

Conflict: Adventure Learning's Often Overlooked Other Half

By Simon Priest & Tom Young

Introduction

Risk, the potential to lose something of value, can be physical (broken limb), mental (internal anxiety), social (public embarrassment), spiritual (crisis of faith), or financial (loss of investment). In adventurous outdoor learning, participants engage in activities where their perception of risk is high: mostly physical, mental and/or social. However, competent leaders and facilitators keep the real dangers at a minimum level (Priest & Gass, 2018). By overcoming those perceived risks, participants change by directly learning to understand themselves (intrapersonal aptitude) and indirectly learning to relate to others (interpersonal aptitude). Indirect interpersonal gains are strengthened by the therapeutic use of small group conflict.

While most research in adventurous outdoor learning has focused on risk taking (Nichols, 2000), the role of conflict resolution has often been overlooked (Christian et al., 2019) in favour of its affiliate: group cohesion (Glass & Benschhoff, 2002). Conflict is the important other half of adventures undertaken in groups (Kimball, 1983). It is defined as the social friction or tension caused by discord or disagreement between two or more participants and sometimes their leader (Pruitt, Kim & Rubin, 2004). It can be used to achieve great learning and change, or it can destroy the potential for growth and gain. During the storming phase of group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), conflict often involves open hostility among participants over such minor disagreements as what to cook for dinner, differences in workloads or pack weights, and everyone talking at once, while nobody is listening (Jensen, 1979).

Competent leaders and facilitators deliberately seek out risk-provoking settings in adventurous outdoor learning, such as remote locations, great heights,

dark caves, rough water, steep hills, and slippery snow. While risks are never forced on participants or artificially created (doing so would be unethical), plenty of risks arise naturally from the adventure experience. Similarly, ethical leaders and facilitators refuse to purposefully create conflict, but instead allow conflict to arise naturally from the stress of living in close quarters with others, while enduring difficult challenges and hardships (Walsh & Gollins, 1976).

However, leaders and facilitators appear to exhibit great trepidation over their groups being in conflict and developing through the storming phase (Warren, 2009). They may believe that a group in conflict is somehow a symptom of their ineffectiveness to control participants. Nothing could be further from the truth. Competent leaders and facilitators avoid being drawn into conflict, but allow the group to resolve the conflict for themselves and reflect on success (Meyer, 2015). This can take a great deal of time and so longer programs show greater impact on pro-social skills than shorter ones (Bowen & Neill, 2013).

Conflict Resolution

Resolution of conflict is critically important to developing teamwork and pro-social skills (Alexander, 2001). In a conflict, at least one participant finds the beliefs or behaviors of another to be unacceptable and acts against the other by blocking or disrupting progress. If left unresolved, conflict can fester and permanently damage relationships. Once this happens, the group begins to experience wasted time, diminished performance, lower morale, and assorted mal-behaviours (Pruitt, Kim & Rubin, 2004).

In conflict, participants have concern for themselves, but may or may not be concerned about other people. The diagram

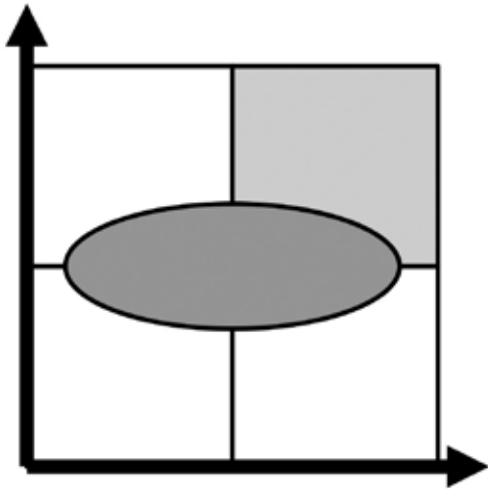


Figure 1: The dual concern model of conflict resolution (after Pruitt, Kim & Rubin, 2004).

presented in Figure 1 shows different combinations of these dual concerns for the self and for others. When both concerns are low, one or more participants can **deny and avoid** by evading everyone and everything. When concern for self becomes high and concern for others remains low, they can **fight and compete** by confronting each other. When concern for self is low and concern for others is high, they can **yield and concede** by one giving in to the other. When both concerns are high, they are more likely to **assist and cooperate** by finding middle ground. Somewhere in the middle, where concerns are between high and low, they can **compromise and conciliate** by giving a little to get something back. The latter two approaches lead to reconciliation, whereas the three former approaches do little to resolve the actual conflict and in some cases can escalate the conflict into aggression or even violence (Pruitt, Kim & Rubin, 2004).

Outdoor leaders and facilitators often have the responsibility to help lessen conflict by mediating a resolution between participants and/or assisting them to negotiate their own, without doing the difficult work on their behalf, but using a democratic style (Attarian & Priest, 1994). To successfully resolve their conflict, participants must be willing and open to

sharing thoughts and feelings, building up communication and trust through talking and listening, collaborating by exchanging perspectives, and compromising to find agreement on acceptable outcomes. Staff will want to follow some or all of these six steps when mediating resolution between participants or helping them negotiate their own (Priest & Gass, 2018).

Prepare by learning everything you can about the conflict and the participants. Seek to understand the background to their conflict and each participant's unique needs. Identify where they disagree and define those points of disagreement in detail. Do your best to convince both participants to seek a pathway to resolution. Provide a neutral environment, a comfortable setting, and sufficient time. If they accept, go to the second step. If not, the timing is wrong; simply wait.

Now that you have their permission, **collect** more information by probing deeper. Meet with each participant to determine his or her feelings and expectations. Be sure to know what lies on both sides of the dispute. Before you proceed to the next step, be prepared to avoid all temptations to suggest an obvious solution to them. This rescuing behavior loses your neutrality and can draw you into the conflict, making you powerless to help. Instead ask questions that help them discover the answer.

1. To start, facilitate the **exchange** of information between both participants. This information includes verbal consent to proceed, willingness to share intentions and/or desired outcomes, and agreement with certain guidelines to the process. Guidelines might include separating the conflict from its cause, not attacking, using "I" statements, and listening without interrupting (seek to understand others before you ask them to understand you; speak like you are correct, but listen like you are mistaken). During the exchange, encourage disclosure, clarify the issues, paraphrase so



everyone understands, and validate participants for sharing or following the guidelines.

2. Check to ensure both participants fully understand one another and then begin to bargain toward middle ground. Encourage each participant to state what he or she would be willing to give and what he or she would want

in return. Work within ideal limits that lie between the best outcome (getting all that you ask for) and the worst outcome (conceding to all demands). When arguments arise, move from debate (not heard) to dialogue (heard and understood) by asking each participant to share feedback with the other and sustaining a meaningful flow of ideas. Identify the benefits and drawbacks to cooperation and compromise.

3. Promote compromise through collaboration by persuading each participant to give a little to get more in return. If each participant can be persuaded to give up one concession that the other wants, then arguments will deescalate, animosity will evaporate, and progress will be achieved. The key to this accomplishment is making concessions that are perceived to have equivalent value until the dispute ends. Mutual agreement, without a loser, feelings of humiliation, or thoughts of revenge, means the win-win outcome is possible.
4. Once the conflict has been resolved, summarize the results, seal the deal, and agree through verbal statements. Celebrate a successful outcome and determine when to check in on their progress. Remain vigilant for the next conflict and identify patterns common to all conflicts.

The Role of the Facilitator

Before discussing the two main roles of facilitators, the importance of considering interests over positions cannot be overstated. People tend to show up to conflict fixed in their respective positions and the trick is to get each party to shift toward expressing their interests, because finding common ground is easier for interests than positions. "A simple way to shift from positions to interests is to add the word "because" at the end of a positional statement. This word induces curiosity and leads us to ask questions

about the reasons that drive a position” (Harper, 2004, p. 122).

A position is what parties want without regard for anyone else’s needs. A “position is something you have decided upon. Your interests are what caused you to decide” (Fisher et al, 2011, p. 42). Parties fixed in positions know that they are absolutely correct and have the only good solution, so are unlikely to budge. If parties take fixed positions, then debates immediately focus on why they are right. As more focus is put on positions their egos eventually get in the way of any reconciliation. Even if a compromise is reached to end the dispute, each party may feel cheated by only getting half of their entitlement. While time may have been wasted, negative tactics were likely used and both parties are likely feeling injured and betrayed to the point of irreparably damaging their relationships.

Facilitators or outdoor leaders have two roles during conflict. They mediate escalation and enable resolution. They do not resolve the conflict for the participants. The participants must do this for themselves, since this experience helps participants to develop the pro-social skills they often lack in their regular lives.

First, they use simple facilitation techniques and the six steps above to mediate the conflict from escalating into violence. The deterioration of the situation can inevitably lead to aggression or even violence, especially in young participants who may lack the maturity that allows for impulse control. Therefore, early in a program, facilitators will find themselves mediating conflict naturally arising from the social milieu: a bunch of strangers under stressful living conditions.

Second, they teach the six steps above, so that the participants can resolve their own conflicts and develop prosocial skills. Teaching the techniques is sequential and increasing responsibility for conflict resolution is gradually transferred to the participants. The sequence begins with emotional control (especially

anger management), progresses through mediation techniques (so they learn to mediate their own conflicts), and ends with resolution techniques (so they learn to resolve for themselves). Additional work can be performed around repairing the relationships within the group that may have been damaged by the conflict.

Finally, a progression of conflict resolving responsibilities and techniques, if cautiously transferred from the leader or facilitator to the participants, can allow groups to reconcile their own differences and further develop their pro-social skills. While adventurous outdoor learning programs may concentrate on the risk taking challenges to develop character, identity, and intrapersonal self-image, these programs should also see conflicts as a kind of interpersonal challenge and address this in a similar way, by debriefing the conflict resolution process like they would debrief a problem solving exercise and/or a risk taking experience. By making conflict part of the growth process in adventure, our profession can move away from seeing conflict as a shortcoming of the program or its staff and move it into the therapeutic realm of purposeful and deliberate challenge that develops pro-social skills in participants.

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