Jedi Moerke

Interpersonal Conflict

October 14, 2009

Interpersonal Conflict Narrative

Conflict Participant Goals and Interests,

 In the previous installment of this paper, I briefly laid out a conflict between myself and someone watching me travel with my white cane. In the conflict, the man saw my cane make contact with a guard rail between a train platform and the tracks. Believing that he should help, he immediately began to offer instruction and I refused it. In the end, I felt frustrated and the man felt hurt that his help was, in his opinion, so rudely refused. The goal of this paper is to review the conflict in terms of the goals and personal interests of each partner in the conflict.

 In conflict, the conflict partners express struggle over what they perceive to be incompatible goals (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 9). Goals answer the question of what each person wants in the relationship and in the conflict itself. William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker (2007) lay out four types of conflict goals using their TRIP theory: Topic (or content goals), relational goals, identity (or face work) goals, and process goals. These goals drive a conflict forward, and their effective management can transform a destructive conflict into constructive problem-solving.

 Topic goals are content goals. They are the external things we can point to and are often the things we argue about (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 64). Topic goals are resources, ideas, decisions, etc. This is where conflict starts; each of the conflict partners perceives incompatibility in their topic goals and interference by the other conflict partner in achieving them. In this case, the man at the Greyhound station wants to help me navigate the train platform separating us from the gate to the bus we’re supposed to take. As for me, I want to be left alone to manage on my own. Our goals are very different from one another and interfere with each other; I can’t go on my own if the man is insistent on helping me, and he can’t help me if I want to find my way on my own. As illustrated by the conflict narrative, there’s much more under the surface of this conflict. According to Wilmot and Hocker (2007), this tends to be the case.

 Process goals relate to how a conflict should be played out. What rules govern the discussion itself? Once a conflict is discussed, then what happens? Though there are no clearly stated process goals from either conflict partner, the narrative reader might infer that the man may have expected more direct forms of politeness and courtesy from me, especially since he offered me assistance. But according to Dawn O Braithwaite and Nancy J. Eckstein (2003), disabled people tend to prefer that they themselves initiate the helping situation rather than the other way around; disabled people also show preference for discrete offers of assistance rather than overt offers which draw attention to a disabled person’s stigma (P. 13). I am no exception to this tendency. I do prefer less dramatic offers of assistance and certainly perceived the man’s keenness to assist me as overkill. Violations against preferred processes on either side left both conflict parties frustrated and upset. From their conclusions regarding how and why disabled people ask for and accept assistance, Braithwaite and Eckstein would probably tell us that what feels like violations in process are really about saving face and protecting our identities as either a helpful person or as a capable person with a disability. Wilmot and Hocker would probably agree.

 Relational and identity goals are often tied together. Relational goals refer to how each party sees themselves in the context of the relationship. Relational goals also answer the question “Who are we together?” (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, P. 65). Identity goals answer the question “Who am I?” In this case, relational and identity goals take primacy and are tied together since the man’s’ actions presumably came from an ethic of care in which he may have seen himself as a temporary caregiver responsible for the welfare of a disabled person while establishing identity as a caring citizen. The ethic of care regarding people with disabilities is common for the non-disabled, but there is much uncertainty about the appropriateness of helping the disabled since non-disabled people receive the mixed messages of “help the disabled” and “let people do things for themselves” (Braithwaite & Eckstein, 2003, P4). He may have seen some interdependence or interconnectedness even though our relationship was quite brief and, in my view, quite superficial. Since I saw our relationship as superficial (we were just two people catching the same bus), I felt no obligation to adhere to social customs afforded to familiars. As such, responding to his enthusiastic interest to help with “I’m fine” was perfectly appropriate.

The man’s insistence on helping me also presented a threat to my identity as a young independent blind woman. This sort of perceived threat to the negative face (feelings of autonomy) is quite common for people with disabilities who want to be seen as capable and in control of their own lives despite challenges (Braithwaite & Eckstein, 2003, P. 12, 22). I wasn’t the only one feeling threatened. My refusal of his assistance compromised his positive face (any positive regard others may have for him) by stepping on his identity as a helpful and caring person. These mutual face threats didn’t stop there. Once threatened, the man’s identity goals switched from wanting to be thought of as helpful to protecting any possible bystander’s perception of him and his action. His comment of “I was just trying to help” not only communicated hurt feelings. The man may have also subconsciously protected himself by further threatening my positive face by suggesting that I was lacking in appropriate social graces.

The goals of each participant in the helping conflict are understandable. I wanted to be seen as anyone else: capable, competent, and normal. Meanwhile, the man just wanted to help someone out. While avoiding conflict altogether might not have been possible since few non-disabled people really know what to do when meeting a disabled person, both parties certainly could have avoided threatening the other’s face. Upon hearing that I was fine, the man simply could have wished me well and went on his way. On the other hand, I may have done well to say something to the affect that I appreciated what he was trying to do and that I felt confident in my ability to get to where I needed to be. In so doing, I would have acknowledged his identity as a helpful person and he would have affirmed my identity as a capable person. While we might not have been able to meet our goals directly, we definitely would have been able to disarm the conflict by working together to achieve mutual goals.

References

Braithwaite, D. O. & Eckstein, N. J. (2007). How people with disabilities communicatively manage

assistance: Helping as instrumental social support. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 31*(1), 1-26. Retrieved October 13, 2009 from EBSCO **http://www.ebsco.com.**

Wilmot, W. & Hocker, J. (2007). Interpersonal Conflict 7th ed. McGraw-Hill.