

The Art and Science of Re-framing in Conflict Resolution

Dr. Farida Virani

HOD, Professor - HR & Behavioral Sciences, MET - Institute of Management - Bandra, Mumbai, India

ABSTRACT- HR managers are responsible towards maintaining a high-performance environment in organizations. Performance behaviors for success recognize conflict management as an important competency for leadership. Identifying ways to help involved parties work through conflicts, responding to opposing views in a non-defensive manner and identifying areas of agreement between them, are some key behavioral indicators. Conflict resolution frequently through 'mediation' is enumerated as one of the core competency for HR managers

Reframing is the art and science of employing words and actions in order to alter a person's perspective of a specific situation (conflict) with the intention of initiating a change in behavior. This paper discusses the purpose, use and some valuable techniques for reframing. Reframing is a tool that can make a huge difference in contentious negotiations. Learning and refining this skill enables shifting a conversation from position to interests, thereby enhancing negotiations and ensuing desirable results.

Key words : HR, Conflict Resolution, Mediation, Reframing.

I. INTRODUCTION

"The art of reframing is to maintain the conflict in all its richness but to help people look at it in a more open-minded and hopeful way." -- Bernard Mayer

A conflict is technically defined as; to come into collision or divergence; be conflicting, at variance, or in disapproval; clash. It is further defined as a serious disagreement or argument, usually a prolonged one. The current need to follow the speed-and-stealth model to participate in a lightning-fast, global business environment vitalize conflicts which are now more prevalent than ever. Cross-functional teams working in shifts asynchronously, composed of members from across the organization with a diversity of knowledge and skill sets, are a vital part of the new work models. Differences in time, language, culture, systems and policies become potential sources of conflict. With frequent differences existing among team members, it is likely there will be misunderstandings, failures to communicate and interpersonal conflicts, finally, leading to dissatisfaction and attrition (Guttman 2009). Since, HR professionals are responsible towards maintaining a high-performance environment, conflict management and resolution is enumerated as one of their core competencies. They frequently act as mediators, quickly responding to conflicts attempting to settle workplace disputes through their comprehension of behaviors in organizations and interpretation of company policies, to help reach an acceptable outcome for all parties.

Conflict management is the process of restraining the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict. Conflict resolution is a way for two or more parties to find an amicable solution to a disagreement. The aim is to enhance learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness or performance in organizational setting (Rahim, 2002). (Mayer 1990) states,

"The skills required for conflict management are simple, but they rarely are acquired as part of growing up. Learn them and use them". In consensus with the past researches and professional literature, conflict resolution requires mastery in skills in two arenas:

- ✓ Conceptual arena
- ✓ Skill competence arena

Conceptual skills: The first arena is conceptual: an individual must understand conflict's causes, styles, strategies, maneuvers and world-views. An individual must understand theories of how and why conflicts arise, where and when conflicts habitually occur, and the range of strategies and tactics that may be utilized to manage conflict. An in-depth understanding of the business, systems, people and processes is essential.

Skill competence: The second arena is skill competence. In addition to understanding communication and conflict theory, an individual must become competent in a range of basic communication skills and develop a working repertoire of conflict management skills. A lengthy list of abilities and tactics can be specified for advanced conflict management. However, two basic communication skills are required if parties hope to manage conflict productively:

- Active listening
- Asking the right questions

Generally, HR professionals mediate when disputes arise between the employees/ groups/departments. Mediation is a process in which an impartial third party - a mediator - facilitates the resolution of a dispute by promoting voluntary agreement or self-determination, by the parties to the dispute. A mediator enables communication, promotes understanding, focuses the parties on their interests and seeks creative problem solving to enable the parties to reach their own agreement.

Conflicting individuals enter into conflict resolution processes with their own interpretation of the problem: what

issues are in dispute, why the problem has arisen and how best to resolve the conflict. The first step in conflict resolution requires conflicting individuals to clarify their interpretation of the problem. This allows the other party and the facilitator/ mediator (HR/Line manager) to see how each perceives the conflict. In most cases, these preliminary statements disclose very diverse views of the dispute. Generally in accordance to the Attribution Theory, each party often place blame on the other side, attribute destructive qualities to the other side's personality or character and demand that the other side comply with their claims. Such conflicting perceptions are adversarial, spur bitterness and inhibit individuals from reaching a satisfactory and operative agreement. The way in which a party describes or defines a conflict is known as framing. "Framing refers to the way a conflict is described or a proposal is worded; reframing is the process of changing the way a thought is presented so that it maintains its fundamental meaning but is more likely to support resolution efforts" (Mayer, 2000). Reframing is a way of observing and experiencing events, ideas, concepts and emotions to find more positive alternatives.

II. PURPOSE OF REFRAMING

'Reframing' is the art and science of employing words and actions in order to alter a person's perspective of a specific situation with the objective of initiating a change in behavior. The art is in accomplishing the process without manipulating the facts of the situation; the science is doing so at the right time and with the correct results. It becomes the facilitator or mediator's job to reiterate what each party has said in a way that causes less opposition or resentment. In other words, the mediator helps disputants dialogue and redefine the way they think about the dispute in the hopes of allowing collaboration between conflicting sides. The ultimate goal of reframing is to create a shared meaning of the problem acceptable to both parties and increase the possibility for more collaborative and integrative solutions. Through this process they begin to recognize the basic causes of the conflict. Once parties begin to truly understand each other's point of view, it makes it easier for them to think about solutions that will work for both sides.

Reframing can be useful in the following ways:

- To tone down on a blaming or critical statement and state in a positive frame.
- To shift from negative to positive.
- To shift from past to future.
- To identify the needs or concerns behind a stated position, which helps the individuals to analyze their own perspectives and clarify their thoughts.
- To identify the issue that needs to be resolved. This can be the start of building an agenda.
- To emphasize common concerns or common ground.
- To acknowledge emotions but not as a central focus.

Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974) describe the 'gentle art of reframing' thus: To reframe, then, means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation

to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the 'facts' of the same concrete situation equally well or even better and thereby changing its entire meaning. Reframing can be compared to shining a spotlight on a part of the stage which was previously dark. The now illuminated object changes the context of the entire scene. Another purpose of reframing is to persuade. The mediator looking to persuade completely steps out from the present facts and circumstances. "He or she ... assist [s] the disputants to see ... future possibilities, in a way which allows previously indiscernible creative solutions to become obvious and inevitable. In this sense, the mediator's role in effecting changes in disputants' mind-frames involves a form of persuasion." (Rosen, 1982)

III. REFRAMING TECHNIQUES

There are many ways to do reframing. Blanciak 2002 states, Zoub mentions few of these; included are: rephrasing, focusing, proposing an option, moving from abstract to specific, going behind positions, stimulating new ideas, looking to the future, dealing with emotional outbursts, preempting, creating a metaphor, offering choices, involving the quiet participant, assigning homework, being direct, using a ludicrous intervention, discussing what will happen in a court scenario, caucusing, emphasizing closure, referring to other disciplines, termination and returning to court (Fisher & Ury, 1983)

In Symbol in Mediation (2000), Jennifer Fisher shows how symbols can be used by mediators to reframe disputes. She defines a symbol as "ritual, visual art, metaphor, and story [all of which] act as other than and yet the same as that which they represent." Fisher shows how the metaphor adopted by a party can lead to a host of predictable attitudes and behaviors. If a party adopts the metaphor that this 'conflict is a combat,' then the parties will behave in aggressive ways to win at all costs, probably never reaching a resolution. However, if the conflict is viewed as synchronized swimming or any other game or activity involving team work, it would allow the notion of achieving a goal together to come to the forefront. If the mediator can successfully persuade the parties to accept this metaphor, resolution would be within reach. Fisher also shows how rituals can be used in a similar way. A simple ritual such as eating together or walking a distance together chatting about topics other than the dispute, can sometimes reframe a dispute from adversarial to cooperative. She states that "the intent is to frame the session in a larger context of connection and to invite healing powers into the process." The only limit on finding novel "symbols" capable of reframing a conflict is the depth of the mediator's own imagination.

Another technique of reframing involves the use of active listening. Bruce Phillips (1999) claims that reformulation (or reframing) through active listening occurs in three ways. First, by reflecting back words, the mediator can "select and ignore particular issues." For instance, if one party to a dispute repeatedly raises the issue of missed timelines of past projects by the other party, the mediator can initially choose to deselect this issue by reflecting back only the issue of the

quality of the services and resources provided during those projects. Second, “reformulations can be used to control the communication in the session by either inviting or discouraging collaboration on meaning-making for those topics chosen.” The mediator can reflect back while encouraging input via open-ended communications. In contrast, the mediator can discourage input by using closed-ended communications. Finally, he argues that “reformulations transform the meaning of the disputant’s utterances.” As an example of this the author recounts how a woman employee disputing the work hours in the organization commented, that her husband felt she was constantly at work, implying that she did not care for the children, was reframed. The mediator reflected this back saying; “So that’s what your husband feels, you are working to secure the children’s future, which occasionally keeps you away from them, in the present.” This put a positive transformation on the employee’s comment regarding the hours spend at work. Evidently, whether a situation is framed as a loss or a gain is tremendously important to the decision-making process. Any reflective listening can be used to help reframe a conflict from a negative framework to a positive one, making resolution appear rapidly in the distance like a brilliant lighthouse in the stormy and dark sea of despair and disagreement.

IV. CRITICAL FACTS

There are a few critical facts about reframing to be cautious. The reframing process is “about changing the verbal presentation of an idea, concern, proposal, or question so that the party’s essential interest is still expressed but unproductive language, emotion, position taking, and accusations are removed” (Mayer 2000). Therefore, it is important that mediators are careful with the language they use to reframe problems. Eventually, the acceptance of the reframing of an issue “is a result of timing and the psychological readiness of the parties to accept the definition of the situation” (Moore 1996).

V. CONCLUSIONS

Finally, conflict is a part of our personal and work lives. Poorly managed conflicts can easily become personal—generating resentment, antagonism, and hostility. These emotional conflicts interfere with work relationships, create stress, polarize teams and are a major factor in absenteeism and voluntary turnover. Occasionally, they lead to grievances and legal actions. When conflicts are managed constructively, people are likely to feel that they are listened to and treated fairly, which reduces formal complaints, personalization of conflict, absenteeism and turnover. Moreover it increases emotional wellbeing, engagement and involvement. The financial savings from reduced turnover and absenteeism, benefits of stable working relationships, organizational loyalty and the retained knowledge of experienced workers and managers, may justify the cost of a conflict management program for manager’s and business leaders which include reframing as an essential skill for conflict resolution. Reframing is a tool that can make a huge difference in contentious negotiations where HR acts as a

mediator. Learning and refining this skill enables shifting a conversation from position to interests, thereby enhancing negotiations and ensuing desirable results.

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