inhibiting behaviors that are likely to lead to destructive conflict. The following field notes provide an example of how Brandonburg's principal leaders regularly facilitate open discussion among the faculty, encouraging a spirit of cooperation within the context of collective problem solving around potentially divisive concerns. The exercise here described took place during the first faculty meeting of the year. Its intent was to gain consensus on proper use of Prime Time, a school wide time for teacher collaboration built into Brandonburg's master schedule during the eighth period of everyday. The Prime Time idea, described in more detail later in this article, was being criticized by some community members as a poor use of teacher time. Brandonburg's principal shared his concerns, saying, "The staff will have to prove its value over the course of this school year." He also mentioned that the end of the day was not the ideal time for staff development, and wondered whether it was more "poop time than prime time." Nonattendance by some staff members and the appropriate remedy for that nonattendance was an important issue to be addressed.

> We entered the cafeteria where the meeting was taking place. Following introductions and announcements, an assistant principal divided the faculty into their school improvement teams, asking them to respond to several questions. The principal referred to the process as "norming," explaining that the appropriate use of Prime Time had become an issue of concern for many. He said were they to be successful in protecting this daily opportunity for teacher planning and collaboration, they would have to prove its worth to skeptics. The provocations presented to the entire group included, "What un-anticipated events might occur that would demand our attention during Prime Time?"; "What is appropriate for us to do during Prime Time?"; and "What is not appropriate for us to do during Prime Time?" Teacher participation varied. Some teachers contributed freely, some reluctantly, and some seemed to be detached, uninter-ested, and anxious to be released. Teacher responses included unanticipated events such as late busses, parents showing up without an appointment, other meetings, new enrollees, students stopping by without an appointment, extracurricular meetings or coaching obligations, and power failure. Other more appropriate activities for Prime Time included returning phone calls, department meetings, talking with other teachers about specific students, team planning, school improvement team meetings, copying papers, tutoring,

mentoring, and Critical Friends group meetings. The discussions about inappropriate uses for Prime Time went to activities such as doing things for which you receive supplemental pay, bad attitudes, leaving early, sarcasm, and personal business. Following the small group discussions, representatives reported their results to the whole, as the assistant principal recorded the items, noting overlap as well as unique suggestions, in an effort to reach consensus on acceptable and unacceptable Prime Time alternatives. Points of contention included returning phone calls, extracurricular meetings or coaching obliga-tions, and copying papers, given that the purpose of Prime Time was teacher collaboration on behalf of teaching and learning. The principal suggested these should be held to a minimum, reminding teachers of the need to demonstrate the worth of Prime Time as a legitimate means to improving instructional practices.

This norming process is just one of the many tools employed at Brandonburg as a means to expose conflicts and move discussion toward productive outcomes. Brandonburg teachers regularly received exposure to, or explicit instruction in, such discourse tools.

Fostering Dissent and Encouraging Dialogue

Principals and teachers can make use of constructive conflict as an important process through which they identify, extract, and combine the diverse skills, abilities and perspectives within the group to produce high quality decisions. By engaging in cognitive debate, leaders gain a more thorough understanding of the rationale underlying their decisions. The presence of open expression and the tolerance of diverse viewpoints may also have symbolic significance for team members, suggesting to them that the decision making process is fair and adaptive. By entering into the debate, individual team members gain an opportunity to shape the final decision in a way that accommodates their own interests.

The trick to reaping the benefits of controversy is to maintain conflict at some optimal level and to keep participants' responses appropriate and productive. Conflict avoidance leaves a persistent undercurrent of tension that saps the organization's energy and enthusiasm. On the other hand open conflicts handled badly can lead to ongoing hostility and animosity among participants and high levels of stress that ultimately produce rigid thinking (De Dreu & Van De Vliert, 1997). Suppressing minority dissent may reduce creativity and innovation and may break down individuality and independence (De Dreu & Van de Vlirt, 1997). Suppressing conflict to avoid more active confrontation may actually lead to escalation of the

conflict in the longer run (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). Given all this, organizations that value continuous learning are smart to foster dissent as a necessary and desirable part of organizational life (De Dreu & De Vries, 1997).

One characteristic of the institutional culture at Brandonburg stood out: Not a single teacher reported fear of retribution or censure as a result of their objections or dissent. Even teachers who were critical of the administration demonstrated a degree of trust and respect that allowed them to feel secure while expressing opposition. Teachers who were unhappy about the school's priorities were articulate and straightforward with their complaints. They seemed to have no fear of facing repercussions as a result of their protests. One such teacher explained:

> I know there is a part of [the principal] that respects me, but he wishes that I'd be quiet, because I make his life difficult. I went twenty-five years and never wrote a letter of protest to my administrator, and I've written probably thirty in the last two years. The last one was seven or eight pages.

Teachers who considered themselves as part of the counterculture acknowledged that open discussion and a freedom of expression were still secure within the high school atmosphere, giving credit to the principal and other school leaders for maintaining a dialogue. An atmosphere of academic freedom characterized the school. Said a teacher,

> One of the things that I'm really impressed with as I talk to other people is the freedom to experiment here. As I travel around and talk to other schools or in coursework or something, I'll tell people what we've tried and what we've done and they look and say, "How did you ever pull that off?"

Many teachers indicated that leaders encouraged them to present their thoughts and to try new approaches in their classrooms. In many cases, it was the teacher who introduced an initiative; in other cases suggestions came from a committee or a school administrator. In all cases, the cultural norm of academic freedom created an openness whereby new ideas were welcomed, indeed, encouraged. For the most part, participants expected that differences would be resolved within the natural course of events.

STRUCTURAL SUPPORTS FOR CONSTRUCTIVE CONTROVERSY

Brandonburg High School encouraged cooperation and collective problem solving through administrative advisory groups and formal school improvement committees. These organizational structures encouraged deeper ownership of the school improvement effort by teachers, fostered leadership skills within the faculty, and created an organizational culture that valued the perspectives of teachers, even when these perspectives conflicted with one another. The leadership at Brandonburg was willing to suspend surface consensus and risk discord to encourage changes of habit on a broader scale. Faculty responsibilities were redefined, shifting focus out beyond classrooms and requiring teachers to value different sorts of activities and to build different kinds of work relationships.

School Improvement Committees

The school improvement activities and resulting relationships placed teachers at a new vantage point from which to view their classroom work. They provided teachers with fresh perspectives on the responsibilities that comprised their teaching practice, a perspective not guaranteed to be happy, friendly, or cooperative. Each faculty member was required to serve on a School Improvement Committee, based on personal choice. Choices included Student Achievement; Teacher Roles and Responsibilities; Arena Scheduling; Attendance; Student Success and Discipline; and School and Community. The committees were made up primarily of teachers, but they also included administrators, parents, students, and board members. The School Improvement Committees became an important mechanism in decision making. There was a growing expectation among some teachers that all significant decisions should be reviewed by the standing School Improvement Committees. One teacher stressed the importance of this kind of participation, saying, "Getting teacher input on decisions is key. We don't just make a decision quickly around here, because if it affects teachers they need to have input."

The advantage of a committee is that, in the inclusion of many people, the base of ideas is broadened, but this also means that there are multiple opinions to consider. One committee member elaborated:

> There are so many different opinions on the topics that we're discussing, and we've got some pretty strong people on that committee. For instance, we've gone around and around about the number of credits required for graduation. Some people think we should have 24 credits. To do that you're going to have to create new courses. Do we have staffing? Do we want to create new courses? Others say, "No, 21 credits." Then you have turf issues. "I want to go to 24 credits, but don't mess with my program." There's a lot of politicking on these subjects.

Increasing teacher-to-teacher interaction has the potential to make the politics of the school more visible, as new aspects of school and classroom life are legitimately open to scrutiny, debate, and decision. Administrators at Brandonburg were prepared to wait for committees to define their own path, exerting influence only indirectly. One teacher noted:

> You'll see an administrator on every school improvement team, not as a team leader, but just working on the team. Sometimes they are used as a resource. When we need to know how to go about doing something, that's the person we ask. Other times he'll be a worker just like the rest of the team. I think that's one key element right there.

The principal situated himself to stay informed, to talk through possibilities with influential players in the school, and to instigate redirection through the structures he helped to create.

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Primetime

One of the strongest and earliest initiatives by Brandonburg High School to encourage regular teacher contact was a program known as Primetime. Originally a weekly late start for students, designed to facilitate staff development, Primetime Wednesday was a successful and popular venture with both students and teachers. After a new principal assumed leadership at the high school, Primetime Wednesday became simply Primetime. The late start became an early dismissal, and the weekly time for teacher collaboration became a daily event. The high school student day ended at 2:00 p.m., after seven teaching periods. The eighth period of the day was set aside for teachers to meet with students, with parents, with school improvement committees, with Critical Friends Groups, or to work on other collaborative projects.

To contain conflict, teachers and administrators may be inclined to reserve joint deliberations for those arenas in which agreement is most likely, arenas that may have only marginal significance for the lives of either students or teachers. This was not the case at Brandonburg. Discussion and debate was often freewheeling during Primetime. Creating opportunities for greater teacher contact and connection may lead teachers to pursue new courses of action and support one another in the attempt to advance the prospects for students' success, even if these activities are controversial.

Arena Scheduling

The accomplishments of the Arena Scheduling Committee drew praise from many teachers. The former computer-based approach to scheduling was replaced with an arena scheduling process that allowed students to select their own courses and to choose which teachers they would prefer to teach those courses. The master schedule included both single-blocked and double-blocked periods; courses which featured either independent research or which featured lecture; opportunities to take advanced-placement courses or courses offered through post-secondary options at the university. The arena scheduling process gave students as much input in course selection as possible.

The approach was similar to what many of the Brandonburg teachers experienced in college, where students were relatively sure about the final form of their schedule at the time that their schedule was constructed. Students walked into the gymnasium and drew cards for each of their courses. If there were conflicts, they settled them before leaving the gym. In a large school like Brandonburg, arena scheduling distributed some of the responsibility for guiding students toward appropriate courses, easing the pressure on the guidance department, and allowing classroom teachers to share in the advising process. As one teacher described it:

> Arena scheduling was a plea from the guidance department and administration, saying what we're doing is not working, it's a mess and we need help fixing it. The poor guidance counselors, I don't know how they did it. We looked at records from last year. In the first six weeks of school there were 2,000 schedule changes.

Most important, however, arena scheduling was a way of operationalizing the school's commitment to choice. The intent was to allow students to take responsibility for their own decisions and then, on the basis of those decisions, hold them accountable for the consequences: Says one staff member, "The arena scheduling has really cemented choice with the kids. If you give kids informed choices, they're going to make good choices and then you can hold them accountable for their choices."

The Arena Scheduling Committee involved the entire faculty in resolving problems as they arose. One teacher not serving on this committee explained:

> It's gotten better and better and better. Whatever they invent, they bring it back to us and say, "Okay, now what have we done wrong? What do you see that we left out?" They create it, and they're trying to

fix it, but they don't want it to just be theirs, they want a lot of involvement from us, too.

A committee member added:

> The teachers as a whole were instrumental in developing the process. We only have two guidance counselors on the team, so guidance came to us with the problem, and then we sat down and figured out how to make it work. It was just a goal of all of us.

Such innovation, in the face of a fairly complex operational task, connotes a substantial degree of conflict efficacy. School life allowed time for gradual consideration of alternatives. Teachers chose a response to the scheduling dilemmas and proceeded, working out the kinks as they went. They perceived their own goal of increasing students' choices as compatible with the guidance staff's goal of improving efficiency in the master scheduling process. Both groups were dependent on the other's thinking as they struggled to arrive at a workable solution. Teachers across the school recognized and celebrated the outcome. In this case, constructive controversy resulted in a high quality solution.

Despite the success of a change process that led to arena scheduling, some teachers were nonetheless stressed by the pace of change. One teacher reported that so many voices were raised in the School Improvement Committee process that it was difficult to get a sense of direction. She said, "I'm about as rebellious, independent, and stubborn as anyone could possibly be, and yet I actually think I might prefer an autocratic system if it made sense at this point to the sheer chaos that we have now." This teacher's characterization of a school in "chaos" speaks to the need for additional training in the attitudes and communication skills required of participants within Brandonburg's new structures. Once these skills are in place, debate can become a more positive element within the school's culture for all participants (Tschannen-Moran et al., 2000).

POLICIES DEMONSTRATING AN EXPECTATION OF COOPERATION

Collaborative relationships enable a school to take advantage of differences and use them as strengths (Barot & Raybould, 1998). Learning to appreciate and make constructive use of the different perspectives and experiences of various organizational actors helps to create a context where trust and respect are cultivated rather than depleted. Respect and trust then become the foundation upon which future collaborative experiences are built.

Professional development and instructional policies at Brandonburg High School encourage collaboration. Brandonburg's principal seemed to recognize that conflict might be a necessary antecedent to institutionalizing new habits of school life. He saw dialogue and debate as crucial to the change process. The principal both enabled and provoked change by asking challenging questions such as, "Why are you teaching that? How do you know it's good? What are students supposed to know? Should it only be the teacher who determines whether or not a course is offered in a single or double block?" Teachers grew to feel more comfortable with these kinds of questions over time, and were less likely to see them as a personal attack.

Critical Friends Groups

Critical Friends Groups at Brandonburg represented an aggressive strategy aimed at reducing teacher isolation and increasing teachers' willingness to critique their own and each other's work. Their purpose was to provide an intimate setting for professional growth and personal support. Members of Critical Friends Groups were encouraged to use one another as sounding boards for their thoughts and ideas. Creating opportunities where peers learn from one another and where practice is "deprivitized" represents for many the ideal school culture (Firestone & Louis, 1999, p. 314). Explained one member of such a group:

> [The purpose of] Critical Friends is to improve my individual classroom practice. In order to do that, you have the opportunity to try something, to discuss it with your colleagues, to get input. But the whole goal of it is improving my classroom practice. I'm documenting what I'm doing on a daily basis, so I can look back.

Critical Friends Groups also helped to initiate new teachers into the school culture. At Brandonburg, new teachers were required to participate. Many teachers felt that participation in these small support groups was essential for developing the wide range of skills and knowledge that new teachers must have to be effective. Their peers could coach teachers as they moved through a project, constantly sharing and getting feedback. Teachers were expected to custom design their own individual improvement plans, and use their colleagues as a refining factor. The end goal of the Critical Friends Group experience was to improve student learning and performance by improving teacher skills and enhancing organizational learning. Another

teacher describes the purpose of Critical Friends Groups:

> It's teachers doing some effective inquiry, gathering data, and trying to make improvements in their practice in an arena where there's support by colleagues as opposed to in isolation. I'm documenting what I'm doing on a daily basis so I can look back. Critical Friends has provided me with a network of people that can help me refine my ideas. It may be someone's professional opinion or ideas. It's just another way for you to say, "Oh, I didn't see it that way."

Even the name of these groups connotes an acceptance of conflict within a context of cooperation. Constructive criticism is often painful, and yet, as friends and colleagues challenged each other to a standard of performance, they also supported each other in meeting that standard. A teacher elaborates.

> With licensure moving in, could we not [use CFG to] combine improving students' learning with improving staff development? We're saying we're going to let you get super creative, work with your peers, and let them critically critique what you're doing. The end result is two-fold. It's to improve student learning and performance, and it's also to improve each one of our skills as teachers. A lot of people that watched last year are doing it this year. If we apply it to licensure, there won't be only an end judgment. The critique will come the whole way along. They [peers] critique you step-by-step as you are moving through a project so that you are constantly sharing and getting feedback.

Team Teaching

Another related Coalition-inspired device that was widely promoted at Brandonburg was the grouping of teachers into teaching teams. These teaching teams shared a common planning period each day, and they were responsible for a common group of students. They were designed to facilitate cross-disciplinary instruction, further the school's personalization goals, and provide personal and professional support for the team members.

Teaming presented advantages to teachers as well as to students. Teachers appreciated the personal and professional support that resulted from being a member of a team. From one early career teacher:

> The number one important professional development experience I had was the interdisciplinary team. I had only taught two years, and I

was teamed with three veteran teachers. That was a really powerful professional development experience.

Another teacher offered,

> We help each other, we observe each other, we team teach when we can. I can walk into her classroom and take over at any second. She can do the same for mine. Our children don't even bat an eye.

Said a third,

> Professionally, I think that it is a positive move. I have grown immensely from my first year of teaching since I've been on this team because I had three other very good teachers to model.

A common planning time was built into the master schedule for each of the teaching teams. The team members were free to structure this time as they saw fit. Sometimes the team members discussed curriculum, sometimes student management, and other times they used it for supporting and encouraging one another. These meetings were not without conflict. Individual team members often challenged one another about the appropriateness of various instructional strategies, the nuances of block scheduling, the choice of student disciplinary measures. The following field notes from the observation of a freshman team meeting capture one such ongoing debate.

> Next week the team is going to a modified double block schedule. Thomkins expressed reservations. Having tried double block scheduling with eleventh graders, he is fearful of those students who "seem bound and determined to not let it work ... those kids who flat don't want to be here. You try cooperative learning activities and they just don't want any part of it." He expressed a willingness to give it a try, but admitted to remaining skeptical. James, a former Brandonburg student whose father worked as an administrator at the school for a number of years, questioned the amount of "freedom and choices students and teachers get. I wonder sometimes what effect it's really having." Thomkins responded. "They'll never learn to deal with time responsibly if you don't give them the room to do so. We've got to find the right balance." Martin was more excited and hopeful regarding the new scheduling. She chose the mastery of teaching within a block schedule as her individual goal for her Critical Friends Group. This was her third year teaching. The team worked out a compromise. They would begin with double blocks that would leave them seeing

two groups of students one week and the second two groups the following week. For the time being, the team would also retain Friday's on the present schedule in order to see all four groups "to touch base."

Close physical proximity, combined with regularly scheduled planning meetings, provided time and space to work through these sorts of disagreements.

THE EMPLOYMENT OF CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

Brandonburg's school leaders took pride in the school district's identification with innovation and ground-breaking ideas. Complete eradication of disagreement was never a stated goal at Brandonburg High School. Indeed, the school principal valued a certain amount of debate, and the school superintendent assumed a role as a deliberate destabilizing force within the district. The superintendent described his role in the district and within the change process as intentionally antagonistic.

> My perception of how the community sees me is a quality-control individual who's trying to raise the standard, trying to create some dissonance in order to make things happen. I think I was a prod, an irritant to people that were very comfortable in what they were doing. I might be a participant in the discussion, but probably not even too much of that, other than to be in the bully pulpit and say we've got to do something different with our kids because we're not meeting their needs. The building principals are crucial to carrying that rhetoric to reality. I see my role as talking about goals and when we are not where we ought to be, being an antagonist, creating dissonance in the structure that would allow them to do things differently.

"Brandonburg is such a changing place," one teacher clarified. "It is never the same from week to week. Teachers' attitudes change constantly; being positive one week to being questionable another. That's one of the things I like. I don't think if it was a smooth ride, I would like it as well. I think it would get boring."

For each teacher who found the stability boring, there was a corresponding teacher who took comfort in the familiarity of established routines and practices. Teachers speculated that many of their colleagues were simply too comfortable to make a move. One teacher said, "You do what's familiar for you. The familiar way is to stand and lecture. That's the way you've been taught 16 years before you become a teacher, and to do something differently is beyond your experience." To recognize and honor

the perspectives of those less outspoken, more cautious members of the faculty, some suggested the need for more specific and structured opportunities and methods for exchange. One teacher elaborated:

> I would come up with some system of communication where the administration would let everyone know what's going on, and then everyone would have the chance to voice an opinion. There would be steps, so that if somebody had a question or an idea, they would have a place to take it, to see if it might come into fruition. They would let people know what they were thinking and then others could respond. Maybe somebody else had already done something like it or taken a class on it or read a book about it or would know some of the flaws in it.

Many teachers suggested a return to regularly scheduled faculty meetings. The School Improvement Committees at Brandonburg included all members of the faculty, but the entire faculty rarely met at the same time, in the same place, for the same purpose. A teacher said,

> I think we need to meet more as a whole staff. I think if I was principal of the school, I would probably have a time once a month when all of the staff came together. Put us down in the pit in the library, in a setting where we were all facing each other in a circle.

Institutionalized, regularly scheduled structures and arenas, such as the ones imagined by these Brandonburg teachers and administrators, have the potential to provide well-managed controversy. With attention paid to context ("in a setting where we were all facing each other in a circle"), the heterogeneity of the participants ("the whole staff"), and the availability of information ("a system of communication where the administration would let everyone know what's going on"), participants begin to feel more prepared to engage with one another and less fearful of potentially contentious dynamics.

That change had brought with it conflict was universally acknowledged at Brandenburg. Teachers differed, however, in their opinions about whether the level of conflict was invigorating or debilitating. One teacher who was stimulated by involvement in the process remarked:

> The way that I feel here is that teachers run the show. It's just another part of your day. If I don't help run the show, then someone's going to run my show, and I don't like that. I want to be part of the process. That's why I wanted to come here. Here I am pushed to think. The work, it's expected and it's a challenge.

The hope held out by both administrator and teacher leaders at Brandonburg was that the debate and challenge could sustain a creative level of tension that resulted in positive outcomes for students without wearing teachers out in the meantime.

CONCLUSIONS

To produce superior results, principals and teacher leaders must work diligently to encourage a balance between the cognitive and affective aspects of conflict. The problem is that in most cases participants' ability to stimulate conflict outstrips their knowledge of how to manage its effects (Amason & Schweiger, 1997). People often avoid conflict because they fear negative consequences, lacking the skills necessary to engage in a determined and productive manner. The teachers quoted above seem to be requesting the opportunity to learn.

School leaders can enhance the potential for creative solutions if they provide individuals a non-threatening environment within which pressures to perform are reduced (Stein, 1968, as cited in Deutsch & Coleman, 2000). Opportunities to communicate with people who may have relevant and unfamiliar ideas, within an "atmosphere that values innovation and originality, encourage the exchange of such ideas" (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000, p. 356). According to Johnson et al. (2000):

> Whether controversy results in positive or negative consequences depends on the conditions under which it occurs and how it is managed: the context within which it takes place, the heterogeneity of the participants, the information available to various members, the groups social skills and ability to engage in rational deliberations. (p. 70)

In such a context there are "no winners or losers, only the quality of the final decision matters" (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 70). It is the leader who explicitly or implicitly sets the tone as to what types of behavior will and will not be tolerated in the midst of conflict. To avoid the dysfunctional consequences of highly charged affective conflicts, disputants should provide opponents with explanations for seemingly confrontational actions, avoid threats and insults, stress underlying common values and goals, and maintain a clear focus on the cognitive aspects of the conflict. In constructive conflict, participants use their anger to solve problems rather than plan revenge, and innovation replaces self-righteous closed-mindedness.

With the addition of some explicit training in productive argumentation strategies, Brandonburg teachers might better realize the power of the very experiences they themselves structured for their students through academic exhibitions and senior thesis defenses. In following the tenants of rational deliberation, that is, generating ideas, collecting relevant information, structuring logical arguments, advancing tentative solutions based on current understandings, and keeping an open mind to alternative perspectives (Johnson et al., 2000), teachers would begin to build confidence in their ability to "use conflict to understand opposing positions, develop alternatives, and integrate apparently disparate positions" (Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1991, p. 141).

In fact, school leaders might consider implementing a more formal approach derived from a structured academic constructive controversy procedure (Johnson & Johnson, 1979, 1989, 1995). Within this process, participants take time to research a particular issue and prepare a persuasive case for their position. They present their case in some compelling and interesting way and are then given opportunity to refute the opposing position while rebutting criticisms of their own position. Participants then assume the opposing position and argue from this stance. Finally, a synthesis or integration of positions is derived from the ensuing discussions (Johnson et al., 2000). Critical Friends groups at Brandonburg already came close to realizing this approach. One can also imagine quarterly faculty meetings reserved for such activities. In the presence of the full faculty, the range of opinion and perspective would be that much broader. Here, as suggested by one Brandonburg faculty member, "If somebody had a question or an idea, they would have a place to take it."

Instituting a more formal presentation process has the capacity to influence discussions in a number of positive ways. Johnson and Johnson's (1979, 1989, 1995) process is based on cooperation and involves several theoretical assumptions. First, individuals when confronting a problem, tend to hold an initial position based on incomplete information, limited experience, and their own specific perspective. They start out confident in their conclusions. At this point, such strong positions "freeze the epistemic process" (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 68). Still, when they are challenged to present their conclusion and its rationale to others, these same participants engage in a cognitive rehearsal, which deepens their understanding of their own position. They are forced to employ various reasoning strategies on behalf of this endeavor. Next they confront differing conclusions, based on some one else's information, experiences, and perspectives. Thus, they become uncertain about their own views resulting in conceptual conflict or disequilibrium. This experience of uncertainty tends to "unfreeze the epistemic process" (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 68), motivating curiosity and an active search, first, for more information and experiences thus increasing

content, and second, to accomplish an adequate cognitive perspective and reasoning process, thus increasing validity and resolving uncertainty.

The simple act of stating the antecedents of a conflict, describing its particular features, and listing the current and potential consequences, gives people common data to tackle. Moving one step further to make written documentation a regular practice creates a public record that can be revisited as a reference to inform all future deliberation. The added benefit of such a document is the written proof that conflicts can represent opportunities for growth and improvement. In the final analysis, participants are forced to adapt their perspective and reasoning as they begin to understand and accommodate the perspective and reasoning of others. They derive a new, reconceptualized and reorganized conclusion. Again, in the words of one Brandonburg teacher, individuals test their ideas "to see if [they] might come into fruition. They let people know what they [are] thinking and then others [can] respond."

Institutionalized ground rules for deliberation can help people reframe or restructure tensions, that is, see them from new angles and through a different lens (Schon, 1983). The Annenberg Institute National School Reform Faculty has developed protocols, or structured procedures such as the Tuning Protocol and the Sticky Issue Protocol, for supporting specific interactions (Annenberg Institute, 2001). These protocols specify who may or may not speak, and for how long, as ways to support participants through potentially difficult terrain by limiting the "noise" of interruptions, diversions, and disrespectful interjections. The protocols can be adapted by the people who use them and are flexible enough to change and grow over time.

Beyond decision-making structure and process, certain specific administrative tools and roles can also help to maintain a constructive level of controversy. For example, constructive argumentation can be institutionalized through the routine designation of a devil's advocate. No important decisions are finalized before antithetical points of view are fully aired. Likewise, an institutionalized wise person, a mediator or ombudsman, if you will, could be named as the impartial investigator, helping to resolve disputes when they arise. People could function in this capacity across departments or teams or buildings, serving to add a fresh perspective from the outside.

Novel solutions, commitment, and interpersonal connections are all increased as are competencies in resolving conflict constructively (Johnson et al., 2000). "It is through controversy that individuals help each other cope with biases of closed-mindedness, simplistic thinking, inadequate evaluation of information, and unwarranted commitment to a position" (Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1991, p. 141). With practice, participants hone their arguments, improving the logical and increasing the evidence supporting them. It is the clash of ideas and the resultant doubts and uncertainties as well as the corresponding interpersonal support and encouragement that ultimately lead to divergent, creative thinking (Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1991). These kinds of skills and dispositions were under development, fueling the school improvement efforts at Brandonburg High School.

Conflict is present within our schools whether we like it or not. Too often educators feel they must present a united front in the face of students who challenge adult authority, administrators who challenge faculty authority, and the larger community already quick to question the school's institutional authority. Even those teachers and administrators who seek to change traditional norms of practice may be inclined to extend unconditional support rather than to challenge one another, yet again (Uline & Berkowitz, 2000). Educators must find ways to legitimize critique and controversy within organizational life. The rules of courtesy and civility do not necessarily run counter to criticism. It is important to find ways to maintain the former without silencing the latter. Controversy can assume a valued and accepted role in the life of schools.

Notes

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