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A religious-secular workshop in Israel

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Dispute resolution and multi-party dialogue

A religious-secular workshop in Israel

Danny Crossman and Jim Cyngler

Introduction

There has been much written and discussed in mediation and negotiation circles over the past 20 years in relation to 'interest based' and 'problem solving' models for dispute resolution. Much of this learning has concentrated on the methodology for establishing the interests and needs of those involved in the dispute. However, little or no attention has been paid within the problem solving methodology to issues such as how to:

- establish or re-establish trust between people in conflict;
- clarify and prioritise interests and needs by each individual or group involved in conflict;
- ensure that those in conflict are able to hear and understand matters discussed in a way that reflects the manner and intent of the other; and
- improve fundamentally the nature of the conflict interactions between those involved, so as to create an environment conducive to the exploration of interests and needs within a problem solving environment.

Consequently, we, the partners of Concord Conflict Management (Concord), have developed a dispute resolution model that recognises the importance of developing an environment in which participants can improve their conflict interactions. This model enables participants to talk constructively and engage in problem solving where they see this as meeting their needs. The Concord model can be utilised in two-party or multi-party disputes.

Why we conducted a workshop in Israel

We felt that it was important to test aspects of this model in a multi-party environment of intensive and sustained conflict. The religious-secular conflict situation in Israel gave us such an opportunity. We were invited to conduct a workshop using our model in Israel in June 1999.

What we aimed to achieve

Our objective in designing a workshop within the religious-secular conflict in Israel was to model a process that would enable individuals and groups to engage in constructive dialogue and problem solving. The nature of this conflict touches the participants in many aspects of their daily lives. It is a conflict in which the participants have heartfelt views and experiences. The conflict appears multi-dimensional — personal, religious, political and spiritual — and it operates simultaneously at individual, group, national and international levels.

Reflecting these points, the context and rationale for the workshop was to:

(1) recognise the difficulty the various players and parties within the religious-secular conflict in Israel have in engaging in constructive dialogue and problem solving and to assist them in this regard;

(2) develop the ability of the participants to communicate openly and effectively and to solve problems together as an integral part and prerequisite for ➢

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➢ resolving the conflict;

(3) design and model a process that can be used by people as individuals or in groups to move from a situation of intense conflict and poor communication to a state of constructive dialogue and problem solving; and

(4) model key facilitative stages of the Concord multi-party dialogue resolution process.

How we organised the workshop

We were invited to conduct the workshop by Besod Siach, an Israeli not-for-profit organisation. Besod Siach's primary function is the development of dialogue in situations of conflict within Israel. Besod Siach is a membership based organisation, consisting of psychologists, lawyers, educators and other professionals. Many of their members are trained facilitators who regularly host dialogue groups.

In organising the workshop with Besod Siach we laid down three preferred criteria.

1. The workshop was to be limited to 20 participants. We felt that having more than 20 people participating may have limited the involvement of the participants and made the management of the group somewhat unwieldy.

2. The participants were, as far as possible, to reflect the broadest range of religious and secular perspectives and residential geographical locations. The group was to reflect as closely as was possible a microcosm of the larger Israeli Jewish society.

3. The participants would be able to speak in English even though it may not have been their primary language. This criterion was inserted for our own convenience, as we were unable to speak Hebrew.

Participants

There were 17 participants in the workshop — 14 women and three men, some of them members of Besod Siach. Professionally, there were psychologists, organisation development consultants, a government representative (from the Department of Justice), family mediators, a cross-cultural community mediator, an architect, an educator, a lawyer and a counsellor.

Participants came from many areas across Israeli society, from various cities, from the countryside and from the settlements on the West Bank. The workshop was held at a college near Tel Aviv in June 1999.

Workshop agenda

The agenda for the workshop was divided into the four stages of our conflict resolution model.

1. Creating an environment in which participants can talk constructively about:
- introductions and expectations for the day;
- icebreakers (a personal experience); and
- developing behavioural ground rules.

2. Clarifying concerns about:
- relationship of individuals to the conflict situation;
- each like group's position in relation to the conflict issue; and
- what each like group would want to tell the others about what would facilitate constructive communication.

3. Developing a shared understanding, in order to:
- hold cross-group discussions on what is the hardest thing about having dialogue with other groups; and
- ensure each other's concerns are heard and understood.

4. Conclusions:
- what factors help or hinder good dialogue;
- how participants can utilise this model in their own situations.

An explanation of how each section was conducted and the outcomes of each are detailed in the rest of this article.

Creating an environment in which participants feel able to interact

Our first goal was to work with the participants to develop an environment in which they felt able to talk to each other in a reasonably relaxed and constructive manner. This step was crucial, recognising that the participants, although willing attendees, had come to the workshop knowing that there would be others with different beliefs and strongly held views.

We realised that if we could not get ➢

➢ the participants to a stage where they had the confidence to exchange opinions and feelings with each other, then we would be unlikely to gain useful feedback from them on our model for achieving constructive dialogue.

We commenced this step by introducing ourselves and our aims for the workshop and then asking each participant to introduce themselves to the group and talk about where they came from and what their hopes were for the day's session. Participants were seated at tables in a horseshoe format with the facilitators at the front. We sought the participants' permission to conduct the workshop in English, as foreshadowed in the invitations to the workshop, and this was agreed.

Participants' hopes for the workshop

The participants each spent some time explaining their background, what brought them to this workshop and what they hoped to gain from it. Quite a broad range of personal goals for the day emerged from this discussion.

The most common response was from participants wanting 'to share, clarify and learn about a new model, to learn something new and gain a deeper understanding'.

Other participants wanted 'to learn about my feelings and conflict', to 'reconcile feelings and thoughts' and learn 'ways of survival in conflict'.

Icebreaker outcomes — positive and negative recent experiences

The second part of the stage of creating an environment conducive to constructive discussion was an 'icebreaker'. This was designed as a personal experience for participants so that they would interact with others in a way that was personal but safe, and which would break down some barriers and free people up to feel more confident about talking openly with the whole group.

We asked the participants to form into groups of four people, with others they did not know so well. They were to tell the others in their group about the best or the worst thing that had happened to them lately. Each group was asked to report back on the discussion, and we would see if there were any common experiences.

The icebreaker worked well in that the participants were able to form small groups with others they did not know and talk with them fairly easily. This exercise relaxed the group a lot, and provided a good starting atmosphere for moving on into more difficult issues.

The small groups reported back to the main group a range of interesting outcomes of their discussions, including points such as:

- 'I was initially apprehensive about revealing personal experiences, but soon felt more comfortable.'
- 'We couldn't separate the good from the bad experiences — we realised that all experiences contain both positive and negative aspects.'
- 'We shared common experiences of the stresses of life, mid-life issues and professionalism.'
- 'Our discussion moved from professional life to traditions and then to our history.'
- 'My ability to listen and have a new experience was positive; my needing space was negative.'

Ground rules — proposed by participants

Now that the participants were ready to talk openly and constructively with each other, we checked with the group what ground rules, if any, they would like to have operating for our discussions during the day. We left it up to the participants to determine what ground rules they wished to use since we wanted them to own the discussion.

There was a wideranging discussion about the need for rules and which were appropriate, with the following initially being suggested:

- 'No shouting or personal insults';
- 'One person speaking at a time';
- 'Clarify why people may not be listening';
- 'Be as brief as possible'; and
- 'Respect confidentiality'.

But as discussion continued, there was less inclination to begin by setting rules, with the following suggestions being made:

- 'Rules should be set according to the norms of the participants';
- 'Ground rules can inhibit discussion';
- 'Let's set the ground rules as we need them'; and
- 'The rules are not as important as the dialogue necessary to devise them'.

On this last point, the group decided to get on with the dialogue and worry about rules if we needed them. As it turned out, beyond the general discussion about rules, we didn't need to firmly set any.

How individuals defined themselves within the religious-secular spectrum

In order to begin work on the difficulty of dialogue between religious and secular groups within Israel, we thought it would be useful for the participants to identify which groups were represented in this workshop. We assumed that participants would place themselves within some discrete, identifiable grouping within the secular-religious spectrum which would be useful for the rest of the discussions.

Participants were willing to undertake this step, and as we worked around the table each explained where they saw themselves within the spectrum. However, participants did not fit neatly into discrete groupings but rather each had an individual description of their position, including the following:

- 'National religious — affinity with Haredi';
- 'Religiously committed woman';
- 'Believer — different from other religious groups';
- 'Non-orthodox religious';
- 'Believer with personal rules';
- 'Secular who keeps the Sabbath';
- 'Secular — and religious about it';
- 'Jewish — but not a believer';
- 'Agnostic';
- 'Atheist'; and
- 'Searching for my place'.

Others preferred to consider this issue with these comments:

- 'What is personal compared with group identity?'
- 'How do we define religious?'
- 'Everyone is multicultural.'

Clarifying concerns

We were trying to enable groups at different points of the religious-secular spectrum to talk to each other constructively. We ➢

'Participants felt that they could agree on differences in small groups that they couldn't agree on in the larger groups. They concluded that this was because in the small groups relationships are developed which have not been formed in the whole group. '

➢ believe that before this can occur, each group needs to be clear about what its own position is, for there is often confusion or at least lack of clarity within groups, and even individuals, about their own position.

Therefore, the next stage in our process was for the participants to form into groups of fairly like-minded people. We recognised that they were all individuals, but asked them to break into groups with those whom they felt they had the most in common within the spectrum, based on what they had learnt about each other so far today. The participants managed to do this, forming four groups of varying sizes.

Their task was to decide as a like group what they would most like to tell the others about what would help achieve constructive dialogue. They were to focus on their own group and agree on the group's concerns. The small groups worked on this for some time then reported back to the whole group.

They said that at first they didn't want to talk about the problems between them; instead, they spoke about common denominators. This helped to achieve successful interactive discussion. They talked about clarification of the individual's belief systems compared with clarification of the group's belief systems, and wondered what the consequences of this were.

They thought that they needed knowledge of the people before moving to dealing with the problems; that is, knowledge of people's belief systems. They wanted to 'clarify what each of us is about before moving to solutions'. They wondered how far they could go and still be one group — how important is it for each sub-group to remain in one group?

Secular group

The group of secular Jews felt that, for the Jewish people and Israeli society, 'there is a problem of self identification'. 'What is it to be a secular Jew?' 'Is Judaism a culture, a nation — what is it?' In particular, they wanted the freedom to choose and define the identity of Jewishness for themselves: 'more freedom means a greater chance of staying within the one (Jewish) community in Israel'.

Secular/religious group

This group, containing participants who felt partly secular and partly religious, wanted to talk about 'the degrees of the definition of belonging — how essential is it?' That is, should one use self definition, others' definition of where one belongs, formal definition or 'behavioural definition'?

Orthodox group

The orthodox group discussed the complexity of their situation: 'life without doubt', 'asking questions compared with a life with rules', 'trying to get agreement on ground rules', 'moving from National Religious Party position and values', and 'moving from seeing things simply to seeing things as much more complex'.

National Religious Party (mostly Orthodox)

The group of National Religious Party supporters explored who they were before they felt they could say anything to the others. 'We found ourselves to be a very complex group'. 'We need ongoing dialogue, both internally and externally.'

Summary

The whole group summarised their conclusions about this stage of the process as:

- 'The need to establish ground rules to enable dialogue.'
- 'The need for ongoing internal and external discussion and clarification.'
- 'The need to clarify who we are so that others can understand us.'
- 'Moving into small groups results in lessening of the total group by weakening individualities.'
- 'There is a balance between the need to define each small group and having a dialogue within the whole group.'

Developing a shared understanding

According to our model, the participants were now ready to discuss their views and positions with each other. The aim of this stage was to develop a shared understanding between the parties of each other's concerns and underlying interests. A shared understanding between parties ➢

➢ is necessary before they are ready to consider potential solution options.

We commenced the development of a shared understanding in small groups. The participants divided themselves into three groups, with at least two participants being from one grouping within the religious–secular spectrum and two being from a different grouping within the spectrum.

The participants were asked to explain to the other side what it was that they found difficult about having a discussion with groups from other parts of the spectrum. They were also asked to check that they understood what the other side found difficult about discussions with those from other parts of the spectrum. This would create a shared understanding within the small groups.

The participants then reconvened as a whole group and reported on their findings and experiences. One group said that they realised that the other side feels the same way as them, and has the same dilemma and inner conflict. Participants said that they tried to identify with the emotional processes on each side. They believed there was sincerity with listening and feedback.

Participants from the secular group felt that they came to the dialogue from unequal positions to the participants from the National Religious Party group. The latter believed in one truth, whereas the former were willing to consider many truths. They were unsure where to go from this situation. Participants talked about life and death issues and about staying in a different position without trying to change it.

They considered what the communication skills were that make good dialogue possible. Participants felt that they could agree on differences in small groups that they couldn't agree on in the larger groups. They concluded that this was because in the small groups relationships are developed which have not been formed in the whole group. Thus, developing relationships is a requirement for achieving productive dialogue and discussions in smaller groups help relationships to develop.

Group conclusion — what makes constructive dialogue

The whole group then considered together what factors helped establish good dialogue and what got in the way of good dialogue. This information will assist in designing future discussions between conflicting groups.

Participants concluded that factors that assisted constructive dialogue in the group setting were:

- 'Knowing others';
- 'Having smaller groups';
- 'Using our first language';
- 'The flexibility of the setting';
- 'Varying the people one worked with, the whole group structure and the activities during the sessions';
- 'Leaving out issues that we won't agree on, such as values'; and
- 'The connection between the personal and the general; moving from personal to general issues and back again during the workshop'.

The need for political correctness was the main factor identified as inhibiting dialogue, particularly in the large group.

Evaluation of the workshop process

Finally, participants evaluated the workshop by discussing aspects that worked for them and which they felt made a workshop of this type successful. Some useful comments included:

- 'Allowed us to create our own groups and define ourselves, rather than tell us which groups to be in.'
- 'Working within our own like groupings first was valuable.'
- 'Process of moving from intra-group to inter-group was a good structure.'
- 'Liked the style of asking us what we wanted at each stage, rather than dictating the agenda.'
- 'Felt we established a group dynamic, rather than just being individuals.'
- 'Helpful that the facilitators were independent of the problems, with no opinions or interests in the outcomes.'
- 'The facilitators were doing what they were teaching; their behaviour was consistent with their message.'

Session conclusion

The participant feedback confirmed our observation that these facilitative stages of the Concord dispute resolution model developed an environment in which the participants were able to improve the nature of their conflict interaction. They found that they could talk constructively and engage in problem-solving. They commented that they could not have expected to interact so positively under other facilitation and mediation models which they had previously been exposed to. Those models tended to be more directive, and there was generally hostility between the participants and a clinging to their own perspectives rather than a process of listening and developing shared understandings.

This feedback was significant since we were testing these facilitative stages of the model in a multi-party environment where participants had intense feelings about the conflict situation. In particular, key steps that were trialled successfully included:

- individuals forming themselves into like groups and clarifying among the like group members what their group concerns were ('the internal conversation'); and
- group members being supported to ensure that all individuals had the opportunity of being heard and checking that this was done.

Also, the specific approach of leaving the power with the participants was well received by them.

This workshop enabled us to trial and strengthen the facilitative stages of the Concord conflict resolution process, and to demonstrate that this process can be used to move individuals and groups from a situation of conflict and poor communication to a state of constructive dialogue and problem solving. ❖

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