Dynamic Agreement™
Community & Conflict

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At last count the population of Earth is over 7,000,000,000 human beings and growing. All those people, in one way or another, live in community. Community can be a wonderfully exuberant and satisfying experience. It can take the form of family, friendship, or other relationships such as business, school, and church association. Living in community can result in partnerships, life-long friendships, shared benefit, support, comfort, and security. Experts now tell us the physiology of human beings indicates we are made for community. Perhaps that's why community can be a joyful state of being.

Along with the joys of humanity come the challenges. Often those challenges are the product of our diversity of perspective or our imperfection. Diversity can lead to unforeseen insight and innovation. Imperfection can result in mistakes, being wrong, and causing harm. It's not unusual for divergent perspectives and harm resulting from mistake to lead to conflict. So, if we live in community, it's not a matter of IF we will experience conflict, it's only a matter of WHEN.

No one is exempt from the challenges associated with participating in community. All of us have experienced conflict. Many of us (maybe all) have been taught that conflict is abnormal/bad/negative/to be avoided. We've been punished for being involved in conflict. Some of us have responded to that negative connotation and treatment by avoiding the source of conflict - community. Avoiding community doesn't require us to live like a hermit in the desert; often we limit the opportunity for conflict by steering clear of meaningful relationships.

Meaningful relationships don't just happen. They require conscious, purposeful thought and action; all we have to do to avoid them is not pursue them. Meaningful relationships also require vulnerability and transparency that exposes us to the possibility of harm and resulting conflict. On the other-hand, that same vulnerability and transparency is necessary to experience the fullness of our humanity and the humanity of those with whom we live in community. It's a DILEMMA! What do we do?

One thing we can do is normalize conflict. When we normalize conflict we cease to perceive it as a negative state or event. We view it as an integral part of community, evidence of diverse perspectives, and an opportunity to learn, grow[1], and build more cohesive, supportive relationships. The challenge is, how do we do that?

Most of us have not been taught how to listen. We engage in discussion (persuasive communication), not dialogue (communication designed to facilitate understanding). We use the time the other person is speaking to craft our response, not to try to see the world through their eyes. We may not know how to listen in a way that involves momentarily setting aside our realities and empathetically adopting another person's perspective. It's unlikely we've been instructed in collaborative, co-creative processes developed to address conflict in a manner that enhances community. Sure, we've read books, watched TED Talks, heard presentations about empathy, compassion, and nonviolent[2] communication, but we've probably not been taught what the actual process of building community and addressing conflict looks like in the lives of human beings who have unique, and sometimes very different, points of view. How can people who are embroiled in the emotional discomfort and cognitive confusion often related to the feeling of being criticized, judged, or attacked come together and agree on how to address the circumstance that led to conflict? Thankfully, we don't have to reinvent the wheel, because our ancestors did the work for us.

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[1] "We find comfort among those who agree with us – growth among those who don't." ~ Frank A. Clark

[2] Nonviolent Communication is a communication process developed by Marshall Rosenberg beginning in the 1960s. It focuses on three aspects of communication: *self-empathy* (defined as a deep and compassionate awareness of one's own inner experience), *empathy* (defined as an understanding of the heart in which we see the beauty in the other person), and *honest self-expression* (defined as expressing oneself authentically in a way that is likely to inspire compassion in others).

Long ago in tribes far, far away (and some not so far away) our predecessors were faced with a perplexing issue. Members of the tribe, having diverse perspectives and being imperfect humans, would, from time to time, experience conflict with one another. The elders of the tribe realized that if the means used to address conflict was the expulsion or execution of one or more of the parties, before long the tribe would be so diminished in strength that it could be easily overtaken or its members enslaved by neighboring tribes. The tribal elders had to devise a process through which conflict could be addressed that actually empowered individuals and provided the opportunity for more peaceful community. Today, that process has been further developed and adapted for use within organizations and between parties to create culture, build community, and reach and maintain agreement. The organizational and relational application of that process can be found in Dynamic Agreement Dialogue™[3] (DAD).

The foundational social (e.g. community/organization) philosophy on which DAD is based is one that may facilitate horizontal power distribution, fulfillment of roles, and collaborative co-creation. In the context of organization development and management, the values, principles, and processes associated with DAD can be utilized to reach and maintain agreement, enhance communication, guide decision-making, and address conflict.

In order to approach community related issues in a non-adversarial manner people must interact, be vulnerable, tell stories, listen actively and empathetically, be willing to recognize responsibility, and make themselves accountable to others. Community building requires more than the occasional organized social activity or shared service event. Earnest and meaningful community is the product of people living life together, sharing thoughts and feelings, and supporting, encouraging, and helping one another. For organizations, community may look like members or employees having dinners together, playing together, laughing together, crying together, and experiencing conflict with one another then working together to address the conflict and strengthen relationships.

Visionary lawyers are becoming aware of more humanistic, less legalistic, approaches to relational dynamics. They're counseling their clients to consider a collaborative, co-creative style of obtaining and memorializing agreement[4]. Forward thinking members of organizations are exploring processes that facilitate dialogue, rather than debate, to address intra-organizational challenges[5].

Whether it be in the context of family, neighborhood, or business organization, community can enhance our individual and relational experiences. It can be a source of joy, creativity, and security. It can also be an environment in which we encounter discomfort and conflict. Community is a vehicle for, and reflective of, the human experience in all its glory and its shame. How we engage community, and the relationships it spawns, may substantially affect the benefit we offer others and our own quality of life.

Community and conflict are inseparable. Rather than deny that connection and attempt to create one while avoiding the other, let's embrace a paradigm that encourages us to recognize the fullness of our humanity and learn, as our elders did, to approach both in a manner that enhances our relationships, facilitates creativity and agreement, and benefits us individually and socially.

[3] Dynamic Agreement Dialogue™ is a communication process developed by Randy L. Langford to facilitate an opportunity for participants to share their point of view and listen to others in a way that may result in enhanced understanding, altered perspectives, and the addressing of conflict.
[4] *Discovering Agreement* is an ABA published book written by Linda Alvarez. In Discovering Agreement, Alvarez explores a non-adversarial, collaborative, co-creative paradigm of reaching, memorializing, and managing agreement. https://www.discoveringagreement.com
[5] Dynamic Agreement™ is a collaborative, co-creative approach to agreement developed by Randy L. Langford used to facilitate communication, decision-making, and to address conflict within organizations and between parties.

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