

Constructive Conflict by Mary Parker Follett

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[Note: The passages here are excerpted from the full text in E. M. Fox and L. Urwick, ed., *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett* (London: Pitman, 1973), pp. 1-20. I have chosen passages to illustrate Follett's prescient understanding of constructive conflict resolution. She had a sophisticated understanding that organizational conflicts of many sorts could (and should) be negotiated through integrating the desires/interests on both sides of the conflict—ideas that were not articulated as clearly again in the management and industrial relations literature until the 1970s and 80s. An academic sidenote: recent scholars seeking to identify the processes of integrative negotiation and the psychological obstacles that often impede it have drawn on modern cognitive and social psychological insights about biases in how people read each other and the emotions that foster trust or mistrust; Follett, interestingly, draws her insights from the psychology of her day, psychoanalysis, and its theories about the person's need to fully resolve intrapsychic conflicts in order to grow and create.]

The subject I have been given for these lectures is *The Psychological Foundations of Business Administration*.... I wish to consider in this paper the most fruitful way of dealing with conflict. I should like to ask you to agree for the moment to think of conflict as neither good nor bad; to consider it without ethical prejudice; to think of it not as warfare, but as the appearance of difference, difference of opinions, of interests. For that is what conflict means—difference. We shall not consider merely the differences between employer and employee, but those between managers, between the directors at the Board meetings, or wherever difference appears.

As conflict—difference—is here in the world, as we cannot avoid it, we should, I think, use it. Instead of condemning it, we should set it to work for us. Why not? What does the mechanical engineer do with friction? Of course his chief job is to eliminate friction, but it is true that he also capitalizes friction. The transmission of power by belts depends on friction between the belt and the pulley. The friction between the driving wheel of the locomotive and the track is necessary to haul the train. All polishing is done by friction. The music of the violin we get by friction. We left the savage state when we discovered fire by friction. We talk of the friction of mind on mind as a good thing. So in business, too, we have to know when to try to eliminate friction and when to try to capitalize it, when to see what work we can make it do....

[Below she distinguishes Integrative Bargaining from what we have variously referred to as Distributive Bargaining/Value Claiming/Competing Style and from what we have called the Compromising Style...]

METHODS OF DEALING WITH CONFLICT

There are three main ways of dealing with conflict: domination, compromise and integration. *Domination*, obviously, is a victory of one side over the other. This is the easiest way of dealing with conflict, the easiest for the moment but not usually successful in the long run, as we can see from what has happened since the War.

The second way of dealing with conflict, that of *compromise*, we understand well, for it is the way we settle most of our controversies; each side gives a little in order to have peace, or, to speak more accurately, in order that the activity which has been interrupted by the conflict may go on. Compromise is the basis of trade union tactics. In

collective bargaining, the trade unionist asks for more than he expects to get, allows for what is going to be lopped off in the conference. Thus we often do not know what he really thinks he should have, and this ignorance is a great barrier to dealing with conflict fruitfully. At the time of a certain wage controversy in Massachusetts, the lowest paid girls in the industry were getting about \$8.00 or \$9.00 a week. The demand made by two of the representatives of the girls was for \$22.40 (for a minimum wage, note), obviously too great an increase for anyone seriously to think of getting at one time. Thus the employers were as far as ever from knowing what the girls really thought they ought to have.

But I certainly ought not to imply that compromise is peculiarly a trade union method. It is the accepted, the approved, way of ending controversy. Yet no one really wants to compromise, because that means a giving up of something. Is there then any other method of ending conflict? There is a way beginning now to be recognized at least, and even occasionally followed: when two desires are *integrated*, that means that a solution has been found in which both desires have found a place, that neither side has had to sacrifice anything. Let us take some very simple illustration. In the Harvard Library one day, in one of the smaller rooms, someone wanted the window open. I wanted it shut. We opened the window in the next room, where no one was sitting. This was not a compromise because there was no curtailing of desire; we both got what we really wanted. For I did not want a closed room, I simply did not want the north wind to blow directly on me; likewise the other occupant did not want that particular window open, he merely wanted more air in the room....

[Below she explains why Integration enables both the goal of maximizing joint gain in the current transaction and the goal of enabling sustainability and perceived fairness over the longer term...]

.....One advantage of integration over compromise I have not yet mentioned. If we get only compromise, the conflict will come up again and again in some other form, for in compromise we give up part of our desire, and because we shall not be content to rest there, sometime we shall try to get the whole of our desire. Watch industrial controversy, watch international controversy, and see how often this occurs. Only integration really stabilizes. But the stabilization I do not mean anything stationary. Nothing ever stays put. I mean only that that particular conflict is settled and the next occurs on a higher level.

Psychology has given us the phrase “progressive integrations”; we need also the phrase progressive differings. We can often measure our progress by watching the nature of our conflicts. Social progress is in this respect like individual progress; we become spiritually more and more developed as our conflicts rise to higher levels. If a man should tell you that his chief daily conflict within himself is—Shall I steal or not steal?—you would know what to think of his stage of development. As someone has said, “A man is known by the dilemmas he keeps.” In the same way, one test of your business organization is not how many conflicts you have, for conflicts are the essence of life, but *what* are your conflicts? And how do you deal with them? It is to be hoped that we shall not always have strikes, but it is equally to be hoped that we shall always have conflicts, the kind which leads to invention, to the emergence of new values....

[Below she explains why the strategies of conflict avoidance and of competing/defending interfere with the approach of integrative bargaining...]

...I do not say that there is no tragedy in life. All that I say is that if we were alive to its advantages, we could often integrate instead of compromising. I have a friend who annoys me in this way. She makes a statement. I say, "I don't agree with that because...." And I intend to give my reasons, but before I have a chance she says, "Well, let's not fight about it." But I had no intention of fighting.....

Wherever you have the fight-set, you are in danger of obscurities, conscious or unconscious. As long as trade unionism is a defensive movement, as long as employers' associations are defensive movements, we shall have obscurities.....

[Her Method: Revealing interests; Fractionating Issues into Sub-issues; Inventing Novel Settlement Options]

The psychiatrist tells his patient that he cannot help him unless he is honest in wanting his conflict to end. The "uncovering" which every book on psychology has rubbed into us from some years now as a process of the utmost importance for solving the conflicts, which the individual has within himself, is equally important for the relations between groups, classes, races, and nations. In business, the employer, in dealing either with his associates or his employees, has to get underneath all the camouflage, has to find the real demand as against the demand put forward, distinguish declared motive from real motive, alleged cause from real cause, and to remember that sometimes the underlying motive is deliberately concealed and that sometimes it exists unconsciously.

The first rule, then, for obtaining integration is to put your cards on the table, face the real issue, uncover the conflict, bring the whole thing into the open....

...This method of breaking up wholes is the way you deal with business problems; it is the method, which precedes business decisions....

...This is the most important word, not only for business relations, but for all human relations: not to adapt ourselves to a situation—we are all, or rather each, of too little importance to the world for that; but to take account of that reciprocal adjustment, that interactive behavior between the situation and ourselves. One test of business administration should be: is the organization such that both employers and employees, or co-managers, co-directors, are stimulated to a reciprocal activity which will give more than mere adjustment, more than an equilibrium? Our outlook is narrowed, our activity is restricted, our chances of business success largely diminished when our thinking is constrained within the limits of what has been called an either-or situation. We should never allow ourselves to be bullied by an "either-or." There is often the possibility of something better than either of two given alternatives....