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EdPA 5385
Licensure Seminar

Reflection Paper

1. Title of Exhibit: Using the ICS to Evaluate Conflict Styles as a School Administrator

2. Primary K-12 Principal Competencies Represented in This Exhibit:

3. Problem Analysis

- a. identify the elements of a problem situation by analyzing relevant information, frame issues, and identify possible causes;
- b. seek additional needed information and frame and reframe possible solutions;
- c. demonstrate conceptual flexibility;
- d. assist others in forming opinions about problems and issues.

13. Resource Allocation

- a. procure, apportion, monitor, account for, and evaluate fiscal and human materials and time resources to reach outcomes that reflect the needs and goals of the school;
- b. plan and develop the budget process with appropriate staff.

14. Sensitivity

- a. understand the concerns of others;
- b. deal tactfully with others;
- c. work with others in stressful situations or in conflict;
- d. manage conflict and obtain feedback;
- e. recognize multicultural differences;

Problem Analysis:

Mitchell Hammer says that conflict arises when we have a substantive disagreement with another person, usually leading to “heightened stress, anxiety, frustration, and even fear” (Hammer, p. 6). I believe that conflict arises in school settings when two parties disagree about a problem that the school is having: the nature of the problem, the cause of the problem, the best way to solve the problem, or whether the problem even really exists. For example, conflict often arises around the issue of class size. How many students is too many? Are large classes really a

problem? In order to reduce our class sizes, what sacrifices in other areas would we need to make? If we are only able to hire a few more teachers, in what subject areas should we hire? Teachers in different departments, as well as administrators, students, and parents, will each view a problem like this differently. A principal needs to be able to gather the right information, which includes understanding the issue from the points of view of parties who disagree with one another, as well as understanding the conflict resolution style of each party. In learning about my Accommodation style, and discovering that most other administrators display a Discussion style, I have learned that as a principal I will need to work extra hard to confront problems directly, since voicing strong opinions may not come as naturally to me as it does to others. However, on the positive side, I may be better at demonstrating conceptual flexibility, because my Accommodation style allows me to easily consider alternative meanings when faced with ambiguity.

Resource Allocation:

Scarce resources are a fact of life in almost all schools, and the competition for these resources inevitably leads to conflict, as various stakeholders disagree about how these resources should be allocated. Successfully “planning and developing the budget process with the appropriate staff” will depend in large part on the strengths and weaknesses of the predominant conflict styles of said staff. Rarely will all of the participants in such a discussion have the same conflict style, although in American schools most of the participants will use the Discussion conflict style. However, there may be other people in the room whose valid points are overlooked because of their differing conflict styles. The principal will need to be able to see past style in order to make the best decisions for the school regarding the allocation of resources.

Sensitivity:

According to Hammer , people who use the Discussion style may have difficulty in reading “between the lines”, (2002, p. 13) but as an Accommodator, I do tend to be sensitive (sometimes overly so) to the feelings of others and alert to nuances. I believe that maintaining interpersonal harmony is a strength of mine, and it is a trait that has served me well as a counselor. I am good at de-escalating crises and emotional conversations, helping people to calm down, and understanding the concerns of other people. I consider myself to be an astute observer of others, alert to their desires and pet peeves, and able to empathize with almost anyone, regardless of age, gender, or culture. I have mediated conflicts between students of different cultures, between students and teachers, between students and parents, and between parents and teachers, and have found that my Accommodating style allows me to remain relatively calm and neutral in most such situations, even as my counseling training helps me to mirror and match the cultural styles of the clients I serve.

3. Exhibit Description:

As part of the EdPA 5385 Licensure seminar, I learned that I have a conflict resolution style (Accommodating) which is not the norm among most school administrators, most of whom apparently embody the Discussion style. The purpose of this reflection is to analyze my strengths and weaknesses in this area so as to determine how I can use my conflict resolution style to be a more effective administrator. Attached are my results to the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory (ICS-IP), which I took as part of this course.

4. Sources:

In order to better understand Mitchell Hammer's model, I read his *Interpretive Guide* (Hammer, 2002), as well as a more recently published journal article (Hammer, 2005) which explains his theory in more depth and provides statistical evidence for the reliability and validity of the ICS-IP instrument. The *Interpretive Guide* provides a useful summary of the four conflict styles, including the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each, how people with various styles may view the styles of others, and which styles are predominant within specific cultural groups. From this reading I learned that my conflict style (Accommodating) is not the typical style used in North America. I have always thought of myself as somewhat conflict-avoidant, or at least as someone who is good at predicting situations in which conflict might occur; in my ideal world, everyone would just get along all of the time! In general, I do view myself as a person with whom it is easy to get along. When I am honest with myself, however, I do realize that I am often frustrated with other people, and that I use indirect methods to deal with my frustrations, which may not always be the most effective.

Some books that I have read in the past which also relate to the topic of conflict resolution are *Getting to Yes* by Fisher, Patton, and Ury (1991) and *The 8th Habit* by Steven Covey (2005). Both of these books contain a similar premise: that it is possible to negotiate win-win solutions to conflicts if the parties can truly understand one another's concerns and needs (Covey calls this "finding the third alternative", p. 186). These readings have probably reinforced my Accommodating style of conflict resolution.

5. The Four Frames of Organization:

The Structural Frame:

In our culture, the Discussion conflict style fits well with the Structural framework for analyzing problems, because the structural approach is grounded in a belief in rationality (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 44), while those with a Discussion conflict style prefer a precise, direct, fact-based approach for dealing with conflict. In organizations that are hierarchical, when conflicts arise, the conflict resolution conversation will center around how to properly follow the rules and procedures, who is responsible, how the organization might be best re-structured, and so on. Rational discussion is believed to eventually lead to the correct decision and outcome for the organization.

The Human Resources Frame:

The Human Resources frame recognizes that people and organizations each have needs, and that conflict may arise when either the employee's or the organization's needs are not being fully met. Many employers do not realize that employees' needs go beyond the need for a paycheck or benefits; employees may also try to get their needs at work met for friendship, camaraderie, purpose, meaning, power, and importance. Employers need to develop human resources policies that hire and keep the best employees for their jobs. These policies may include paying people well, promoting from within, empowering employees, and promoting diversity (Bolman & Deal, p. 135-155). Of course, these same human resources policies may cause and promote conflict, due to disagreements about pay and promotions, or misunderstandings that may occur in an increasingly diverse workplace. On this last point,

managers with an understanding of the four intercultural conflict styles may have an edge over managers who don't, because culturally competent managers can attribute employees' conflict styles to their cultural backgrounds rather than to their personalities, and they are more likely to benefit from the opinions and contributions of those with a culturally different conflict style.

The Political Frame:

The political frame is a natural choice for analyzing many conflict situations, since disagreements often arise over the allocation of resources or power. The political frame views conflicts as something of a competition, as various coalitions jockey for resources and power. In a typical school, the principal has the most power (at least in terms of position power), but that power is balanced by other coalitions such as the teachers' union or the PTA. Prior to becoming an administrator, I have generally been an employee who had more "personal power" than "position power" (Bolman & Deal, p. 194-195), but as a principal, I will need to become more comfortable with the notion of position power, and learn how I can incorporate my Accommodating style without appearing weak or lacking in power.

The Symbolic Frame:

As a person who is concerned with meaning, specifically with the meaning that employees in an organization may attribute to the actions taken by management, I prefer the symbolic framework for analyzing many situations. People within schools often interpret the same experience differently (Bolman & Deal, p. 242). For example, I work for an online charter school that is growing rapidly. For some employees, the rapid growth symbolizes personal career opportunity. For others, the growth symbolizes corporate greed. Some employees are true believers in the charter school movement and in school choice; others see this as the downfall of public education or resent the lack of unions. I believe that the senior management of the corporation which runs our school has little understanding of the symbolic frame, because they often implement policies without considering what these policies might "mean" to the people who work for the school. Some policies seem to help corporate profits while hurting specific students, thus contributing to the symbol of the "big bad corporation". As an administrator, I will take care to consider the symbolism of the actions that I take, because I believe that unintentional symbolism can lead to misunderstanding, lack of loyalty, mistrust, and lowered morale. Conflict arises when employees attribute unintended meanings to the actions of management, and much of this conflict would be unnecessary if management paid more attention to the symbolic frame.

6. Values and Beliefs:

I value peace, harmony and mutual respect in interpersonal relationships. When conflict is decided in such a way that there is a clear winner and a clear loser, I believe that the organization suffers in the long run, because the person who feels like they have lost is also likely to feel a loss in dignity, self-esteem, and loyalty to the organization. People's feelings matter, and I believe it is important to resolve conflicts in a way that minimizes hurt feelings. As stated in *Getting To Yes*, "Any method of negotiation may be fairly judged by three criteria: It should produce a wise agreement if agreement is possible. It should be efficient. And it should improve or at least not damage the relationship between the parties" (Fisher et al, p. 4). I have based my counseling style on Carl Rogers' person-centered philosophy, whereby I strive to view my clients (and colleagues) in a non-judgmental manner with unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961). As a counselor, there are times when I need to confront my clients; however, it is essential

to create a positive relationship with a client before confrontation can be effective. My values and beliefs are consistent with my Accommodating style of conflict resolution, because of my sensitivity to the feelings of others and my ability to be comfortable with ambiguity.

7. Growth/Improved Practice:

Conflict is a fact of life, and now that I understand how my conflict resolution style may differ from that of the typical school administrator, I can work to change my behaviors. For example, I can learn to be more direct, and with practice, I may become more comfortable “saying what I mean and meaning what I say” while still respecting the feelings of others. This week I experienced a conflict at work, and I directly told the person I was disagreeing with what I thought and how I felt. I tried to remain somewhat emotionally restrained, and I succeeded to some extent. However, that night I felt so bad about it that I could hardly sleep. Should I have really spoken up? If so, why did I feel so bad about it later, even though I was (and still am) convinced that I was right? Would a different, more indirect, approach to solving the conflict have worked better or made me feel better? I plan to become more aware of these situations and to intentionally practice some new conflict resolution styles, while still remaining true to my own values and beliefs.

References

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