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Solution-focused conflict management and conflict consulting in organisations

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Introduction

The generally known methods of solution-focused consulting were developed in a therapeutic context: as methods to structure the therapist-client, or patient, dialogue (De Shazer, St.1989, De Jong, P. / Berg, I.1998). In my presentation I will concentrate on the following issue: How can the attitudes and methods of the solution-focused approach be applied to the consulting of systems (groups of people, departments, and/or companies) faced with or going through conflicts? Using a practical case from a company, it is shown which general principles of conflict management in large systems must be considered and how the use of SF methods facilitates conflict management.

1. A solution-focused approach to conflicts

With a solution-focused approach, conflicts can be seen as an attempt at solving a problem: The parties involved create a conflict in order to solve their problem.

When the focus is on the whole relevant system, the following questions arise: What is the purpose/benefit of the conflict? How can the system develop further by going through the conflict? What is the new thing that is trying to break through?

When the focus is on the parties involved in the conflict, the questions are: What personal interests do the parties pursue by engaging in the conflict, which of their needs do they want to satisfy by the conflict? What step in their personal development, which individual learning process, will be triggered by the conflict?

2. Solution-focused conflict consulting in companies

It has become obvious, that the methods of solution focused consulting are suited very well to the consultancy or coaching of individuals, even without any therapeutic goals. There is a wealth of research and documentation that shows that these methods are effective in this field and yield positive results (Bamberger, G. 2001).

There is no denying that when dealing with conflicts, it is often useful and sufficient to coach one single party. But in many cases this single-party consultancy is not enough, and any consultant who wishes to effectively deal with the conflict needs to provide consultancy to the whole system involved – a group of people, several departments of an organisation, and the organisation as a whole.

When consulting systems, I see the following major differences to consulting as a therapist or coach for individuals:

1. The parties communicate in a tactical way.

When providing conflict consultancy, the consultant should be aware that the "adversary" is always present. This means that whatever a party says or does should be considered a "tactical move" which is part of his/her overall strategy to realize his/her own interests and/or push through certain changes in the entire system.

Furthermore, the consultant should know that the parties are always aware of the overall situation. If the consultant was retained, for example, by the head of a department, the issues that come up will be different from those that would have emerged if the consultant had been retained by the boss of the head of the department or by HR.

This means that consultants should keep in mind that it is possible, for example, that any hypothetical, future-oriented questions will trigger only such answers which the parties questioned feel that they can give in the particular context without exposing themselves and which will support their own strategies.

2. Some of the parties involved in the conflict may feel (more or less) pushed to take part in the consultancy.

Generally speaking, conflict management within a business enterprise is the responsibility of managers. They tend to retain a consultant if they are themselves involved in the conflict or if the conflict has escalated (Glasl, F.1990) such that the parties are no longer able to solve it internally. This means that in a business enterprise the person retaining the consultant will always be a member of the management team who is sincerely interested in solving the conflict in a structured, cooperative way. This need not hold true to the same extent for all the employees, though. It is possible that some of them take part in the process with a kind of resistance because they feel pushed to attend.

This problem is also well known by authors who describe solution-focused therapy, for example, De Jong, P. / Berg, I.1998 who distinguish between "clients", "visitors" and "those who merely wish to complain". Consequently, the consultant should be aware that some of the parties attending the consultancy process may not be real "clients", but may merely attend out of curiosity, because they feel pushed, because they wish to express their complaints or for whatever personal reason.

3. Conflict management in larger systems requires a structured way of action

Within an organisation, conflict consultancy rarely involves work with solely 2 conflicting parties; usually, it means working with groups of various sizes. In traditional conflict consultancy it has proved successful to proceed in 3 phases: orientation phase, conflict treatment phase, consolidation phase (Glasl, F. 2004). The same applies to the solution-focused approach. The necessity of an "orientation phase" is a major difference to the classical approach in the solution-focused therapy or coaching of individuals. However, when working with complex, larger systems, the orientation phase is indispensable. It is to enable orientation on 2 sides: on the one hand, the parties to the conflict learn about the personality, role, work ethic and approach of the consultant; on the other hand, the consultant explains the relevant general conditions, rules, and communication structures for further dealing with the conflict, learns about the number and the groups of people who need to be involved in the conflict management, and – together with the parties involved – draws a picture of the conflict situation that is as conducive as possible for the further efforts at improving the conflict situation. In the solution-focused approach, it is typical at that stage to pay particular attention to the various solution scenarios of the individual parties to the conflict, what strengths and resources they see, and of what situations they are aware where they experience at least some hints or traces of the visualised solution.

3. Case study

I was contacted by the head of division of a big company who found himself in a difficult situation. His relationship with some of his managers and employees had come more or less to an impasse on account of serious conflicts which had developed over several years. All in all, his division comprised about 60 employees. His request for outside help was triggered by the fact that in a staff survey, those conflicts had come to broad daylight. Some comments had been that strong that it was only logical to conclude that in his relationship with some of his staff, escalation step 4 (F. Glasl, 2004) had been reached. The head of division was firmly resolved to actively address the difficult situation and to bring about a lasting improvement.

Phase 1: Job definition

A consultant can provide effective consultancy services to a company only if he/she is given a formal order by the responsible manager and if he/she establishes an "emotional contract" with all parties to the conflict; this means that in the optimum case, all parties to the conflict resolve that they wish to work with the particular consultant in bringing about an improvement of the situation. In the case at hand, this had become possible by the fact that offers of 3 different consultants had been invited and that the head of division had decided that it would not be him who would select the consultant; rather, a group of employees, ie representatives of each department, should make that decision.

Solution-focused elements in my interventions during the job definition phase

During the job-definition phase I had an initial meeting with the head of division and subsequently I submitted and presented an offer. My offer included my view of the *status quo* and, on that basis, recommendations, how much time and efforts as well as what methods should be used to deal with the conflict. In the case at hand, my view of the *status quo* was based on the findings of the staff survey as well as on the initial meeting with the head of division. When describing the *status quo*, I paid particular attention to describing problem-stabilizing and solution-generating factors in a balanced manner. In other words, I tried to make it clear what I considered resources, strengths and things that were functioning properly. And I also tried to point out what events of the past, opinions, attitudes, etc. I saw which contributed to existing conflicts so that the conflicts would continue or even deepen if nothing were done to counteract them. Judging from my experience, such a balanced look at the situation is indispensable: Focusing exclusively on the resources and the visualised solution would be stifling, the parties to the conflict would have the impression that an essential part of their reality was overlooked or neglected.

Phase 2: Orientation

My major interventions were:

- personal talks with each individual manager and member of staff as well as with the chairman of the works council,
- collective group meetings with employees from the individual departments,
- presentation of the results of such talks before a representative group, bringing about a decision on the actual course of action to be taken.

Solution-focused elements in my interventions during the orientation phase

During the personal talks and in the collective group meetings, a number of solution focused techniques proved very helpful:

In situations of conflict, the parties involved usually have a strong wish, actually a real urge, to describe how the conflict has developed and in what respect they have been disappointed and hurt – even without explicitly being asked to do so. I have found it a productive approach to carefully listen to the parties and ask questions only to the extent that it is necessary for me

to be able to clearly recognize the major bones of contention, the dynamics of the conflict and the current degree of escalation. What is really required from the consultant is to actively turn around the wheel so as to steer the parties away from such unsolicited analyzing of past problems and instead to make them focus on positive visions of the future, on their strengths and on possible approaches to a solution!

I managed to do this by asking for exceptions (how do you experience the situation, when does it feel better, be it only slightly better, etc.) as well as by posing the "miracle question" and working with rating scales. The latter with a double purpose: To instigate specific steps of – ever so small - small changes and to create a yardstick for the final evaluation of the process. I put the following question to all the people I talked to in this context: Let's suppose our joint work at the problems were successful: By what parameters would you know at a predetermined date (which is half a year later) that the culture of cooperation has improved? The replies to that question were highly specific. Let me give some examples: 1) behaviour of X in group meetings: X listens, lends an ear to the wishes of the employees, reflects on them, does not block them off right away. 2) Clear strategy regarding the new technology Y: there is internal communication about it, we stick to it for 2 years. 3) People seek contact with each other...., greet each other, and there are smiles between the „old “and the „new“ employees. In a next step, I used those comments for my further work: „On a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the positive situation that you have just described, where are you now?" The ensuing discussion about the current position and the next small steps at bringing about a change as well as the possible contribution of each individual party to the conflict yielded many positive suggestions.

Phase 3: Conflict management

In order to actually deal with the conflict, I proceeded at three levels:

Firstly, at the level of the relationships between individuals and within groups: I moderated personal meetings between the head of division and the individual managers in order to sort out their controversies and build or rebuild the mutual trust. In addition, I moderated meetings with the head of division and each department which had the following goals: Listen to the respective other party, try to understand, deal with the mutual wishes and expectations.

Secondly, at the level of organisational structures, roles and procedures: In a workshop with all managers of the department several essential measures were discussed and decided on: necessary educational measures, the need to furnish specific job descriptions of the individual employees (provide a clear and detailed description of tasks, competences, and responsibilities), development of structures enhancing cross-departmental cooperation, improvement of the process of project meetings.

And, thirdly, at the level of the technological basis of the future work: information and discussion at departmental level on the prerequisites for the successful development of a technology that was considered critical to the future success of the entire company, and discussion about the progress made in that development. As a consequence of our efforts at that level, the chief executive officer allowed further personal resources to bring about the technological innovation.

Solution-focused elements in my interventions during the conflict management phase

In my opinion, the strengths of the solution-focused approach, to the extent it has been developed so far, are the afore-mentioned attitudes and questioning techniques to bring about changes of views, evaluations and perspectives. Thus, they are aimed at the very heart of a conflict: A conflict escalates as a consequence of changes in the perceptions, ways of thinking and feeling and in the wishes of the parties to the conflict. To reverse that trend, de-escalation also necessitates changes at these levels. The entire spectrum of the solution-focused approach to conducting meetings/discussions/inquiries is suited to this process particularly well; in

particular this refers to questions for hypothetical solutions, questions for exceptions and distinctions, work with scales, summarizing, paraphrasing, complimenting, circular questions (see, in this connection, De Jong, P. / Berg, I. 1998, Proksch, Mecke, A. 2004).

Furthermore, there are a number of other time-tested measures of conflict management which I employed successfully to the case described, in particular the method of non-violent communication (M. Rosenberg, 2001), the method of "principled negotiation" (Fisher, R. *et al.* 2002) and role negotiation (Harrison, R. 1971).

Where issues regarding the steering and guiding of the entire division were concerned, or the further development of organizational structures, roles and processes and the clarification of the technological basis for the future work, I employed not only the solution-focused approach, but also classical tools of personnel development, organisational development and professional process consulting. (Glasl *et al.* 2005).

Phase 4: Evaluation

It is generally accepted that in interpersonal development processes, the *status quo*, or the "as is" situation, must be defined by all members of the system. The same holds true when looking at the progress of the development. In conflicts, both the definition of the *status quo* and the definition of the progress made are highly delicate issues and are of particular importance: It is at the very heart of conflicts that the subjective perceptions of the individual parties to the conflict differ considerably! Accordingly, it is to be expected that the subjective impressions as to whether a conflict has been coped with / handled well / or even "solved" will differ!

This makes it only logical that the progress of any efforts at solving a conflict should be evaluated with the help of a clear and generally accepted method.

In the case at hand, I resorted to rating scale questions already applied during the orientation phase. At that time, I had asked the parties, "By what parameters would you know at a predetermined date (which is half a year later) that the culture of cooperation has improved?" Around that date, I held group meetings; I asked all parties involved to describe their impressions by using a rating scale from 1 – 10 (anonymous replies, using a written list of their former comments plus rating scale). Subsequently, I merged the anonymous individual comments into an overall collective picture and instigated an open dialogue within the group, focusing on the following question: What has turned for the better – stayed the same – turned for the worse – as a consequence of the measures of the past few months? Overall, that evaluation gave a convincing picture of a marked improvement of the situation: 34 % rated the situation 7 or higher, another 56% gave a rating between 4 and 7, and the remaining 10 % gave a rating lower than 4. Regarding the dialogue, many rated the developments positive, not even one participant had had the impression that the situation had deteriorated.

These evaluation meetings constituted the end of my work as conflict manager. And you can imagine that I was more than pleased when, one year later, my customer, the head of division, called me to relay another highly satisfactory feedback from the group, saying, "We have achieved very much in the past year – your efforts have indeed led to a fruitful cooperation within the group".

4. Summary

The attitudes and methods of solution-focused consulting have proved a considerable asset in professional conflict management, which is also reflected in a growing number of articles in the specialized literature (Kessen, St. / Troja, M. (2002), Mecke, A. 2004, Proksch, R. 1998). The solution-focused approach has shown to be highly fruitful in all situations where a change of perceptions, evaluations, feelings, and needs or goals can contribute to de-escalation. However, it should be kept in mind that the solution-focused method cannot generally be considered the only way for managing conflicts. Depending on the degree of escalation, the

type of conflict, and the special context, it will be necessary to rely on different conflict management strategies (Glasl, 2003).

In the corporate context, special conditions apply: Conflicts in institutions are usually also caused by the distribution of resources, by structures, technologies, etc. Consequently, it is often not possible to reach a "solution" by resorting exclusively to the instrument of dialogue in order to bring about a change of perceptions, evaluations and feelings of the persons involved. In addition, it will be necessary to conduct negotiations, work out agreements and make decisions in order to bring about a lasting change or to achieve that the entire system makes that step in its development the necessity of which was pointed out by the conflict.

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