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Communication in Development:
The Need for a Technology on Conflict Management

By

Benjamin V Lozare
COMMUNICATION IN DEVELOPMENT: THE NEED FOR

A TECHNOLOGY ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Benjamin V. Lozare, Ph.D

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Communication in Development: The Need for
A Technology on Conflict Management

Benjamin V. Lozare, Ph.D

The key point of this paper is that the use of communication for nation building requires a comprehensive technology of conflict management. In the past forty years, such a technology has been ignored by communicators who appear to be more concerned with enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of persuasive messages.

This paper will argue that conflict, properly managed, can be a positive factor in national development. Productive conflict can be a source of energy, creativity, inspiration and focus. In contrast, unmanaged conflict becomes a significant drag to the planning and implementation of development programmes causing the allocation of energy to unproductive objectives and the wastage of time and other resources.

In an earlier paper on the same topic, I have noted that the literature on conflict does not seem to have clearly answered whether conflict is a process, a relational state, a feeling or a set of behaviors. Confusion results when concepts like "hostility" "disagreement", "incompatibility," "competition" and "misunderstanding" are considered interchangeable with the concept of conflict (Lozare, 1989).

My preferred definition of conflict is that of Brown (1983) which states that conflict is "incompatible behavior between
parties whose interests differ", a definition which easily trigger images relevant to the development context.

Figure 1 attempts to conceptualize the pursuit of national development objectives as a function of public behavior which in turned is shaped largely by the efforts of development institutions.

![Diagram]( ATTENTION: The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document. Nanyang Technological University Library )

Figure 1- A Conceptual Framework Relating Communication with National Development
I would like to hypothesize that communicators have largely ignored the influence of organizational communication factors on the process of production and distribution of development messages, the area where communicators seem to have concentrated their attention, e.g. production and distribution of family planning and health messages, agricultural and industrial productivity messages, etc.

The framework suggests that the efficiency and effectiveness of producing and distributing development messages depend on the clarity of a shared vision and development workers' commitment to it, the level of skills of development workers and their ability to work as team.

To clarify this concept further, the analogy of a football team may be used. The success of a football team depends on the team's game plan, the individual skills of the players and their ability to work as a team. A weakness in one of these dimensions would be hard to overcome by excellence in the other dimensions. Indeed, high level individual skills do not count much if the players cannot work as a team. Neither can they achieve much despite high level skills and teamwork if the the game plan is weak.

An analysis of the situation in many development countries would usually find the following:

1) There is often no clear shared vision to which development workers and the people are committed to. In short, the game plan is highly deficient.
2) The level of skills of development workers is frequently low.

3) Development workers find it hard to work as team.

4) Social and political structural factors pose serious obstacles to implementation of development programmes and changing of peoples' behavior. Attempts to change social and political structural factors are conflict prone activities.

5) Resources are severely limited and the process of resource allocation is a major source of conflict.

6) Conflicts between development messages and current beliefs of people due to lack of participative/consultation activities and poor sequencing of development messages.

7) Conflicts are usually resolved by application of the law, often with the use of force, rather than through a communication-based technology of conflict management.

An elaboration of these observations follows:

1) Lack of a shared vision and commitment to it.

Although most developing countries claim to have "development plans", many of the so-called "plans" are akin to "wish books", simple statements of what people would like to happen but which lack concrete strategies and specific action steps that can be taken to move people from their present situation to a more desirable one.

Ideological conflicts appear to be significant in many developing countries. Insurgencies, separatist movements,
rebellions, coups d'état seem to be common fare in addition to a constant high level of civil disorder. As a consequence, a lot of resources that could have been allocated to development projects are devoted to internal security operations which in many developing countries constitute the biggest item in the national budget.

Some of the conflicts in this area are conflicts of interests, i.e. land reform is usually opposed by landlords. Others are perception conflicts (differences in assessments of situations), goal conflicts (differences in desired states or standards), or strategy conflicts (differences in preferred courses of action). In a number of cases, the lack of a shared vision is due to incompetent leadership.

Ideological and conceptual conflicts also plague development scholars and competing development paradigms have spawned endless debates which could have been focused on more urgent and important issues.

2 and 3. Low level skills of development workers and inability to work as a team.

Conflict among development workers perhaps occur more frequently that is thought. Figure 2 presents a typology of development actors classified according to measure of mission-orientedness versus self-interest and open-mindedness versus close-mindedness.
As indicated in the figure, workers who are relatively mission-oriented but whose minds are closed may be labeled "fanatics". They may be sincere but their dogmatism may wreak havoc in a development organization because errors as well as achievements would be pursued with zeal. Their narrow view of development may put them in direct confrontation with other development workers, particularly the "professionals" who are mission-orientated but are open-minded well.

Figure 2 - A Typology of Development Workers According to Their Mission-orientedness and Open-mindedness

The "bureaucrats" usually predominate in most development organizations. They primarily pursue self-interest rather than the mission of the organization and they do so with closed minds. Thus, the typical clerk who refuses to acknowledge...
"tape" may be simply protecting his own self-interest, that is his own job which may be completely superfluous.

The "businessmen" in a development organization are those who also pursue self-interest but who do so with open-minds. Thus, they usually exhibit greater mental agility than the "bureaucrats" and are recognized for their pragmatism in pursuing opportunities to supplement their incomes, perhaps through acceptance of bribes or graft. In most instances, the stars of "businessmen" usually rise faster than those of the "bureaucrats".

The "professionals", on the other hand, are the true idealists whose minds are open to realities and constraints, to reasonable goals and compromise and to threats as well as opportunities.

These four categories of development workers relate with each other within the context of power struggles and conflict. Frankly, I would hazard a hypothesis that outcomes of the conflict and power allocation struggles among the four types of development workers would have a much greater impact on the development process than from the fine tuning of theories and models of communication.

One can write voluminous literature on the damage done to development programmes or communication campaigns when leadership of development organizations pass on to "fanatics", "bureaucrats" and "businessmen" rather than to "professionals". It is in these instances when the best communication and development theories
fall apart and cease to be meaningful.

Indeed, it has been often observed that professionals do not seem to last in government service. It is also recognized that many Third World governments are characterized by graft and corruption and excessive red tape.

A possible explanation is what is described above. Under conditions of poor or mis-directed leadership, the four types of government development workers are in constant struggle for supremacy. The professionals often lose out because of their unwillingness to use the full spectrum of bureaucratic in-fighting techniques.

Poorly managed conflicts among development workers can thus allow the ascendancy of the incompetent but politically astute "bureaucrats" or "businessmen" who often cause lasting damaging effects on development programs.

Corollarily, I would hazard to suggest a hypothesis that in most successful case histories of development programmes, one is likely to find the mark of professionals who do their job in the best way that they can.

In a sense, perhaps one important challenge for us is to find ways on how we can move the great number of "bureaucrats" from the lower left quadrant (point A) to the upper right quadrant (point B) where the "professionals" are.

Another typology of development workers is shown in Figure
3. This typology is based on development workers' concern for implementation and management and their concern for analysis and empirical data. Differences in their perspectives, say between the "ivory tower visionaries" and the "drones or worker bees" can trigger serious misunderstandings among development workers.

Figure 3 - A Typology of Development Workers According to Concern for Data and Analysis and Concern for Implementation and Management

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<th>High Concern for empirical data and analysis</th>
<th>Low Concern for Implementation and Management</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ivory Tower</strong></td>
<td><strong>Noisy bell</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Winning Team</strong></td>
<td><strong>Drone or worker bee</strong></td>
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4. Social and political structural factors pose serious obstacles to the implementation of development programmes and peoples' behavior.

Rigid social stratification, inefficient political systems, economic inequities, flagrant violation of human rights due to weak law enforcement, etc. often cause serious obstacles to development programs.
Rigid social stratification blocks participatory activities while inefficient political systems often thwart popular will. Economic inequalities and social injustice cause uneven access to the means of communication and the benefits derived from them.

Tensions generated by these factors usually erupt into social instability and periods of chaos which throw the economy into kilter and sidetrack development programs. The Philippines, Sri Lanka, Nepal, China and Indochina are excellent examples of these unproductive large scale social conflicts.

5. Resources are severely limited and the process of allocation of resources is often a source of serious conflict.

Issues such as agricultural growth vs. industrial development, education vs. national security expenditures, labor vs. industry, public welfare vs. economic growth often generate unnecessary tensions. Such conflicts usually occur when a country's political leadership is weak and fails to provide the appropriate long term vision that could clearly establish a country's priorities.

On the other hand, many developing countries witness the "edifice syndrome" of their leaders who develop penchants to build show-case projects that yield minimal benefits to the people, e.g. magnificent cultural centers, palaces, etc.
6. Conflicts between development messages and peoples' current beliefs due to lack of participatory activities and consultation and poor sequencing of messages.

A good analogy concerns knowledge of the numbers of a safe without the appropriate sequence. Knowing the numbers does not help much because without the proper sequence, the safe would remain locked.

Sequencing of messages has not been given the attention that it deserves by communicators. Poor sequencing of messages because of insufficient understanding of audiences can be remedied by increasing participatory activities which can yield insights on how people perceive certain situations and what they value.

In cultures where husband-wife communication is inadequate, family planning messages usually have limited effects. Conflict between spouses surface because the absence of appropriate context messages garble reception of family planning informational and motivational campaigns.

Similarly, health education campaigns among Andean peasants were noted to have failed because the communication planners did not consider that the cultures being targeted lack a germ-theory of disease. As noted by Matlon et al (1988):

Traditions do not hang together in shreds and pieces; they are woven together by a set of explanations. In science, the explanations are called theories; in nonscientific settings, folklore or folk science. (1)
In this regard, few development planners realize that many of their development messages are disruptive and dissonance creating messages as they threaten existing belief systems. Participatory activities and careful sequencing of messages may reduce unnecessary conflicts in this area.

7. The resolution of conflict through application of the law, usually with force, rather than a communication-based conflict management technology.

Although the state claims the sole agent of legal use of force, many developing countries are experiencing painful struggles that cause the use of force by its citizens, sometimes with the intervention of a foreign power.

Not only are development programmes disrupted, precious lives are lost and economic opportunities are wasted. The irony is that often, struggles for greater social justice often cause the opposite.

When a dam was built in the mountains of Northern Philippines, the people whose villages would be submerged took arms and fought government forces for years. In such a situation, conventional communication approaches failed to contribute much as the conflict cannot even be properly defined by current models. A show of hand would reveal that the lowlanders who would benefit from the dam because of increased supply of irrigation systems, electricity and water may be in the majority and yet that does not make the rights of the uplanders less legitimate.
The lack of a communication-based conflict management technology thus resulted to the use of naked force. Economic losses may be calculated for this conflict but the loss of human lives and relationship is incalculable.

What Can Be Done

In this seminar, I would like to propose the following suggestions:

1. We should recognize that power is one of the most important variable in appreciating communication situations. The use and abuse of power is central to understanding the problems relating to both growth and equity.

   It is surprising that communicators have avoided the study of power despite its centrality to communication and development situations. Medical doctors would not hesitate to study anything, including all human body fluids and solid waste to generate clues on what ails their patients. In the study of communication, unfortunately, we seem to have surrendered to others the study of power and its application.

2. We should recognize that participatory planning and research, concepts which are now being encouraged, require conflict models rather than consensus ones.

   True participation demands the participation of all, including those whose views are contrary to conventional wisdom.
In this regard, a conflict model is vital in reconciling differences in opinion instead of simply sweeping them under the rug of persuasive messages.

In a conflict model, conflict is deemed to be an integral part of the picture and not an aberration as would be the case in a consensus model. Conflict management puts conflict on the front stage and not on the back burner (Lozare, 1989).

3. We should promote the idea that well-managed conflicts are healthy and desirable whereas poorly managed conflicts exact high costs on development programs.

Too little conflict is not desirable because they mobilize little energy within groups, prevents disagreements and sharing of controversial information, perpetuates unchallenged traditions or myths and promotes decision based on inadequate information.

A high level of conflict, on the other hand, produces high level energy to counter-productive objectives, cause the restriction of information flow and distorts decision making processes.

4. We may need to reconsider our dichotomy of communication actors into sources and receivers. This dichotomy has caused us endless problems and has led to a strong source-bias in our researches and plans. The new communications technology which are more interactive in nature suggest that communication actors are best referred as communication participants with equal status in any communication. This upgrades the concept of feedback and
feedforward as integral parts of the communication process.

5) Consider the development of a technology of conflict management. As a modest start, I would like to solicit your views on a framework I have been working on. This framework seeks to analyze the types of conflict that occur, why they occur and what can be done to resolve them. The framework is given in Figure 4.

Figure 4 - A Typology of Conflict, Their Causes and Possible Solutions

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<tr>
<th>Types of Conflicts</th>
<th>Causes of Conflicts</th>
<th>Conflict Resolution Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) Perception conflicts</td>
<td>Differences in information and/or differences in assessments of situations</td>
<td>Communication/education strategies and/or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) Goal conflicts</td>
<td>Differences in values and/or differences in desired states or standards</td>
<td>Structural or systemic strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C) Strategy conflicts</td>
<td>Structural factors and/or differences in preferred courses of action</td>
<td>Selection of actors strategies (e.g. hiring, promotion of &quot;good people&quot; and firing of &quot;undesirables&quot;)</td>
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Note: Conflicts with strong personal and emotional undertones are not included here. Such conflicts require expert counseling and other similar strategies.

Based on the framework, people may be in conflict because they assess situations differently, vary in their objectives and/or prefer different courses of actions.
In turn, these differences occur because people may have different sets of information or values. Alternatively, or at the same time, they may process information in varying ways. Similarly, structural or systemic factors may also promote competition rather than cooperation.

Conflicts can therefore be resolved either by increasing the quantum and quality of communication, making structural or systemic remedies or by selecting the actors, e.g. firing the "bad elements" and increasing the number of "good elements".

The framework is applicable too in village settings where power relationships are also critical. When people are well organized and conflicts are at optimal levels, people's capabilities to go from where they are to where they want to go are enhanced. But organizing people can be a most challenging task and getting people to participate in decision-making can be most difficult if power-relationships and conflicts are not properly managed. It is in this area that literature is thin and we lack maps to guide us in our paths.

It may be useful to note at this point that some conflict situations arising from development programmes may be most problematic because it is most difficult to pinpoint who is in error. The classic development problem of relocating people whose homes and ancient burial grounds will be submerged by a huge dam to be built has not yet found a satisfactory answer.

If public opinion is solicited, the people in the uplands understandably opposes the construction of the dam but the people
in the lowlands of course would be in favor because the dam would bring them electricity, an irrigation system and a more adequate water supply.

How should communicators approach this problem? With a show of hands in which case the majority prevails or should communicators simply take the side of the government and use all forms of communication to convince people that relocation is their best option?

We must recognize that the field of communication at present is essentially a field of persuasion where training focuses on how to convince others. Perhaps, we need to pause and figure out how to learn the art of listening, which to me is the key to conflict management.