How useful is a problem-solving approach to police station conflict management: keeping the peace among police officers

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Abstract

Conflict management is the overall approach an organisation uses to respond to disputes and difficult issues in the workplace. Some of the theoretical ideas that underlie contemporary conflict management, however, are different from the prevailing cultural norms present in many policing organisations. For a police supervisor to develop the most effective approach to in-house conflict mediation then, some considered awareness might be necessary. The purpose of this article is first to distinguish the character of the traditional problem-solving approach to in-house police conflict management. It is suggested that the frame one applies to conflict may affect what one sees and does. Afterwards, the article draws on a case study of a workplace conflict that took place recently in the Irish National Police Service, relating to the introduction of a new-style criminal investigation. The purpose of this case study is to demonstrate that from a social interactionary perspective, the problem-solving conflict approach was not capable of unmasking the relational, meaning-making and value intricacies in the circumstances described. Drawing on this appraisal, an assessment is offered for police supervisors wishing to engage in their own mediation efforts, which encompasses a critical assessment of the deficiency of the problem-solving approach to personnel disagreements. Ultimately, a conclusion is reached that successful conflict intervention demands a careful look at the interpretive relationships between opposition parties; a police supervisor needs to help conflicting opponents to query much of what they suppose they know about the other, in order to learn what really motivates them and why.

INTRODUCTION

This article is written with a police supervisor's role in mind. In general, police supervisors — maybe because of their legal positivistic training, or due in some part to the matter-of-fact perspectives they hone from their frequent experiences of dealing with the assorted difficulties of others — tend to be pragmatic commonsensical problem-solvers. Their work calls for a problem to be looked at, and for analysis to speedily proceed to the point at which a promising and reasonably practical intervention emerges. While this sensible approach to normative police work is not without its plus points, it may unwittingly lead police supervisors towards

certain potentially destructive assumptions when called upon to reconcile in-house personnel conflicts.

By means of clarification, an analogy may be appropriate. A painkiller given to a person with a headache may temporarily salve his or her troubles; solve a problem arising from a conflict arising between two parties in a police station and it may produce a similar result. Indeed one could argue that painkillers and problem-solving approaches to conflict situations in a police station — as elsewhere, perhaps — have a good deal in common: both have been utilised for ages; many academic papers have been published about the two; however, it may not be easy to know if either really has a lasting effect on the root cause of one's troubles. Just now, pharmacologists may be labouring diligently to offer us a more refined understanding of painkillers. This article will pursue the same goals towards assessing the usefulness of the problem-solving approach to a workplace conflict that took place inside an Irish police station.

In order to achieve the above aim, the distinguishing methodological and theoretical nature of the problem-solving approach to conflict is first considered. This is an important issue, because the problem-solving approach differs somewhat from the methodological and theoretical roots of other conflict approaches available to police supervisors. Then, the article draws on a case study of a workplace conflict concerning the introduction of a new-style criminal investigation that took place in An Garda Síochána, the Irish National Police Service. The purpose of which is to demonstrate that the problem-solving conflict approach was not capable of unmasking the relational, meaning-making and axiological complexities in the conflict situation that is described. Drawing on this largely cognitive and ontological (the nature of being) critique, a reflexive assessment is offered for police supervisors wishing to engage in station-house conflict mediation, which encompasses a critical assessment of the efficacy of the problem-solving approach to personnel disagreements.

THE PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH TO CONFLICT

According to this writer's appreciation of the problem-solving perspective of conflict as has been presented and developed in the extant literature over time and space (Azar, 1972, 1979, 1985; Burton, 1962, 1965, 1972, 1979, 1984; Burton & Sandole, 1986; Kelman, 1972, 1987, 1997, 2001), a divergence of needs, values and interests amounting to a conflict may arise if one individual within a police station was, for instance, to seek to achieve a goal, and was hindered or prevented from achieving that goal because it was perceived as being incompatible with the objectives of another individual. Therefore, the conflict acquires the outward appearance of a clash or locking of horns, whereby, each party seeks to achieve his or her own goals at the expense of, or perhaps notwithstanding, the other party's requirements. This exceedingly individualistic worldview sees persons as 'unique, separate and autonomous' (Bush & Folger, 2005, p. 238), and capable of rationally defining their own universal, ontological and generic needs, interests and values, and satisfying them. As Sargent, Picard, and Jull (2011) state:

It is each party's perception of the other as an obstacle to the [realisation] of his or her own goals that fuels the conflict between them, sometimes resulting in bitter and protracted conflict. Because obstacles must be overcome, and because overcoming such obstacles is often expensive, difficult, and time consuming, the costs of conflict — especially ones in which the parties are relatively evenly matched in terms of resources — are often very high. (p. 348)

The conflict resolution approaches emphasised to police supervisors by archetypal

problem-solving advocates such as Burton and Sandole (1986), require parties to seek mutual gains and work collaboratively — aided by their supervisor — to identify shared interests obtained in analytical problem-solving, workshop-like, face-to-face sessions that can offer the basis for a communally gratifying resolution to the aggravated human needs at the root of the conflict. In such circumstances, police supervisors are advised to 'concentrate on helping the conflicting parties [at logger-heads] to become "joint problem solvers", who can each achieve more of their goals through [staged] collaboration and joint decision making, rather than through competition and struggle' (Hedeen, 2004, p. 109). An emphasis is to be placed on the maximisation of personal gain through discussion and mutual self-sustaining problem-solving (Maier, 1981).

Heath (1976) points out that such problem-solving approaches to conflict often depict parties as commonsensical, realistic, goal-seeking actors, whose primary concern is with their own welfare and with achieving their goals in an environment that inflicts limits on their capacity to do so. In other words, parties seek to modify their own functional environments to achieve their own ends of survival — taking goal-directed, purposive and future-oriented actions. This approach has a theoretical root that is situated in individualistic functional choice, power bargaining and decision-making. Conflicting parties must therefore ask themselves, what is the most rational decision I can make to achieve my desired goals in the future, given what I know about the state of affairs in the environment towards which my action is directed (Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Heath)? This method of calculating the consequences and returns of prolonged conflict for the parties themselves is liable to be the main ambition of supervisory problem-solving interventions. Emphasis is to be placed on the mutual gains (which rival police officers can make) and on the identification

of shared or tradable interests (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991).

In summary then, the problem-solving approach to conflict inside a police station is one in which parties are, by and large, seen by their supervisors to make autonomous choices, based on a positivistic calculation of the consequences and returns of probable outcomes that will affect their shared social functioning.

ASSESSING THE PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH TO POLICE CONFLICT

To start this assessment of the functionalist problem-solving approach to conflict within a police station, it should here be posited that how a police supervisor theoretically defines what is happening in conflict can have important repercussions with regard to how he or she will frame and respond to in-house conflict issues. It may well be the case, as Young (2008, p.197) has proposed, that 'paradigms power perceptions'. If, for example, a police supervisor chooses to only define a conflict in terms of goal incongruity or a struggle over competing desires, then it follows that he or she ought to only seek to help contra-parties achieve their goals or realise their personal objectives. Advocates of the contrasting, transformative (Bush & Folger, 2005) and narrative (Winslade & Monk, 2000) conflict-mediation approaches, however, each promote alternative and interrelated conceptual objectives to the goal-based approach involved with problem-solving. Thus, they suggest that not all supervisors theoretically need to understand their intercessionary efforts as having only just one solution. Instead, it is here recommended that police managers need to draw on their own epistemological (the character and scope of knowledge paradigms) outlines and cognitive frames of conflict and its causes, to conceptualise what it is they will observe and do during in-house mediation practices.

In transformative mediation, the goal is interpreting 'empowerment and recognition' (Bush & Folger), and in narrative mediation, it is the 'generation of a new story' (Winslade & Monk). Hassett, Mitchell, and Monan (1953) remind us that, in our positive judgements of the worthiness of knowledge paradigms, we should purposely decide upon a judgement of fact which is the fruit of personal experience derived from a reflective examination of our own positionality.

For the current writer, a long-time serving police officer, a social interactionist perspective is recommended as being consistent with his own considered worldview and life experiences within a lively police station. Because he believes that 'human' behaviour is fundamentally relational and that we constructively live our lives within networks of interpretive relationships that are meaningful to us and from which we generate our social identity (Merton, 1968; Moses, 1990). Consequently, he deems that the positional view contained within the problem-solving approach to conflict — that the parties are rational, future-orientated, decision-makers — perhaps fails to take into account the reflexive, two-sided scope of all purposive human action taking place within a police station (Mead, 1938; Niebuhr, 1963; Spector, 1983; Sandywell, 1996). After all, police officers involved in a conflict do not just look forward in time, purposively, towards a future that they seek to modify in accordance with their goals, needs or interests. It must surely be recognised that they also look backwards, reflexively, basing their actions on their subjective interpretation of the circumstances that compelled them to act in the first place. The theologian Niebuhr observed that all responsible purposive action is generated as an answer to the question, 'what shall I do?', but that this question cannot be answered only by reference to a prior question, 'what is my goal?', without also considering the answer to an antecedent question, 'what is going on?'.

The philosophical underpinnings of the author's own considered positionality having been explained, the remainder of this article sets out to do two things. First, to describe a case study of an actual conflict that recently happened in An Garda Síochána, to demonstrate that, for the author, the problem-solving conflict approach taken by the supervisor in question was not capable of unmasking the relational, meaning-making and value-related complexities in the conflict situation, which will be set out. Second, to draw on this largely ontological critique to offer a reflexive assessment of the practical implications for other police supervisors wishing to engage in mediation practice, while also passing commentary on the limited efficacy of the problem-solving approach to conflict.

THE CONFLICT

The conflict the author wishes to use for the purpose of his demonstration is one he is personally aware of: it involved two Garda co-workers employed within a division of An Garda Síochána (the Irish National Police Service); Jack, a fairly newly promoted arrival to his station, and Jill, a senior and long-time employee. When Jack settled in his new station, he drew on his previous experience and high levels of specialised training in a particular area of crime investigation to advocate the need for increased operational attention to be given to an area of analysis that he felt was largely being ignored, even though this area had up until that point been within Jill's remit and charge. Jill experienced this as a direct threat to her ability and position within An Garda Síochána — 'Who the hell does he think he is; he's only here a wet weekend and he's telling me how to do my job'. Jill took every opportunity to complain to her fellow workers and demean Jack's views; they, for their own motives, responded by forming a collaborative clique that resisted Jack's promotion of important administrative

modification. Jack was genuinely knocked for six. He felt wounded because he believed that he was acting in response to a much-needed, previously ignored area of crime investigation and service delivery. He, therefore, sought to have a meeting with senior Garda management to secure their backing for his idea.

The possibility that senior Garda management might intervene in what had until then effectively been a horizontal workplace issue involving the strategic modification of investigative practice, further heightened Jill's and her collaborators' collective feelings of threat. This reinforced their perceptions that Jack was merely trying to advance his own agenda and standing with senior Garda management, at their expense. Increasingly, they treated Jack and his staff as outsiders, depriving them of the vital inside knowledge they needed for their new-style criminal investigations. By this means, they further undermined Jack's efforts to generally convince other divisional Gardaí that his new ideas were sound and had operational merit. As the ante was upped for each party, they looked for support and dragged other staff into the conflict. The increasing consequences of the conflict undulated and rumbled on throughout that particular Garda division and further afield.

APPLYING A SOCIAL INTERACTIONIST LENS TO THE CONFLICT

Considering the relational aspects of the conflict

As already specified, traditional problem-solving approaches to in-house police conflicts will frequently depict parties as self-referential actors, whose needs, values and interests are produced within, sooner than relationally through, the individual's interaction with his or her environment. From this individualistic perspective, if a police supervisor wanted to understand the causes of conflict behaviour in the above circumstances, he or she might start by taking into account the possible shared interests and separate needs of the individual parties at conflict; Jack and Jill would be appreciated by such a person, as the source of his or her own needs, values and interests, and as the creator of his or her own deeds, almost as if Jack and Jill existed outside any social relations with others in their station setting.

Such a problem-solving view, however, would perhaps fail to see that Jack's and Jill's respective actions have created consequences for each other and for the policing division in which they both work, dynamic relational consequences that were not necessarily knowable beforehand or directly attributable to the purposes or drives behind their initiating actions. In such a co-evolutionary environment (Kauffman, 1995), actions also have unanticipated or inadvertent consequences, after all, Jack's attempt to enlist senior Garda management to hold up his investigative change project had the knock-on effect of increasing Jill's sense of intimidation and interference, and making her and her collaborating colleagues all-the-more wary of any succeeding efforts on Jack's part to re-engage with them and smooth out or neutralise the conflict.

Applying the most 'appropriate' approach to Jack and Jill's conflict might entail that their supervisor take account of more than the search of their respective or collective needs, values and interests in their analysis of the conflict. Should the supervisor, perhaps, also include Jack's and Jill's axiological (value-based) hopes for each other's behaviours, Jack's assumptions of how Jill ought to act and vice versa, the presumed patterns of collaboration that were considered essential by both conflicting parties? Ought the supervisor also include the value-based judgements of improvement and rejection they perceived in their own and each other's

behaviours and intentions when the criminal investigation scheme was first mooted? As can be observed in Jack's and Jill's conflict, the level of threat that was experienced, whether perceived or otherwise, was at the same time both the grounds for and the end product of the escalating relational conflict dynamic between the parties. It drove much of the defend–attack activities on both sides.

A traditional problem-solving supervisor might tend to emphasise the functional quest for shared interests, at the cost, perhaps, of not making an allowance for the relational pattern of contacts that created the perceptions of threat within their conflict dynamic. As can readily be appreciated from the conflict described above, Jill's protests and grumbles organised other Gardaí (police officers) in unpredictable ways, while senior Garda management's potential interference was an unintended corollary of Jack's ill-conceived communiqué. Is the conflict described above then, both relational and non-linear? The causes and effects of same are, after all, both compound and at times unpredictable. They concern more than the incompatible problems and goals that Jack and Jill appear to have. Rather, they are embedded in different, highly subjective and dynamic relational frameworks of understanding which require considered interpretation, ie, what perceptions Jack and Jill hold in relation to Garda organisational structures and power relations, gender identities, histories, influences, cultural mores, experiences and their potentially differing value concerns?

Considering the meaning-making aspects of the conflict

As 'human' beings, we develop our awareness of reality based on our sense-perceptual, experiences. We each call on our own such experiences via understanding, judgement, education, learning and acculturation; in this way, we develop cognitive maps or frames of meaning to aid us in making decisions. These can then used to arrange and deal

with complex information and stimuli and make sense of our own and other's experiences (Goffman, 1974; Lonergan, 1972; Thaler, 1984). As a consequence, we attribute significance to the implications of others, although we can never read their minds to know for certain their true thoughts, intentions or wills towards us. Consequently, we must draw inferences or assumptions from the discernible activities of others. We begin to shape ideas, hunches if you like, about how other people think. These we use as a cognitive shorthand that, in turn, ably qualifies our motivations as regards the behaviours of others. We may often be right; however sometimes, because we are human interpreters, we may get it wrong. As can be discerned from a reading of Jonsson's (1990) work, we constantly interpret our environment for clues about how to respond to other persons. Our response to the actions of others is determined not only by the material consequences of their actions on us, but also by the inferences we draw about them and their intentions toward us, inferences that we can rely on to orient our own actions toward them.

Arising from this, it follows, perhaps, that if we infer someone's actions toward us as antagonistic, then we are likely to take action in a way consistent with that reading — we too can become self-protective, and quite possibly, aggressive and cynical, and our response will often reflect that enmity, which can, in turn, generate other rather unfriendly reactions. Thus, as Jervis (1976) observes, we may be often guilty of a double standard when we evaluate conflict interactions in which we are involved: we interpret our own response as reasonable and appropriate, while viewing the response of our conflicting opponent as unreasonable and even malevolent.

It is possible to see this meaning-making process of conflict in the case study presented above, after all, Jill characterised Jack's suggestions for investigative process improvements as threats to her organisational status and thus reacted in view of that which she

interpreted. He then rejoined in response to her reaction and suggested seeking the support of their senior managers. Hence, it was that she countered by increasing her confrontation along with offering further resistance to Jack's endeavours. Perhaps, in order to fully identify with the dynamics of their mutually unreceptive and troublesome responses, their supervisor ought to have looked not just at Jill's perceptions of Jack's suggestions for change, but also at the perceptions that underlie Jack's interpretation of her comeback, and how that influenced his subsequent behaviour toward her, which then copper fastened her feelings about his actions as being stressful. This vicious circle of meaning-making conflict, or the conceptual spiral of mutually reinforcing distrust, is well described by Merton (1996) when he observes that negative attributions may occur when each party interprets the other's actions unfavourably and responds accordingly. In many conflict situations, these cycles fuel the conflict and have no obvious beginning or end. In some sense then, the conflict between Jack and Jill is not unlike the arms race as described by Merton between the USA and the former Soviet Union, for in each case, the process of attributing significance to the performance of others and then acting on the basis of the meaning attributed to that behaviour are somewhat similar.

It is not being argued here that Jack's and Jill's conflict lacks material problems at its base, or that the perceived problems that caused the conflict are all in the minds of the conflicting parties. Rather, what is being posited is that the traditional problem-solving approach to conflict was not complex enough to capture Jack's and Jill's ascription of significance and meaning to the actions and conditions presented. These may have shaped their perceptual experiences, activated their motivations and generated their behaviours. Human beings are not like other physical objects, billiard balls, for instance, whose deterministic propensity toward movement can be

logically calculated by Newtonian principles of motion or quantum physics. Instead, we each have the intellectual capacity and free will to actively understand and judge our perceptual surroundings in order to decide how to act in response to the conditions we take in. An appreciation of this principle of free will is essential to a supervisor's construal of the integrity of the parties at conflict, as it holds implications regarding whether individuals are to be held morally accountable for their actions. While recognition of shared goals may be reasoned as necessary, if it is not informed by actual experience, understanding and judgement of what is the good to be done, it may not decisively be compelled by it. Are we all too often aware of what we should do, and yet because we are humans possessing freedom of choice derived from our free will, we simply do not do it?

Perhaps, therefore, the focal point of conflict analysis between Jack and Jill need not necessarily be linear and purposive, as is the way with the traditional, functional, problem-solving approach. Instead, it could address the dynamic and adaptive interactions and interpretive meaning-making dynamics between the conflicting parties, as an alternative strategy to treating them as self-referential individuals whose needs, values and interests can be analysed objectively as if they are separate from the conflict itself and its wider environmental reaches.

CONSIDERING THE ROLE OF VALUES IN OUR CONFLICT CASE STUDY

Moreover, having undertaken a problem-solving approach to Jack's and Jill's conflict, their supervisor could, perhaps, have come across difficulties relating to the role and the objectification of values in the conflict, because the implicit postulation in the problem-solving approach to conflict is that the concept of 'interests' can be analytically differentiated from 'values' for the purpose of examining, understanding and adjusting a

party's behaviour. As Atran and Axlrod (2008) explain, however, conflicts over (police officer's) values are in reality more difficult to resolve than conflicts over interests, because values are related to individuals' sacred identities — their core sense of who they are and how the world ought to be ordered — and therefore are largely non-negotiable.

For a social interactionist, though, needs, values and interests are interdependent and intertwined. Jack's and Jill's particular frameworks of thinking about their conflict may include particular desires that they are each seeking to realise for themselves, and also take in wider considerations of normative social relations that they have come to value because they believe they serve a higher purpose — is it possible that during the course of their conflict Jack and Jill might have reflected on their respective roles and used such occasions to make value-related judgements that had an enduring influence on their self-identity within An Garda Síochána? In other words, their respective perceptions of losing organisational face and repute with other Garda co-workers if they backed-down from their particular positions, might well have invoked a sense of value injustice which then stimulated negative sentiments for observable causes that would stand apart from the immediate interests at stake with their being at odds with one another.

In such an instance, Jack's and Jill's respective values might well be intertwined with their interests in complex and entrenched ways that may not too easily be unravelled by their supervisor. In the end, it might not be a focus on their common interests to improve crime investigation and service delivery in their division, which might allow their supervisor to resolve their conflict problems and allow them work together in harmony. As long as Jill perceived Jack as still being a threat to her expertise derived from value-based seniority, she might do little to intervene and encourage her collaborating, cliquish colleagues who were withholding necessary information from Jack and his team, even if this had the outcome of destabilising the effectiveness and integrity of divisional investigations. Her attitude might change only once she began to see Jack as a competent co-worker to be trusted as an insider, consistent with her established pattern of normative expectations of a highly skilled equal.

Conflicting actors can sometimes be unaware of the values and biases attached to their demands. How then can they be expected to rationally objectify the axiological issues that underpin other parties' demands? No wonder in-house police personnel conflict occurs! As can be observed in the conflict situation as described, when Jack and Jill experienced a threat to their respective values, they responded defensively. It is here proposed that had their supervisor wanted to achieve lasting accord between both parties, focus should not only have been on the form of the struggle where Jack and Jill sought to accomplish his or her own goals at the expense of, or perhaps, in the face of, the other party or parties — as is the prescription of a traditional problem-solving approach. Their supervisor might also have considered an exploration of the defensive reactions of Jack and Jill, which might have brought involuntary underlying values to the surface. This perhaps would have allowed them to speak about what truly matters instead of simply maintaining defend and attack patterns.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICE SUPERVISORS

It is clear to this writer, arising from the short social interactionist critique supplied above, that police supervisors not yet practised in the art of station-house conflict mediation, might do well to remember that their cognitive and relational views of human interaction and conflict exchanges may have an impact on the way they see and attempt to intervene in a workplace conflict. In other

words, what he or she thinks will influence what he or she sees and does. The assessment of the traditional police problem-solving approach to conflict supplied above may hopefully help them to become more explicit about the need to be definite of their own theoretical footing. It is hoped that this smoothes the progress of their becoming better mediation practitioners. This application of a social interactionist lens to a functionalistic problem-solving approach to conflict might enable supervisors to develop added insight and intentionality to their own intercessionary motivated actions.

Undoubtedly, for some, the traditional problem-solving approach to conflict has its uses and the capacity to provide a frame through which conflict may be viewed. However, this writer, drawing on his policing practice, fundamentally believes in the importance of improving complex 'human' relationships through the maximisation of mutual respect and justice in favour of the common good. For him, the point of life is, responsible and virtuous self-cultivation aimed at what Aristotle called eudemonia, or fully human functioning. As Robert Fitterer declares: 'Living well requires loving aright' (2008, p. 3). Functionalism's view of conflict, directs a natural (positivistic) scientific explanation of human knowing, it is based on the belief that our language un-problematically reflects our 'objective' reality. Contrary to this view, the epistemological parameters directing the above assessment have suggested that conscientious interpretation (free-willed decision-making) is understood to be a central part of human judging; it is the creative meaning-making element of human action. The reflexivity of people is not an irritation to be evaded, as it is in the functionalist's position, rather it may be considered a defining qualitative aspect of human experience.

When a station-house conflict occurs, then, because of the highly interpretive nature of the threat experience perceived by each and every divergent party involved; it

is here suggested that all police supervisors need to help the parties they engage with to ascertain what it is that may be discovered about their respective perceptions of threat — what it is they care about. This, above all else, may help resolve and repair their working relationships. The more a supervisor can enable an interpretive deepening of the conversations between the conflicting parties; the better their chances of repairing the relational connection between the parties at conflict. Then they can articulate what really matters and why.

CONCLUSION

An assessment of the usefulness of the problem-solving approach to conflict has been considered above from a social interactionary perspective, in which the actions of a given conflict that occurred in An Garda Síochána was used to demonstrate that not every action within a conflict can be viewed as a distinct event. Rather, it was shown that the events that took place in the conflict described were part of a sequence of interconnected actions. In making a number of largely theoretical observations about the limitations of the problem-solving approach to conflict intervention an assessment was delivered that questioned the effectiveness of the problem-solving approach in the circumstances represented.

It was argued that the cognitive frame applied to conflict might affect a police supervisor's understanding and judgement as to what's best to do. Consequently, successful conflict intervention may require a police supervisor to move beyond the claim postulated by Burton and Sandole (1986) — leading advocates of the problem-solving approach — that their theory is generically and universally applicable to all conflicts. It may demand a closer look at the interpretive relationships between opposition parties, helping them to query much of what they suppose they know about the other in order

to learn what really motivates them. A deeper learning about each other's interpretation may be the key to unlocking station-house conflicts. As the symbolic interactionist, Blumer (1969, p. 180), states: 'human inter-action is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions.'

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