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System Dynamics in Conflict Management Negotiation and Mediation Constellations

By Eelco de Geus

Dealing with conflict and finding acceptable solutions for party's that are involved in conflict means dealing with a complex field of systemic forces and searching patiently for a satisfying way out of a jungle of meanings, beliefs, judgments, emotions and interests. It is a very important job, for its super ordinate goal is to unify what has been separated, to reconcile people, organizations and cultures that have been fighting each other for shorter or longer time, sometimes over hundreds of years. The more overview the negotiator has over these system dynamic influences, and the more he or she is able to include what has been excluded until that moment, the more he or she has the power to create the right support and find acceptable solutions. The work with systemic constellations is an important contribution to increase awareness, to broaden perspective and to gain the trust, loyalty, and power that is needed to deal with conflict in a good way, as well for the negotiators as for the people they represents.

System dynamics and conflict

When two parties are in conflict with each other, each of them fights at the boundaries of its own systems. Each party has its own background, with specific members, subgroups, specific values, a specific history, specific pain and specific victims. Every single one of these aspects influences the system as a whole, and determines its movements, its growth and, in the end, its deterioration. Every single aspect needs its place, wants to be honoured and respected, wants to be in a good balance of giving and taking in relationship to the system it is part of.

When two systems (families, organizations, cultures) meet, they can only integrate into a super-ordinate system, when each of them acknowledges and honours the background, experiences and values of the other systems. Where that is not possible, conflict is born; repression, exclusion, and war are the result.

Negotiations

Negotiating means that persons or a group of people represent their system, move to the boundaries of their own system and communicate its wishes, needs and values to the other side.



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On a deeper level one could say: the negotiator's responsibility towards his people or organization, is to communicate the important elements of the system to the other party, so that each party develops more acknowledgement, honour and respect and the way towards integration is paved.

The other way around, the negotiator needs to listen to the values, experiences, emotions, and needs of the other party and communicate those to his own people, in order to help his system acknowledge, honour and respect the other system, thus paving the way from the other side. The integration of human systems is a most difficult, delicate and in the same time necessary job for the further growth of the human race, and for building peace in the world. Therefore the negotiator's job is one of great weight and needs much strength, patience, endurance and wisdom.

Reality

The above described systemic frame for conflict management is an idealistic one. Reality however, especially when two cultures meet, is that the long history, the wars, the victims, the loosing of ground and all other facts that caused pain in the past and have built strong collective emotions on both sides. These work their way through into every level of the negotiations. It would be presumptuous to have the idea that we can overcome these deep underlying conflicts in the negotiations. We can only face reality, and look for concrete solutions that very slowly build up a better understanding and integration of the two systems.

The attitude of the negotiator

Therefore the negotiator needs a humble and in the same time persistent attitude. Humble means here: knowing that he or she is only one person in an immense systemic force field and that his or her power reaches as far as the loyalty and support that is coming from his or her people. Although the chosen negotiation strategy can be as well mild or consenting, as aggressive or persisting, the inner attitude needs to be one with a great heart for all the people and emotions involved, for the historical aspects, for the feelings and values on both sides. Thus the negotiator gets the weight and the respect he needs to influence the conflict situation.

Inclusiveness

Inclusiveness means that we are able to have a broad perspective, see the people, the past,



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the feelings. Have our inner eyes on everyone and everything that belongs to our system and to the other system, and to give it a place in our hearts. Of course this is only possible until a certain limit. That limit however is very personal, and the more inclusive the negotiator is, the more power he or she will gain. The contrary of inclusiveness is exclusiveness. People or facts that belong to a system and its systems past and who are excluded, will keep on sabotaging the conflict solving process, until there are seen, acknowledged and honoured.

Honour

Honour means that we honour the past of the other system, honour the losses and the pain, honour their value system, their religion, honour their wishes and needs, in the same way as we honour those aspects in our own system. We can acknowledge the differences, without judging them, and honour them. Honour does not mean that we have to agree. It means seeing things as they are and acknowledging them.

Balance

In every human relationship there is a need for balance: the balance between give and take. A relationship can only develop when both sides give and both sides take. When one side takes more than he gives, the relationship shall end soon. The same is however the case when one side gives more than he takes from the other side: also then the relationship cannot build up and shall die. Specifically in conflict management there needs to be an awareness about this balance between giving and taking. For solutions to come forth out of precious built relationships, the negotiator needs to manage this balance between giving and taking well.

Solutions

In many conflict situations, and specifically in cross-cultural conflicts, solutions are not easy to find. They come however, when the constellation of both systems is right. That means that everything is in the right place, that the order is right and that we have found a good balance between giving and taking. Then solutions tend to present themselves in a very unexpected and unpredictable, surprising way. The art of negotiating and mediating lies for a large part in facilitating the right systemic constellation, in which solutions can occur.



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Systemic Constellations

As negotiators and mediators we see many aspects that influence our work, but there also many aspects we do not know. Therefore we can use the work with systemic constellations, to bring to light that aspect we did not see until now. For example, the constellation may bring to light places where we have excluded important elements in our minds and hearts, and reveal how we are in relationship to both the systems we are dealing with and whether this position is empowering or is blocking the way towards constructive solutions.

In systemic constellations work we choose representatives out of a group of participants to stand for different persons, organizations, historical facts, and other aspects that are important in the dynamics of the conflict-situation we are dealing with. We place these representatives somewhere in the room, so that we get a three-dimensional picture of the constellation of our situation. The distances between the representatives and the feelings they have give important information about the present situation, and offer potential systemic solutions for the future. This work with systemic constellations, which is applied in family systems, organizational systems and cultural systems, is founded by the German psychotherapist Bert Hellinger, and is one of the most innovating methods for finding solutions in difficult systemic conditions.

Conclusion

Negotiation and mediation take place in extremely complex systemic contexts. The negotiator or mediator needs a good insight in and knowledge about the different systemic factors that influence his work. He needs to develop an attitude that supports his position in the field in a positive way and needs to be able to make the right systemic interventions at the right moment. Therefore negotiators and mediators need to be trained in a systemic way of thinking and develop a systemic awareness, in which the work with systemic constellations can play an important role.

Eelco de Geus is a dutch systemic psychotherapist and consultant, who lives in Austria. He is trained in the fields of Transactional Analysis, Neuro Linguistic Programming, Community building and System Dynamics. Eelco created and facilitated training programs for large organizations, with the focus on systemic leadership, developing learning organizations and community building. He leads the Institute for Systemic Constellations Vienna, in which family, organizational, and cultural constellations are studied and facilitated. He is an international teacher and facilitator of system constellation work.



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