# Conflict management and conflict resolution

## 1. Definition

**Definition of social conflicts (Brunno Rüttinger)**

"Conflicts are situations of tension where two or more parties, which are dependent on each other, try to realise ways of thinking, of feeling or plans of acting, which are seeming to be or are really not being compatible. They are aware of their opposition."

Social conflicts were expressed in every sort of group (whether they are professional or private) and trigger fears, especially because they are connected with experiences of destruction or harming results. It gets often missed that social conflicts include the chance of a positive progress, when you deal with it in a constructive way.

**Transactional Analyse conflict counselling** (**Uta Höhl-Spenceley 2007** )

"Conflict Counselling is based on a explicit contract with a system or parts of a system (e.g. team or leader of a team) which is aimed to enable them :

- to get awareness about the existing situation of tension, the connected attitudes, feelings and tendencies of acting, which seems to be or are really not compatible
- to recognize destructive dynamics and consequences of the conflict
- to develop options in dealing with the conflict process and competencies of conflict resolution
- and on this basic to obtain decision-making powers and ability to act in the conflict situation

## 2. Stages and mechanism of conflict escalation

It is very important for the counselling process to diagnose the conflict considering to the level of the escalation and the effective conflict mechanisms. This includes to identify the patterns of behaviour, thinking and feeling and constructions of reality who are relating to the conflict and maintain the conflict or drive it forward.

A theoretical concept which is helpful is the model of stages of conflict escalation from Friedrich Glasl and his ideas about mechanisms in the different stages.

He describes different stages of escalation.
The border from one level to a higher level is marked with a threshold, which you can experience very clear. Whenever one of the conflict parties overstep one of the thresholds the conflict will reach another level of "violence", every new satge of escalation is connected with a dysfunctional change of the communication and with a limitation of opportunities for action.

**Stages of conflicts (F. Glassl 1999):**

- hardening
- debate                                   win-win
- action instead of words
- 
- worry for image and coalition
- loss of face                            win-loose
- strategies of threatening
- 
- restricted destruction
- fragmentation                        loose-loose
- together to ruin

F. Glassl describes that at the first stages every person involved thinks that the conflict is possible to solve in a good way (win-win) in the stages 4 – 6 the issue is wether I/we will win or the other will win (win –loose) and in the last three stages everyone have only the possibility to loose.

**Destructive Mechanisms which leads to escalation of the conflict (Uta Höhl-Spenceley, 2007)**

Based on Glassl´s theoretical ideas about conflicts, TA theory (especially game theory, analyses of transactions, frame of reference) and experiences in my practice you can define that one of the problems of conflict resolution is that how longer conflicts go on more and more the conflict parties develop dysfunctional/harmful patterns, which drive the conflict.

You can observe/explore following **destructive patterns**:

**Increase of dysfunctional communication**

- Instead of using all functional ego states adequate to the situation an ineffective complementary transaction (parental attitude – childlike attitude) get fixed
- Increase of ulterior transactions with discounts or subliminal derogatory messages
- The conflict parties avoid communication with each other

**Dysfunctional changes in the relationship**

- Increase of tension and hostile attitudes (leaving an O.K. – O.K. position)
- Establishing coalition, which are accompanied by a fixation of group boundaries inside the system between the conflict parties
- More and more agitation at the group boundaries
- Increase of psychological games and power-plays

**Fixation of the frame of reference and disorder of thinking**

- Frame of references which are dysfunctional get established or more end more justified
- Aspects of the situation, the own person or about the others get more and more discounted, when they don not fit to this frame of reference
- Aspects which could justify the own point of view get exaggerated
- The willingness to understand the frame of reference of the conflict party decrease

Definition of frame of reference:

"An individual´s frame of reference is the structure of associated (conditional) responses (neural pathways) which integrates the various ego states in response to specific stimuli. It provides the individual with an overall perceptual conceptual affective and action set which is used to define the self, other people and the world both structurally and dynamically." (Schiffs, TAJ 3/1975)

**Increase of self- and others harmful behaviour**

**3. Stages of conflict-counselling**

According to models of counselling- and treatment planning you can describe different phases of the methodical work in conflict resolution. This phase model is only a way of orientation and is not to understand as a linear static sequence. Rather conflict counselling is process orientated work, in which the single phases can be more often repeated and are not clear to separate from each other.

**Stages of transactional conflict counselling**

1. Contact and grasp the starting point
2. Definition of the problem and diagnoses of the conflict
3. Contract
4. Working on the conflict dynamic and the conflict mechanisms
5. Working on the conflict resolution
6. Integration in the every day life (or professional work)
7. Ending

Based on a clear analyses of the current state, the diagnoses of the conflict (stage, background, systemical aspects, group structure) and a contract you need a clear planning of necessary steps and interventions, which includes aspects of the work on the content (conflict resolution) and interventions aimed on changing the process.

According to the content at the beginning stages it is necessary that the definition of the problem of the different members of the system get clear and that the system come to a common problem definition from the adult ego state. Besides it is important that the

involved persons get aware about the sort of conflict, which mechanism are counteract a solution and maintain the conflict.

What is defined at conflict management have the main focus on disband the destructive patterns which maintain the conflict. Beside of interventions which are aiming on getting awareness about them (e.g. through analysing typical reported situations or confronting the parties with dysfunctional patterns they show during the session), it is important to interrupt patterns which drive the conflict and give the conflict parties the possibility to make alternative experiences during the counselling process.

The conflict resolution have the focus to work out the background of the conflict, relevant issues and find ways of resolution. E.g. in Team conflicts possible backgrounds could be undefined responsibilities, questions of power, structural problems or different needs/ professional attitudes and possible solutions could be define responsibilities, tasks, helping the leader to fill out the role, changing structures and finding ways to express needs/professional attitudes and learning cooperative ways to negotiate compromises.

At the beginning of a conflict counselling one of the problems is often that the conflict parties have a tendency to involve the counsellor and experience him/her as bias when they do not share their frame of reference, so main focus is here to establish a trustful working relationship, where everyone have apace and feel accepted. Beside it is necessary to focus not only on the problems, instead the system needs to look to their resources, signs of positive sides of their working or living together, recognize positive changes, getting aware of things they are agree (have in common) and making the experiences that different point of views are O.K. and accepted as equal.

## Literature

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