

Third Party Consultation

Ron Fisher, Ph.D.
International Peace and Conflict Resolution
School of International Service
The American University
c. 1978 Rev. 1992, 2004

Introduction:

Conflict between people is an omnipresent fact of human existence and is neither good nor bad. However, the manner in which the conflict is handled will determine whether it is destructive or creative and growthful. Unfortunately, it's my assessment that people in most societies are poorly socialized to handle interpersonal and intergroup conflict in a productive way. Usually in conflict situations, we see a variety of symptoms of dysfunction such as blocked or distorted communication, stereotyping, threats, hostility, coercion and little motivation to improve the relationship between people.

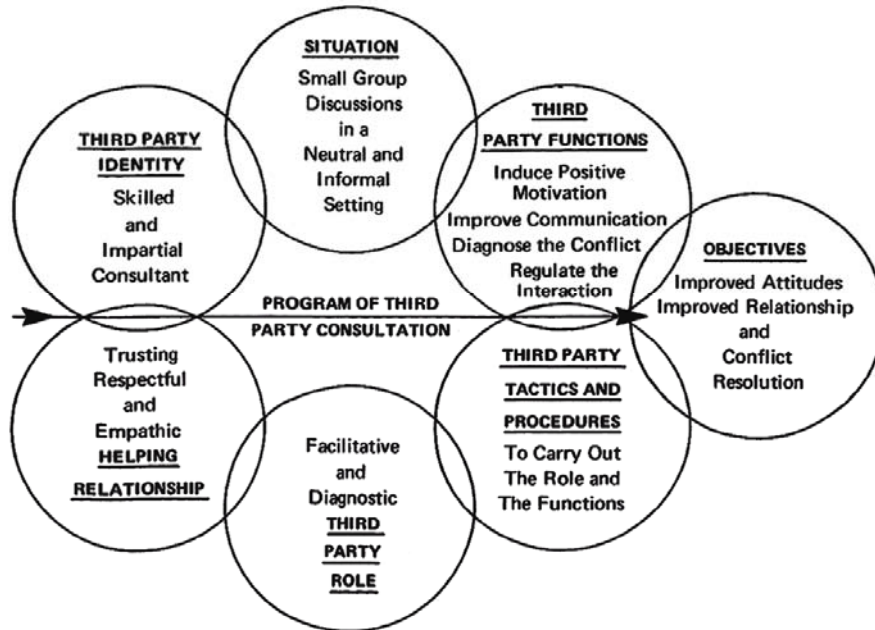
It is at this point, or even before, that I believe an impartial and skilled third party can be very useful in helping people to analyze the sources and dynamics of their conflict and to identify behaviors and solutions that will help them resolve it to their mutual satisfaction.. I also believe that individuals can be trained to, and can then choose to, act differently in conflict situations. The constructive resolution of conflicts is a difficult and time-consuming process, and we often find people more predisposed to temporarily "settle" conflicts through force, by withdrawal, or by accepting simple compromises which leave neither party satisfied. Thus, it will be a long time before third party consultation will cease to be a useful skill for social practitioners in a variety of social systems.

A Model of Third Party Consultation

Many of the ideas behind third party consultation are very old and are found in different societies in various forms. I believe these ideas make sense to most people in terms of their everyday thinking. My first effort in this area was to pull together the contributions offered by several scholar-practitioners in the field of conflict resolution. In doing so I wanted to place the emphasis on the identity, strategies and behavior of the impartial third party consultant who enters directly into the arena of conflict in a facilitative and diagnostic manner. By so doing, the consultant helps the antagonists analyze and constructively deal with the basic issues in their relationship. The general descriptive model which I developed is presented in Figure 1, wherein each circle represents a major conceptual component. I would like to "walk through" the model and describe for you each of these major components.

Figure 1: A Model of Third Party Consultation

Copyright by the American Psychological Association, 1976, and reprinted with permission of the author.



The identity of the third party is crucial to the success of the method. The consultant needs to be a skilled practitioner who is seen by the parties as impartial, that is, as not taking sides, but listening carefully and respectfully to each person. The implication is that you should not enter into a situation as a third party unless you are confident that you are initially impartial with regard to your background and can behave in a fair and even handed manner. Sometimes, third party teams are drawn from the groups involved in the conflict to produce a "balanced" impartiality. Most importantly, the consultants should have confidence that they have the necessary knowledge of the situation and the expertise to facilitate productive confrontation between the parties. It is also important that the consultant does not have high power over the people involved, or they will turn to the consultant as a third party arbitrator or judge, and may follow what they think are the consultant's solutions to the conflict rather than their own.

An adequate third party identity lays the basis for a helping or consulting relationship with each of the participants which involves trust, respect and understanding. In this way, third party consultation is seen as one kind of the general helping relationship that has been described by psychologist Carl Rogers and others. Thus, the same values, qualities and skills that make for good helpers in general, such as empathy and authenticity, also makes for good third party consultants.

The consultant needs to have control over the situation in which the antagonists come together to confront their conflict and discuss their relationship. The general approach is to arrange a series of informal and flexible small group discussions which focus directly on the nature of the conflict and the relationship between the parties. It is important that this setting be neutral and informal, so that neither party is on home ground and a comfortable atmosphere can be established. In dealing with intergroup conflict, for example, it is essential not to meet on the turf of either group or their allies.

As the consultant brings people together for confrontation discussions, he or she needs to be very clear on the third party role, which is to be the facilitator, not the expert, nor the judge; not the "pleasant personality" who soothes feelings and slips the issues under the rug. You must see yourself as the catalyst who will facilitate and energize the processes of exploration and creative problem-solving. To do this you will also have to be diagnostic, applying whatever ideas are appropriate to the system in question. This is where a social science background is very useful if not essential in more complex systems, such as organizations. You will need to search for the real meaning of communications, apply knowledge you have about conflict behavior and social relationships to interpret what is happening, and encourage self-diagnosis by the people involved. You should also see your role as non-evaluative, non-coercive, and non-directive over outcomes, although you will be directing the process of the discussions.

What are the core strategies of the third party? What conditions is the consultant attempting to establish in the discussions? I have found it useful to talk about four basic functions which the third party consultant must carry out. The first is inducing and maintaining mutual positive motivation on the part of participants to enter into and sustain the problem-solving confrontation and to resolve their conflict productively. Of course, some minimal amount of motivation is necessary for the parties to even come together. Once they are together the consultant can behave in a variety of ways to maintain their problem-solving motivation. The consultant must establish an atmosphere in which the participants do not fear blame and can develop some sense of hope. The risk of negative evaluations must be reduced. Participants must feel free to explore how their differences have developed. The consultant should also try to maintain an optimum level of tension, even though it is hoped that the participants will feel removed from the highly charged emotional field in which the conflict typically holds them. The consultant can stimulate the consideration of common values and goals which can further motivate the participants toward finding satisfactory resolutions. For example, it is useful to find out what participants would like to be different as a result of the sessions.

The second and perhaps most pervasive function is that of improving communication in terms of openness and accuracy. Many of the thoughts and concerns which the parties are reluctant to divulge must become part of the discussions if movement toward resolution is to occur. This means not only the fears, the angers, the hates, but also the positive emotions, assurances, acknowledgements and overtures between the participants. With regard to accuracy the third party must be seen as both a model and a teacher of accurate and honest communication.

The third important function is diagnosing the conflict right in the ongoing interaction of the discussions. The emphasis is on understanding the process of interaction between the parties, and it is sometimes useful for the third party to bring in ideas and models about social conflict which

can help the participants understand their behavior. For example, in intergroup conflict, the consultant might ask the participants to share the images or stereotypes that they hold of each other. The consultant must aid the parties to stand back from their conflict and to evolve explanations which are mutually acceptable to them. In this way, the participants can identify basic and symptomatic issues between them, and can diagnose and understand the origins of the conflict, as well as the processes of proliferation and escalation that have made things worse.

The fourth function is regulating the interaction, and for this the consultant needs control over the process of the discussions. The consultant must attempt to pace the problem-solving phases of the interaction from differentiation to integration. The idea is that people need time to describe the issues as they see them and to ventilate their feelings and to feel that they are being understood, before they can move on to appreciate their commonalities, express the positive aspects of their relationship, and search for mutually acceptable solutions. The consultant must also serve as a synchronizer and a referee who keeps the parties on the issues and controls destructive interactions.

The third party functions are carried out by the specific behavioral interventions or tactics of the consultant. For example, to maintain positive motivation the consultant can stimulate hope by talking about better ways of being in the relationship. To improve communication, the consultant can empathically restate what a person has said, clear up hidden meanings, and summarize main points. This can also involve teaching communication skills. Diagnosis is operationalized by offering interpretations, searching for consensus on main issues, and so on. Regulating the interaction can be handled by setting up an agenda, orienting the discussion when necessary, using a flipchart to list issues, and asking people to hold when required. The functions can also be brought into reality by third party procedures which are structured exercises that the participants are asked to carry out. One example is to have each party develop their perceptions of the relationship independently, and then to share these perceptions in joint discussion.

Where is the third party trying to move things? What are the objectives of the method? First, if the functions have been successfully instituted, we would expect that certain process qualities have been established, that is, problem-solving motivation, open and accurate communication, diagnostic orientation, and regulated or controlled interaction. These conditions are essential to productive confrontation wherein the parties discuss their relationship as cleanly and as honestly as possible. It is then predicted that these conditions lead to the long term objectives of improved attitudes, an improved relationship, and conflict resolution. With regard to individual attitudes, it is hoped that people involved will come to have more complex, realistic, and favorable predispositions toward the other party. An improved relationship requires a shift from a destructively competitive win-lose relationship, to a collaborative, trusting one, or at least a working one. By conflict resolution I mean that the parties will come to solutions freely agreed upon and mutually acceptable to all, with a commitment to work on future conflict before escalation sets in.

Conclusion

Why do I think this model is useful? I think it is very important for practitioners, both formal and informal ones, to stand back and to systematically analyze their work. In this way, we can come

to better understand what we have been doing, and can sensitize ourselves to the essential ingredients of our work. Thus, if our mixture of strategies and behavior is lacking some crucial ingredients, or if some are being overstressed in place of others, we can take steps to adjust our practice accordingly. In that way we can obtain the best integrative mix of behavior to reach the objectives that we and the people we work with agree are important.

A note of caution: I don't mean to suggest that third party consultation is applicable or useful in resolving all conflicts. For example, straightforward questions of resource distribution, such as salaries and benefits, are best handled by negotiation or mediation. Third party consultation is more applicable to escalated and intense conflicts where a mixture of objective differences and subjective elements (perceptions, attitudes, values, needs) are intertwined in a complex fashion. Thus, before implementing the method, the consultant and the parties must agree that third party consultation is compatible with their analysis of the situation, their preferred strategies of change, and their values of human conduct. When everyone agrees that they wish to seek creative and mutually satisfying resolutions to complex conflicts in an participative and humanistic fashion, then the third party model gives us one way of describing a useful approach. Below are some references that you might find useful to provide further information on third party consultation, and to describe some of the settings in which the approach has been useful.

References

- Azar, E.E. (1990). The management of protracted social conflict. Hampshire, UK: Dartmouth Publishing.
- Blake, R.R., Shephard, H.A., and Mouton, J.S. (1964). Managing Intergroup conflict in Industry. Houston, Texas: Gulf.
- Burton, J.W. (1987). Resolving deep-rooted conflict: A handbook. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Burton, J.W. & Dukes, F. (1990). Conflict: Practices in management settlement and resolution. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Fisher, R.J. (1972). Third party consultation: A method for the study and resolution of conflict, Journal of Conflict Resolution, 16, 67-94.
- Fisher, R.J. (1976). Third party consultation: A Skill for professional psychologists in community practice. Professional Psychology, 7, 344-351.
- Fisher, R.J. (1983). Third party consultation as a method of intergroup conflict resolution: A review of studies. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 27, 301-334.
- Fisher, R.J. (1990). The social psychology of intergroup and international conflict resolution. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Fisher, R.J. (1997). Third party consultation as the controlled stimulation of conflict. In C.K.W. De Dreu & E. Van de Vliert (eds.), Using conflict in organizations (pp. 192-207). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Fisher, R.J. (1997). Interactive conflict resolution. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Kelman, H.C. & Cohen, S.P. (1986). Resolution of international conflict. An interactional approach. In S. Worchel & W.G. Austin (eds.), Psychology of intergroup relations (2nd ed.) (pp. 323-342). Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.
- Mitchell, C.R. (1981). Peacemaking and the consultant's role. Westmead, UK: Gower.
- Walton, R.E. (1969). Interpersonal peacemaking: Confrontations and third party consultation. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.