

Engaging Conflict:

The impact of Clear Leadership training on how people think about conflict and its management.

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the impact of a leadership training program on 38 participants from a regional, multi-site health care institution. Titled *Advanced Leadership Skills*, this program was comprised of three phases and was specifically designed for the organization's directors and managers. The program emphasizes how personal and social realities are constructed by the stories we tell ourselves and each other to make sense of ourselves and the world, and provides tools to manage self and others. This study explored whether participation in the program and subsequent use of its skills changed how participants think about conflict and therefore act when confronted with conflict.

It is common in organizational life for people to assume that conflicts are the result of personality differences. Contemporary views on conflict often argue against this and emphasize either a lack of agreement on goals and roles or competing interests as the source of conflict. Such views emphasize searching for ways to reframe conflicts so that definitions of goals and roles are shared and/or each party can attain its ends. Post-modernist thought has engendered an alternative approach to thinking about conflict. It is a narrative approach based on a social-construction view of social reality. From this point of view, conflict is a way of making sense of a difficult relationship. We each have our *story* of conflict, and once having defined a relationship as being in conflict, we then act out the story.

It is this understanding of conflict management that *Advanced Leadership Skills* *implicitly* attempts to transfer to participants; there are no explicit discussions of narrative forms of conflict management in the program. We were interested, first of all, in whether participants changed their thinking about conflict after taking the program, to this new, narrative approach. We were also interested in how these two distinct forms of thinking (interest based conflict versus story based conflict) would interact. Would one replace the other or would the two merge into a new form of thinking amongst participants?

One hour interviews with a stratified random sample of past participants explored the experiences of organizational conflict since participating in the leadership program. Approximately half of the individuals in the sample appeared to have fully replaced their former approach to conflict with a story-based approach. The other half appeared to merge the two such that aspects of both were evident in their examples and descriptions. One interesting difference between the two groups is that those adopting a story-based approach reported using skills taught in the program more often than those with combined approaches. Most striking was the universal impact of the training on manager's mental maps of conflict – almost everyone's thinking seemed to be affected. All but two of the respondents described having used skills from the program to resolve conflict in the workplace and 65% described using the skills to mediate conflicts between other people or groups. 45% described coaching others to engage conflict. In general, an increase in participant's sense of ability to effectively engage and resolve conflict was found. There were no discernable differences related to how much time had lapsed since taking the program.

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Preface

This study examines the impact of a leadership training program on 38 participants from a regional, multi-site health care institution in the Province of British Columbia, Canada. In this report we will call this program *Advanced Leadership Skills*. It was comprised of three phases (Personal Mastery, Clear Leadership, and Power, Systems & Partnership) spaced over about six months and was specifically designed for the organization's managers, directors, and consultants. The second phase, Clear Leadership, focused on interpersonal communication and organizational learning. It aimed to transfer a leadership skill set for individuals to apply to unsatisfactory or unproductive situations to generate more satisfying and productive working relationships. The third phase Power, Systems & Partnership, aided participants in experiencing and thinking through the application of those skills in work settings. It is this aspect of Advanced Leadership Skills – its impact on the conflict experience – that is the primary focus of this research note.

The central issue explored is whether participation in the program and subsequent use of its skills changes how participants think about conflict. In other words, do participants create a new story about conflict as a result of going through the program and applying learned skills? And if a change is evident, what does this shift and new story look like?

The following five sections organize this paper's content.

- Review Reviews the literature on interpersonal conflict and a description of relevant Clear Leadership training
- Thinking about Conflict Outlines the possible mental maps, patterns and mental shifts before and after the course
- Approaches Links thinking about conflict to Clear Leadership
- Findings Evaluates results and the impact of the leadership course
- Discussion Discusses results and suggests future research directions

Delivery of Advanced Leadership Skills began in 2003 in cohort groups of about 25, with about 3 cohorts a year. In the summer of 2005, interviews were conducted (and videotaped) with participants who had completed the program through one of six cohort groups. A random, stratified sample of 40 participants, based on managerial level and cohort group, was created by the organization's Learning and Development group. They were contacted by the Learning and Development group and invited to participate in a study to assess the impact of the program. Thirty-eight volunteered to do so. The videotapes were later analyzed for content themes and data matrixes developed to capture the items of interest in this and another study.

Anywhere from one week to 30 months elapsed from the time participants completed the training to their interview session. Interviews lasted between 30 to 55 minutes and consisted of both open- and close-ended questions. Some of the close-ended questions used a rating scale. Participants were routinely encouraged to provide workplace examples to illustrate their responses. This allowed for both a quantitative and qualitative review of the program's impact. Although this paper is primarily concerned with conflict, that subject represents only a portion of the material discussed during interviews. For additional information on the impact of Advanced Leadership Skills please contact Dr. Gervase Bushe at bushe@sfu.ca.

Review

It is estimated that managers spend about 20% of their time managing conflict (Thomas and Schmidt, 1976) and this may be even higher in health care organizations (Borkowski, 2005). For individuals working in health care, being able to manage, resolve or prevent conflict can be considered a key ingredient to delivering services. Hoggett (2006) comments that employees in the public service need to “focus on being good enough rather than wasting time and energy on unrealistic programs designed to achieve excellence and greatness”. Whilst that statement may be antithetical to the ideas of other researchers (e.g., Collins, 2001), it was a sentiment echoed by several interviewees who spoke of a workplace that was often not good enough. Operating below some minimum standard was alluded to through descriptions of dysfunctional relationships, poor results, and wasted time and money. This is not to say that the workplace was dysfunctional before Advanced Leadership Skills, but rather that employees often reported being consumed with the objective of simply being good enough. Changing organizational structure can also lead to conflict as some goals are exchanged for others, spans of control grow larger and ambiguity increases for a period of time (Theobald and Nicholson-Crotty, 2005). This organization, like many others, has gone through a lot of structural change in the past decade and many interviewees prefaced their responses with contextual descriptions of their work environment. In particular, they spoke of organizational changes designed to improve efficiency and effectiveness, but that simultaneously strained work relationships.

Defining culture as a system of shared values and beliefs, De Dreu (2004) uses the term conflict culture to describe the shared beliefs group members have about conflict. Because an implicit intention of Advanced Leadership Skills is to help participants engage and manage conflict better, it is important to consider what impact the program may be having on the conflict culture in this organization. Approaches for evaluating impact on organizations often focus on behavioural measures – absenteeism, turnover, grievance rates (see Colvin, 2004) – and psychological measures – morale, sense of belonging, and stress. The latter in particular provide researchers and managers with a reading of climate and culture. Both behavioural and psychological measures are useful indicators of a program’s impact on the conflict culture, but they may overlook how people holistically think about conflict – the stories they create about the phenomenon. This paper assumes that an individual’s ideas about conflict, their *mental maps*, can be usefully explored as a means of understanding any changes taking place in the conflict culture of the organization.

The Clear Leadership course and the Power, Systems & Partnership course are predicated on the theories and techniques described by Bushe (2001). In this book, Bushe argues that two things make it difficult for people in organizations to learn from their collective experience. The first is that everyone creates their own experience. A person’s history, education, culture, current emotional state and a variety of other factors contribute to shaping their observations, thoughts, feelings and motivations at any time. Since everyone is having a different experience, and anyone’s experience is as valid any others, learning collectively from experience raises difficult dilemmas not accounted for in most descriptions of organizational learning.

The second barrier to collective learning is that as sense-making beings, people are compelled to make sense of each other, which they do by making up stories about each other’s experience. Rather than check these stories out with the individual, people tend to go to third parties to test out their stories and compare notes. Bushe (2001) describes the resulting situation as “interpersonal mush” – a condition that leads to numerous interpersonal and organizational

problems. He contends that 4 out of 5 organizational problems can be traced back to the mush and if replaced by “interpersonal clarity”, will be resolved. The courses teach participants how to have “organizational learning conversations” – conversations that replace interpersonal mush with interpersonal clarity.

While not explicitly about conflict, both courses help participants to see their organizations as filled with stories people are making up to make sense of other’s actions. Each course provides skills for breaking through the interpersonal mush to increase organizational learning and improve working relationships.

Thinking about Conflict

Since Deutsch (1973), the dominant view of conflict identifies the source of conflict as competing goals or interests or incompatible behaviours (e.g., Brenner, 2000; Brown, 1983; Thomas & Kilmann, 1978). Wall and Callister (1995) state, “...definitions hold that conflict is a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party”. One of the most influential works on conflict resolution, Fisher and Ury (1981), forward an understanding of conflict predicated on competing interests. They suggest separating interests from positions, people from problems and establishing objective criteria for arriving at decisions. Another common belief about conflict and its management is that given enough time and discussion, agreement can be achieved (Brady and Hart, 2006). These ideas, although not necessarily consistent with each other are part of what Winslade and Monk (2000) describe as a problem-solving or interest-based approach to conflict. We argue that this interest-based perspective is today’s dominant paradigm amongst managers and professionals in western societies.

Post-modernist thought has allowed for an alternative approach to thinking about conflict. It is a story-based approach understood in the language of social-constructionism. Winslade & Monk (2000) argue that individual desires are constructed in discourse and do not simply exist independent of people’s interactions. Unlike an interest-based formulation that looks at frustrated needs, they see conflict as a natural by-product that can result when two or more people, each producing a different set of perspectives and experiences, come into contact. In order to make sense of others and the situations they are in, people make up *stories* about what others think, feel and want (Bushe, 2001). Rather than being based on objective differences in goals or interests, conflict can be a by-product of the stories that get made up. From this perspective, for conflict to be resolved, multiple stories must be rewritten or co-authored into a singular and shared story. This shifts attention from the problem to how the relationship is storied (Vogelsang, 2003). It is this understanding of conflict management that Clear Leadership and Power Systems & Partnership implicitly attempts to transfer to participants. A major concern of this paper is what happens in individuals when they encounter a conflict after being exposed to this approach.

Regardless of the paradigm used to conceptualize conflict, one can expect considerable diversity in how individuals experience conflict. This may be partly due to the uncertainty encountered when navigating difficult workplace situations. It can probably be assumed that every individual brings a unique mix of dispositions, levels of awareness, and interpersonal skills to their work relationships. Within the conflict literature there are competing ideas regarding the benefits and drawbacks of conflict on workplace relationships. In the everyday world people tend to think of conflict as a negative phenomenon inimical to workplace functioning, but most researchers point to benefits such as the stimulation of innovation (De Dreu and West, 2001) and knowledge

creation (Beech, et al, 2004). Others suggest that in conflict situations, unhappiness is simply a healthy response to dysfunction (Quackenbush, 2004). Beech et al argue that facilitated conflict can be used to emotionally charge and challenge group norms and the institutional status quo for improved functioning. Others, in contrast, have concluded that managers should not spark a conflict to create action, most especially if there are other means available (Meyers, 2004; Wall and Callister, 1995). These discrepancies are in part addressed by distinguishing between different types and intensities of conflict. Brown (1983) hypothesized a curvilinear relationship between conflict and organizational health, with too little or too much being unhealthy. De Dreu (2004) has found evidence supporting a curvilinear relationship between task conflict and innovation, but none between relational conflict and innovation. The latter was deemed uniformly deleterious to productive work and to personal well being (De Dreu, Dierendonck & Dijkstra, 2004).

In short, the interest-based paradigm sees conflict as a collision between competing needs, interests and behaviours that requires time and effort to resolve. The story-based paradigm sees "...people construct[ing] conflict from narrative descriptions of events" (Vogelsang, 2003). The former is the dominant thought pattern amongst professionals and managers in western society. The latter is a very new perspective, and while not explicitly discussed in the course, is highly consistent with the content and pedagogy of Clear Leadership. One key issue in this study revolves around understanding what happens when two distinct approaches to conflict come head-to-head in the mind of an individual manager. Regardless of the paradigm used, individuals may have varying levels of comfort managing conflict and various ideas about the usefulness of conflict in the work place. In trying to understand how participants story conflict – both as a result of going through the program and applying learned skills – this paper looks at both changing cognitions and affective orientations towards conflict. The next section discusses in detail the patterns of experience found in the interviews.

Patterns of How Thinking Changes

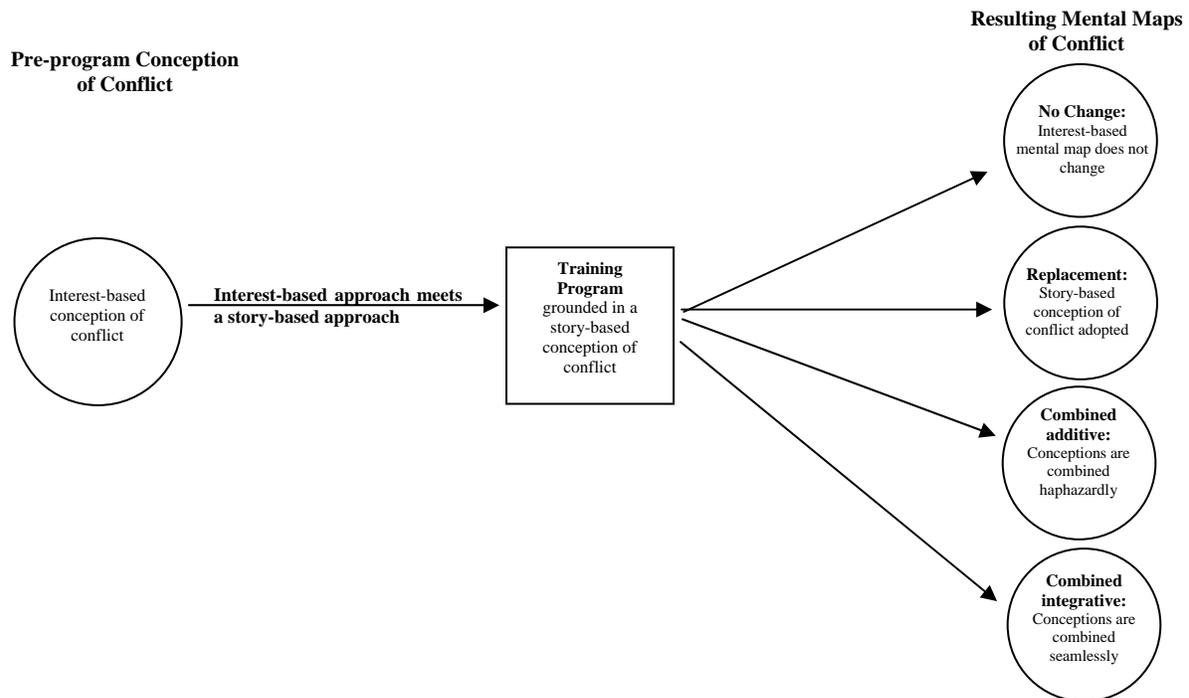
Two forms of individual thinking are investigated below. The first is the mental map of conflict that is created as a result of an interest-based approach meeting a story-based approach. The second involves tracking the patterns of thinking painted by interviewee responses. These are tracked to help understand what the different mental maps look like.

As discussed above, the interest-based approach to conflict dominates today. An assumption in this study is that most participants would have held this understanding at the inception of training. Three key outcomes were expected as a result of interest-based thought meeting a narrative based approach to conflict:

No change	Participants retain their interest-based map
Replacement	Participants fully adopt the story-based map
Combination	Participants combine the two maps

Given the widespread acceptance of an interest based approach to conflict, and the difficulty of changing how people think in just a few days of training, we expected that some percentage of participants would still retain an interest based map. Of those that were impacted by the course, it was not clear whether participants would fully adopt a story-based perspective or combine the two approaches. If the two approaches were combined, it was also not clear how this would transpire and what would be the result. The emergent mental map might be a cohesive blend or piece-meal amalgam. A cohesive blend would imply a comprehensive integration of the two

perspectives. A piece-meal amalgam would imply that portions of the story-based perspective were adopted and applied. Hereafter, these two possibilities are referred to as the *integrated* and *additive* conceptions of conflict. With the division of the combination result into two distinct outcomes, we derived four unique forms of thinking about conflict. These are referred to as the four possible mental maps that might arise from an encounter between two competing approaches.



Tracking Changes in Thinking about Conflict

Three steps were used to understand how participants storied conflict. The first was to look for evidence of the pre-program perspective. The second step was to assess whether a shift in thinking took place. The final step was to determine the nature of the resulting mental map of conflict.

Besides looking at the result of a paradigmatic collision, patterns of thought were also tracked and coded. The following list represents the primary patterns that emerged from the stories participants told. These along with the behavioural accounts provided by participants were used to understand the conflict map participants adopted.

1. A conflict was a negative experience and was scary, but I have tools for its management
2. A conflict was OK or even a good thing. It was also less scary than before
3. A conflict was really a misunderstanding: It was multiple stories needing to be co-authored into one
4. A conflict was not what I thought it was – it was prevented, or I discovered it was something else altogether

Descriptions of work conflicts were coded for thought patterns on the assumption that they reveal the conflict paradigm in use. The first two patterns of thought reflect emotional judgements. It was assumed that these patterns could occur in an interest-based, story-based, or combined map of conflict. Positive statements about conflict, however, were expected to be held by individuals who had experienced a change in how they thought about conflict. The third pattern is most

reflective of a story-based approach to conflict. The fourth is, perhaps, the most interesting as it suggests a dramatic change in thinking such that conflict is entirely redefined. It is possible for certain combinations of these patterns to co-exist although patterns one and two were expected to be mutually exclusive. The description of patterns three and four were treated as evidence for the replacement of an interest-based map with a story-based map.

To summarize, the study attempted to explore the encounter between two distinct paradigms, specifically, the result of an incumbent interest-based approach meeting a story-based approach. This is done, in part, by uncovering the patterns of thought that trace the participant's resulting mental map of conflict.

Approaches: Conflict & Clear Leadership Skills

In addition to investigating how participants think about conflict, interviews were also geared at learning about how people engaged with conflict at work. Four behaviours were of particular interest. The first was evidence that the individual consciously engaged difficult situations using the Clear Leadership skills, particularly the "learning conversation" technique. The second behaviour of interest was whether participants had coached co-workers through conflict. This could take the form of providing advice or simply helping a colleague organize their thoughts through the kind of listening skills taught in Clear Leadership. Although the participant might not necessarily be a part of the conflict situation, they were indirectly helping engage conflict in the workplace. The third possible engagement behaviour was mediating or facilitating learning conversations between others who describe themselves as in conflict. Examples of this behaviour include helping two individuals communicate or helping achieve clarity in an interpersonally strained relationship. Fourth, explicitly transferring program skills to help others navigate the workplace was considered a sophisticated form of engagement that also indicated program success. As discussed below, this behaviour had the benefit of leveraging course skills by providing a common language and creating potential network effects.

Before the data gathered from the interviews was examined, there were several findings that were expected to emerge. This included relationships between skill use, frequency of use, change in thinking, and the four engagement behaviours listed above. For example, we anticipated that the greater the change in thinking, the greater the frequency and number of skills participants would report using. It was also expected that more sophisticated engagement, such as mediating conflict or teaching others engagement skills, would be associated with greater individual use of skills and more dramatic changes in thinking. We were interested to see if time since the training would be negatively related to skill use, since previous research on leadership training has often found that over time, participants forget what they've been taught in a course.

We were also interested in discovering whether individuals adopting a story-based map would revert back to an interest-based map. There are at least two important issues we explored in this study. The first is an expectation that the larger the change in thinking, the less likely skill use would atrophy. Thus, individuals adopting a story-based map might retain learnings better than those only partially adopting story-based thinking. The second issue is our assumption that skill atrophy is partially caused by having to work in an environment dominated by interest-based thinking. Previous research on the Clear Leadership course has found that skill usage is positively associated with having peers and bosses in the workplace who also have taken the course (Gilpin-Jackson & Bushe, 2005). Consequently, we expected the number of program alumni the respondent interacted with in the workplace to mitigate the use and knowledge of skills.

Decision rules were used to help identify participant use of course theories and skills. One convention used was a point-system to score participant responses. For example, direct statements indicating use of Clear Leadership such as “I used the curious self” or “I think conflict is just different stories” were given two points. A specific workplace example that exemplified a skill or pattern of thought was given four points, even if that skill or pattern was not expressly identified by name. Because participants often implied behaviours or patterns of thought, one point was given to any response that strongly insinuated its presence. Lastly, in a sparse number of situations, a comment was given half a point if it gave an impression of suggesting a behaviour or pattern of thought. Behaviours and patterns that received a total of two or more points were deemed strongly present whereas those with only one point were considered weakly present. This approach helped differentiate from the vagaries in response quality as well as by providing another point of comparison between individual responses. These scores were then used for statistical tests of significance with other variables in the study.

Another decision rule was needed for identifying the presence of a mental map. Including the four patterns of thought listed above, a total of thirteen responses were coded as evidence for an extant map. For example, “conflict is about limited resources” gives evidence of an interest-based approach to conflict. On its own, the comment does not provide irrefutable proof of a particular mental map, but it is one of many indicators used to decide whether the participant had maintained an interest based map of conflict, merged the interest-based and story-based approach or replaced the former with the latter. In addition to coding belief or affect statements, 10 behaviours were also tracked and coded that could reasonably be associated with these patterns of thought. It is important to note that participants were not expressly asked if they agreed with a particular thought pattern or performed a specific behaviour. Rather, these patterns and behaviours were independently raised in response to open questions by participants as they discussed their engagement experiences. Lastly, a key indicator of changes in thinking was a statement about whether an individual thought about conflict differently and whether they engaged it differently. Statements that described behavioural changes, even if a participant stated there were none, were also taken into consideration.

Patterns of Thought that Emerged	
1	conflict is preventable
2	conflict is something else altogether
3	conflict is an opportunity
4	conflict is a multiple stories
5	conflict is a misunderstanding
6	conflict is a good thing
7	conflict is natural
8	conflict is not so scary
9	conflict is negative
10	conflict is about conflicting interests
11	conflict is about personality clashes
12	conflict is about limited resources
13	conflict is . . . (miscellaneous)

Behavioural Approaches	
1	used program skills to resolve conflict
2	sought out others and engaged them
3	coached others through conflict
4	mediated or facilitated between others
5	transferred program skills to others
6	avoided conflict
7	stonewalled others
8	avoided talking about conflict during interview
9	other behaviours (miscellaneous)
10	unclear what their behaviours were

One final concern was that trying to track changes in thinking necessitates the ability to assess pre-program thinking. Sometimes individuals simply describe how they thought about conflict before the program and afterwards. Unfortunately, this information was not usually provided in an organized or easily accessible form, if at all. By default, it was assumed that all individuals participating held an interest-based conception of conflict prior to registering in the training program. That said, there were a few individuals who clearly negated this assumption by the way they described their pre-program approach to conflict. Individuals who were deemed to possess a story-based map of conflict pre-program were not expected to experience a change in thinking that was measurable in the interview process. The results of these individuals were not used for those statistical calculations that, by definition, precluded a story-based understanding prior to program enrolment.

Findings: Conflict Maps and Engagement

Three individuals were deemed to already possess a story-based conception of conflict before participating in Advanced Leadership Skills. Some of the information gathered from these individuals was therefore not used in the statistical analyses. It was also not possible to conclusively determine the post-program knowledge map of three additional individuals; they just did not provide thick enough descriptions of work experiences to be able to assess their mental maps. For the remaining 32, 16 (50%) appeared to have fully adopted a story-based approach to conflict. The other half had combined their interest-based thinking with story-based thinking. In terms of how they were combined, the *additive* map (a piece-meal combination) was slightly more popular than the *integrative* map (a uniform combination). Amazingly, no one who entered the course with an interest-based view of conflict appears to have left with their mental map of conflict unchanged.

No Change	Replaced	Combined	
Interest-based approach retained	Story-based approach adopted	Interest- and story-based approaches combined	
0	16	<i>additive</i> 9	<i>integrated</i> 7

Resulting knowledge maps from an interest-based conception of conflict meeting a story-based approach to conflict. Numbers indicate the number of individuals possessing that knowledge map after training.

The most common pattern (45% of participants) in descriptions of conflict after the course was that conflict was only a misunderstanding between stories that needed to get checked out. Somewhat surprisingly, almost a quarter of individuals (24%) had completely rethought conflict such that what was previously deemed a conflict was subsequently redefined, sometimes as personally generated experience, a product of a defective or incorrect mental map or something else. Almost 30% of participants reported thinking more favourably about conflict. Only two participants ascribed negative judgements to conflict during the interview.

Percentages	Patterns of Thought <i>conflict is...</i>	Description of Thought Patterns
5%	negative	A conflict was a negative experience and was scary, but I have tools for its management
30%	positive	A conflict was OK or even a good thing. It was also less scary than before
45%	misunderstanding	A conflict was really a misunderstanding: It was multiple stories needing to be co-authored into one
24%	something else	A conflict was not what I thought it was. It was prevented, or I discovered it was something else

Figures include participant’s direct statements about performing these behaviours, specific examples illustrating their use, and responses strongly implying their presence.

It was expected that engagement behaviours such as facilitating and coaching would correlate with the number of skills used, frequency of skill use, and perceptions of return on investment, however none of these were found to be statistically significant. That may be due to the universally high ratings participants gave for skills usage and ROI from the course. All but two (95%) said they had used the course skills to engage conflict. More than 60% of participants reported having helped mediate or facilitate conflict between individuals or in a group context. Additionally, more than a quarter of individuals stated that they had explicitly educated others about Clear Leadership with the purpose of transferring learnings. We expected use of skills and engagement of conflict to be higher where participants reported having more contact with others who had also taken the course, but there were no significant differences found. We also thought people who had taken the course longer ago might report less skill usage but this was not the case.

Percentages	Type of Conflict Engagement	Description of Engagement
95%	engaged	Engaged conflict by initiating conversations that resolved issues
41%	coached	Helped others engage conflict by offering guidance or helping them clarify their thoughts
65%	mediated/facilitated	A conflict was really a misunderstanding: It was multiple stories needing to be co-authored into one
32%	transferred skills	Formally transferred learnings from Advanced Leadership Skills to others

The only significant difference of note was the finding that individuals adopting a story-based approach reported using learned skills significantly more often than their counterparts who had combined the two approaches. Similar between group differences were found for the number of skills used and ratings of return on investment. These latter differences, however, were not statistically significant.

Question: How often do you use the skills at work?	
Score	Frequency
1	never
2	rarely
3	occasionally
4	weekly
5	daily
6	all the time

Average Score:	
Mental Map	Frequency of Use
Combined <i>interest-based + story-based</i>	4.1 (weekly)
Replaced <i>story-based</i>	4.8 (daily)

Discussion

Using a random, stratified sample allows us to confidently predict that the Advanced Leadership Skills course has had a fairly consistent effect on how managers in this large organization, who have taken the course, engage and deal with conflict. Since conflict is endemic to health care organizations, the prevalence of a more favourable perception of conflict suggests that the participating employees are better positioned to navigate their workplace. The high rate of skill transfer from Advanced Leadership Skills is in stark contrast to the reported research literature in which very little managerial training appears to get transferred and applied back in the workplace. It is commonly cited that only about 10 percent of training translates into job performance (Brinkerhoff and Gill 1994; Cheng and Ho 2001; Elangovan and Karakowsky 1999; Kupritz 2002). Although there appears to be no empirical evidence supporting this estimate, there is enough evidence to show that transfer of training is generally very low (Kupritz, 2002) and managers attest that even with high quality training, transfer outcomes among employees are highly variable (Marx, 1982).

Those who most fully adopt and utilize the course skills also make the biggest transition in their mental maps of conflict away from an interest-based view to a story-based view. About half the participants in this organization make that transition. For the other half, the story based view is combined with the interest based view either in a piecemeal fashion or into a personally unique, integrated mental map. This latter is a most interesting group, as it is likely that both points of view have their advantages and drawbacks and that an integration of them suggests a higher level cognitive resolution, or more complex cognitive map, of conflict and its resolution.

We think the shift in a person's mental map from interest-based view of conflict to a narrative based view or integrated view of conflict is likely to have positive effects on both an individual's sense of empowerment and well being and on organizational functioning, particularly in organizations where conflict is endemic. Under an interest based map, where conflict is about competing interests, often over scarce resources, one's ability to find resolution is often seen as requiring giving up one's own interests or resources, or being able to commandeer additional resources. As a middle manager labouring under tight resource constraints with little control over one's own goals and interests, it is little wonder that many people view conflicts as unsolvable and something to be avoided or worked around. Resolution of conflict can be seen as an emotionally difficult process with little chance of real success. If one's view shifts, as many of the course participant's views shifted, to seeing conflict as arising out people experiencing and making sense of the same events differently, the sense of personal empowerment and willingness to engage conflict can be expected to increase. And this is what we found with 95% of participants describing a willingness to engage in working through a conflict and 65% describing using their new skills to mediate conflicts others were having. Clarifying the variety of experiences and sense-making, and re-storying what shows up as conflict, is much more under the control of the manager – it is something they can take action on and reasonably expect to succeed at. Therefore they feel more empowered to act on conflict successfully.

We note the lack of differences between participants who had recently completed the course and those who had completed years earlier. We expected mental maps to be dynamic and to show differences between individuals coming from different cohorts but there were no statistically significant trends. Many of the responses provided by interviewees suggested that there may be a galvanizing process following the course in which skills are solidified. For some this process involved reflecting on learnings before applying skills. Others described a learning phase

following the program as they experimented with skill application. In both instances, skills appeared to become better ingrained over time. Interview responses also indicated that there may be skill attrition over time. This was most evident in the common request by respondents for follow-up sessions to refresh and reinforce learnings. However, it was not possible to determine any temporal milestones that corresponded with predictable changes in thought. One possibility that might account for this finding is that although participants are forgetting the course lexicon, the key messages are being retained. Consequently, over time, participants may no longer distinguish between particular skills, instead grouping various behaviours into a broader and more general understanding. For example, the course material might be reduced and reorganized into three catch phrases: *everyone's having a different experience*, *don't make up stories* and *create clear conversations*. Unfortunately, without using a larger sample size and tracking impact over a greater time frame, it's difficult to be any clearer about this phenomenon.

To conclude, it was found that most participants had created new mental maps about conflict as a result of participating in Advanced Leadership Skills and applying learned skills. About half the participants combined some of the narrative thinking behind the course into their incumbent mental maps while the other half completely adopted a story-based conception of conflict. The mental maps created about conflict due to the Clear Leadership experience suggested that participants were more optimistic about its management and their capacity to resolve difficulties with colleagues.

Limitations

This study was successful in uncovering several findings. Some of these were statistically significant while others served a useful explorative function. However, this study is limited in several respects. The greatest challenge was not having a reliable or clear measure of participant's pre-program conflict beliefs. While the coding system may be sufficiently vigorous to yield inter-rater reliability (this was not tested), it raises other problems such as evaluating construct validity which can be minimized if not avoided using a more direct measurement tool. Another challenge was the exploratory nature of the study. Understanding the encounter of two paradigms was deemed worthwhile after the vast majority of interviews were completed. The patterns of thought investigated were also construed after the majority of interviews were completed. The result is that some of the conventions and approaches used to quantify information may compromise validity.

Another concern is with the reporting method. It has been demonstrated numerous times in the last century that humans do not have perfect access to their cognitions (Landrum, 1990). This became repeatedly evident as several participants often contradicted their assertions that they had not changed how they thought about conflict when they gave specific examples from work where they had changed. Related to this is the notion whether it is possible to behave differently without thinking differently, especially with something as involved (and usually complicated) as conflict. As one individual put it, "I do things different, that tells me I'm thinking about it differently." The strategy used in this study was simply to craft a coding system that took into account these nuances of human experience.

Some other challenges are indicative of the interview process itself. One issue is a concern for demand characteristics – characteristics of the interviewer that influence the interviewee's responses. This might be partially negated by not having fully formulated how the study would be carried out during most of the interviews. Also problematic was the practice of videotaping the interviews. Although the video camera was invaluable for following up and in-depth study, it was

somewhat inimical to some of the sensitive material under investigation. Participants were often very careful not to use names and some out-right stated that they would not discuss workplace strife other than in the most general form. While all participants had the option to opt-out of the videotaping, only two individuals did so while many who cooperated in this fashion were visibly cognizant of the video camera's presence.

Future Directions

Given the limitations and results discussed above, there are several future opportunities that present themselves to studying the conflict experience resulting from program participation. To verify current findings (and uncover new ones), a survey can be designed and tailored to investigating the conflict experience. Having already gone through an exploratory process through the interviews, surveys can be delivered pre-program to help trace changes in thinking resulting from learnings. This will greatly assist in determining exactly what types of stories individuals have about conflict before being introduced to the Advanced Leadership Skills' thinking. This could also provide guidance on how to tweak the program to maximize impact. Lastly, a survey can also be delivered to a greater number of individuals and a greater number of times than interview sessions. Repeated measures along with a larger sample size would greatly assist in improving the power of the quantitative analysis.

To address the challenges presented by reporting methods (to which surveys also fall victim), another approach is to use an experimental approach that utilizes unconscious processing to explore cognitions. For example, individuals sitting in front of a computer screen could be briefly presented with statements about conflict and instructed to push a button upon completing its reading. Subtle differences in response times can be used to indicate the extent to which individuals agree with such statements (Jacoby and Witherspoon, 1982). Of course, it may be difficult to recruit large numbers of professionals enrolled in a leadership course to also take time to participate in such a study; let alone before and after the program.

In trying to understand how individuals story conflict as a result of program participation, it is difficult to know what portion of the material's impact comes directly from the course, and what comes from applying learned skills. While future studies might attempt to tease apart this relationship there is also the difficulty of gauging to what extent beliefs about conflict are influencing behaviour, and to what extent behavioural experiences are determining thinking. There is considerable research that attempts to determine whether behaviours cause beliefs, or beliefs cause behaviour. That conundrum was circumvented (but not ignored) in this study as the primary concern was with how program participation and skill application impacted individual's beliefs and ideas about conflict. To understand how individuals think about conflict it is probably necessary to take into account the underlying processes.

With regards to some of the study's findings, it is important to investigate whether a distinction between an additive and integrative form of combination is useful and whether they indicate real differences in cognitive complexity. Future research can also focus on the understanding why some individuals replace their interest-based approach with a story-based approach and others do not. It is possible that all participants actually combined the two approaches and that this study's design was not able to detect subtle aspects of the interest-based approach. Because the individuals adopting a story-based approach were more likely to report greater use of skills, exploring how individuals think about conflict, how those thoughts change, and how they impact engagement can prove to be fruitful for managers, consultants and researchers alike.

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