Chapter Thirteen

Changing the Culture
Accepting Conflict and Encouraging Choice

Conflict is woven deeply into the very fabric of our lives, from our thoughts to our relationships with co-workers, friends, acquaintances, and family members to our interaction with groups and organizations. Throughout this text and our efforts to marry the principles, practices, and values of alternate dispute resolution (ADR), dispute systems design (DSD), and organization development (OD), we have attempted to make conflict accessible to analysis and exploration, with suggestions for enhancing the perceptions, choices, and actions that conflict generates. We believe that managing the turbulence of conflict requires nurture, special skills, and improved practices on the part of individuals, groups, organizations, and nations. It also requires an attitude of acceptance—not of fighting, fleeing, denying, avoiding—and an understanding of the power of choices, not either/or, right/wrong polarities.

It is not enough to continue to tinker at the edges of conflict, with interventions that are limited, slow, and unintentional. With the increasing experimentation of practitioners in large group interventions, where design and application share Weisbord’s vision of “getting the whole system in the room” (Weisbord, 1987), practitioners need to continue to enhance their understanding of conflict management as a system. The once-dominant image of individuals and small exclusive groups unilaterally determining the future and direction of their organizations is fading. Instead, organizations are turning to collaborative efforts with stakeholders and organizational participants, because these groups have the innovative ideas—and the energy to carry them out—so key to organizational survival, effectiveness, and growth. Allied with this shift is the belief that systems as a whole—be they families, organizations, or even nations—need to continue educating, informing, and empowering their members to more fully understand and accept conflict.

We think that the increasingly interdependent nature of our world cries out for an increased effort to accept conflict and to learn the skills and processes of conflict management and teach them to each other. We suggest that one way to make progress in this challenge is by creating changed cultures of choice and acceptance of conflict, initially at least in our organizational systems. Our hope is that by doing so, learning and increased awareness of conflict will permeate to a deeper level of every aspect of human interaction and change. One way to begin this voyage is to move beyond questions of why someone or some organization prefers to deal with conflict in a certain way (even though we have spent time discussing the topic in this book) toward an approach that accepts conflict and validates choices. This last chapter, then, focuses on the changed culture of choice and acceptance of conflict—on the part of the organization, its stakeholders, and its practitioners.

The Organization

In most instances throughout our examination of the design of conflict management systems in organizations, we have raised “what if” questions. What if the organizational leadership is unwilling to assess the current state of its total complex of dispute handling and results? What if the organizational leadership is unwilling to have organizational participant and stakeholder involvement throughout every phase of the design process? What if the organizational leadership is determined to only “insert” ADR offerings into its ongoing dispute resolution mechanisms? In other words, what if the organization does not want to examine the way it handles conflict within its boundaries and the attendant costs—dollars, time, satisfaction with results, and durability of resolutions? Should the practitioner walk away and wait until the organization experiences a crisis that increases its willingness to examine how it manages conflict? These are the dilemmas of
working with organizational conflict management systems development, and such dilemmas are not uncommon in any change process. Rarely, if ever, is the "ideal" approach realized by the practitioner or the "ideal" response made by the organization. Given the importance of this arena of inquiry and action in the life of the organization, we offer some suggestions for moving forward in view of these challenges.

First, when one is dealing with one of the most sensitive aspects of human interaction—that of conflict—and advocating that the system and its members move into the tension of conflict, we suggest that there needs to be a conscious recognition that this is advocacy of courage beyond what is often possible or even realistic for the organization. We have a good friend and colleague, John Settle, who frequently addresses audiences after we have laid out the "best and ideal" approach to "doing it right" in conflict management systems design—and his message is to "just do it." In many ways, our friend is right; for there is never an ideal organization, ideal leadership, ideal time, or ideal method to improve a conflict management system. As practitioners, we all take the organization as we find it and if we wait until tomorrow—for more buy-in, for more resources, for more data—tomorrow never comes and the system never changes.

In addition, the real beauty and gift of interest-based processes is in using them, not talking about them. The mediation process in particular can be an amazingly empowering and energizing one for disputants enmeshed in conflict—a freeing of human need and desire in the midst of our more common expectation that we will win if only we can hide our pain, vulnerabilities, and weaknesses. Actually participating in interest-based alternatives to dispute resolution often leads to the deepest understanding on the part of organizational participants that they have and want a choice in the manner in which conflict will be resolved. The choice among diverse conflict management paths is organizational self-determination in action. But if organizations offer no range of choice in conflict management processes—structuring the resolution process as a polarity between all or nothing—they lose the opportunity to experience interest-based processes and perhaps more durable, satisfactory results at lower cost. In addition, they can become inelastic and inflexible in their response to disagree-
inside or from the outside, need to be involved in bringing issues to the surface, suggesting options, offering feedback, and reacting to revisions. If such individuals are excluded from the design process, they will face the choice of whether or not to protest and seek inclusion. Our focus here, however, is limited to reflecting briefly on what stakeholders can contribute to a changed culture of choice and acceptance of conflict in the organizations in which they have a stake.

Most stakeholders are no less than startled when they are first invited to become part of a survey or assessment focus group reflecting on an organization's current conflict management practices. This is the result of having a valued voice and a respected "place at the table," often for the first time. In this respect, the initial behavior of stakeholders may often appear subdued and in some cases awed—most likely a result of being thrust into the role of advising, guiding, and participating from one of advocating, reacting, and complaining. This can be particularly true when the organization has a regulatory or other directive role with its stakeholders. Moreover, because of the past history and pattern of dealings, it is not uncommon for stakeholders to have a low level of trust at this initial stage: "They never cared what we thought before, so why should they believe they want our ideas now?" In the face of such uncertainty, stakeholder involvement is rarely freewheeling, creative, and open in the early stages of interest-based design—a state that needs to be accepted and respected by both organizational leadership and practitioners.

What can change this lukewarm commitment by stakeholders to the process and the product of interest-based conflict management systems design? One method we suggest is ongoing stakeholder involvement as members of the ADR design team. As a member of an ongoing team, the role of the stakeholder changes significantly from sporadic, uncertain "consultant" to highly informed, involved, responsible, and committed team member. High-quality involvement really requires a new sense of responsibility, accountability, and stewardship on the part of stakeholder participants, as well as a tremendous commitment and reallocation of their time and energy. The costs are high in truly becoming a part of the solution, not just part of the problem. If such a high degree of involvement and commitment is not possible for stake-

holders or not feasible in a particular organization, we have some observations about acceptance and choice regarding the manner in which stakeholders pursue their roles and responsibilities in conflict management change processes. These are intimately tied to each of the key areas of discovery discussed in the previous section about organizations: openness, systems thinking, cost assessment, possibilities, and experimentation.

Just as Funches (1989) noted the "three gifts" of the practitioner, heart, discernment, and presence, in dealing with client organizations, so too with the gifts stakeholders can bring to the process of conflict management systems design. In the case of stakeholders, the gifts may well need to change to those of willingness, forgiveness, and participation. The gift of willingness reaches to the core of stakeholder involvement—to willingly set aside reservations, to openly share information about the organization's current conflict management system, to meaningfully engage in the ongoing process we call conflict management systems design. The gift of forgiveness that stakeholders can bring to the process goes to the possible past failures of the organization and its leadership to include and involve stakeholders in decisions affecting their vital interests and concerns, as well as the possible failure to explore and respond to the causes, costs, and consequences of conflict. Lastly, the gift of participation—not superficial presence but deeply involved and engaged partnership—runs through all of the key processes of discovery for organizations in conflict management systems design, yet most particularly on the part of stakeholders. Without high-quality, responsible, and committed stakeholder participation, the organization is no better off for its efforts to involve those with an interest in the outcomes of the design process. With these three stakeholder gifts, the entire dynamic of interchange and involvement contributes to a changed culture of organizational conflict—again, to one of choice and acceptance.

The Practitioners

Much of this book has been devoted to the multiplicity of roles the practitioner plays in conflict management systems design. Here, we emphasize in particular that the practitioner's guidance and
orchestration of organizational learning about conflict management systems is, as identified in Chapter Four, an interest-based intervention akin to the mediation of an entire system. When the tasks of a mediator (introduction, clarify issues, gather information, identify interests, develop options, narrow options, and closure) are wedded with the spirit embodied in Funches' three gifts of the OD practitioner, a whole picture of a practitioner's role in the delicate process of conflict management systems design emerges.

In light of these multiple tasks and gifts, we believe that as practitioners we have a very different burden from organizations and stakeholders in the process of changing the culture of conflict and honoring acceptance and choice. Even with deep knowledge of and experience with interest-based principles and processes, we cannot force systems to be open, to offer choices, or to change. Rather, as practitioners, we must constantly remind ourselves (and each other) to respect organizational and stakeholder self-determination. This can be personally frustrating, for we know in our heads that a failure of the organization to be open or a failure to change in response to valid feedback may affect the very survival of the organization or its continued viability. Moreover, and particularly with past histories of bitter disputes, organizations are often unwilling to include all aspects of their system in the discovery and change process—and thus fail to act as an integrated whole. As a result, the remaining process of identifying the costs of conflict, uncovering choices for action and remedy, and experimenting to learn the best fit of ADR processes becomes flawed and incomplete. As practitioners, it is easy for us to feel responsible for such perceived failures.

We find it useful at such times to remember that our role in interest-based conflict management systems design is that of a guide and a resource, with the organization and its stakeholders maintaining the control and responsibility for results. After we have applied whatever skill, knowledge, and influence we bring as gifts to the change intervention, we find it helpful and comforting to adopt an attitude of humility and acceptance: humility that the process and the results are "owned" by the organization and the stakeholders, not us, and acceptance of the choices that have been made or not made. It is the courage to accept that which we cannot change.

We also find it useful to remember the initial tenet of the Hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm." If we have avoided harm—that is, have not increased the level of conflict and blame in the system—then we have remained true to our clients. If we have also honored and enacted the values of openness, feedback, and participation in the design process, then we have remained true to ourselves. It is perhaps this personal congruency—walking the talk, so to speak—that is both the greatest gift and the greatest burden for the practitioner.

**Mirroring**

How does one synthesize the various "gifts" and roles of organizations, stakeholders, and practitioners with regard to acceptance and choice? The "mirror exchange" (as it is called in OD) or "reflecting back" (in ADR parlance) is a time-tested tool used by mediators and other neutrals that can be adapted for use in the design arena. The mirror exchange has been used to improve intergroup relations (such as between labor and management in the workplace) and to de-escalate hostilities in the international community; it can also be insightful in the conflict management design process.

"Mirroring" in the design context involves the stakeholders holding up a figurative looking glass to organizational leadership and asking questions such as: "What can the organization do to improve its management of conflict with respect to stakeholders?" This exercise requires the organization to be willing to look at itself and articulate what it sees. This elicits a "to-do" list of possible action items. The magic of the exchange occurs when the question is reflected back to the stakeholders (who must also be willing to look and to share insights): "What can stakeholders do to improve management of conflict with the organization?" This exchange can also be done by practitioners (both internal design specialists and external design consultants), particularly in the entry and contracting phases. Such mirroring leads to a wealth of information as well as to an increased awareness that conflict management is everyone's responsibility.

We suggest that the ultimate breakthroughs in effective conflict management systems design and in the creation of changed
cultures of choice and acceptance of conflict can occur with the use of such mirrors but most particularly when we are willing to hold them up for our own reflection—as organizations, as stakeholders, as practitioners. Only through such self-examination can we recognize that we all contribute to and help sustain present levels of conflict in the world around us and that we can all contribute to changing the way we manage conflict.

Epilogue
Implications for Improving Conflict Management Systems

And so we return to the water, which is where we began. As we mentioned at the beginning of this book, conflict is like water: it is everywhere—within individuals, within groups, within communities, within nations, within the global village. As with water, conflict presents unlimited opportunities for growth and healing as well as for damage and destruction. What we do with these opportunities is our choice as practitioners and as stakeholders. There is a saying: “If you want peace, work for justice.” Perhaps if we want peace, we should learn, create, build, practice, manage, teach, and design interest-based conflict management systems.

The basic question seems to be, “Why should I (or he, she, we, they, or it) care about systemic conflict management? Why should I as a practitioner, as a stakeholder, strive to create interest-based conflict management processes?” The answer lies in whether we aspire to be stewards of the many systems within which we live or whether we settle for being mere spectators. Stewardship involves more participation, more energy, and more work than spectatorship, but the rewards can be far greater.

An effective organizational conflict management system can have multiple implications for many groups of people. Some parts of the system will reflect back on the individuals within the organization—by serving as a model of communication and problem-solving techniques that can be used in daily life with co-workers, spouses, partners, children, parents, and friends. Other parts will