Integrative Thinking and Behaviour in Times of Conflict

In times of conflict, the emotional reactions of anxiety, stress and fear easily take hold both at a personal and group level. When the pressure is on, we don't always think well allowing the simplification and personalisation processes to drive deepening polarisation, win-lose outcomes and potentially poor either/or decisions.

The following cognitive biases are each known to contribute to increasing polarisation and should be understood by parties seeking to moderate situations which are dividing too deeply.

1. **The 'At Fault' fallacy**
   The 'At Fault' fallacy describes the tendency for both parties to frame the conflict as if the initiating acts were the responsibility of the other. We learn this as children. When mum asks, "Why are you fighting?", the response is, "Well he /she started it!".

   When each side is invited to reflect on their frustrations and actions, they tend to explain that the issues are created by the other, they are victims of others' wilful actions and are only rightfully defending themselves or others who need protecting. The result of this characterisation of the conflict is that it escalates and polarisation increases.

2. **The 'Over-Stating' Bias**
   When each side describes the position of the other, both parties tend to see the other as more extreme or polar than in reality each position actually is. When this occurs, parties may even tend to describe their own position in more extreme or exaggerated terms than when examined carefully, it actually is. Mediators, as they listen to both parties, may get caught in this tendency to overestimate the real differences especially when language is emotional and generalised.

3. **The Transparency Illusion**
   Both parties tend to believe that they are communicating openly and clearly, that their values and needs are transparent, evident and understood. Parties believe that their emotions and body language are accurately read and perceived by the other. This is frequently not the case. When trust decreases, the capacity to accurately read other people also significantly decreases. In fact the tendency to 'mind read', i.e. one party assuming the other's motivations and values are negative and biased against them illustrates this illusion.

4. **Subjective Evaluation Bias**
   Both parties tend to unconsciously evaluate options or potential outcomes in a conflict based on perceptions other than the objective elements of a proposal or option before them. The most common of these is to assume there must be hidden elements or implications that benefit the proposer of the option otherwise it would not be proposed. Ideas might be evaluated on the basis of when, how, where and by whom they were proposed rather than by what they factually actually contain.

5. **The 'Fixed Pie' Fallacy**
   Parties assume, in discussion that a loss or concession made in negotiating an outcome automatically means a corresponding gain for the opposing party. There is an assumption that gains are always mutually exclusive – If one party gets this, the other cannot have that. In reality, what each party desires is not always diametrically opposed to the outcome desired by the other.

There are several processes within conflict management which, when applied, may counter the tendency of cognitive biases to increase polarisation.   These are part of what is referred to as integrative complexity or integrative thinking.

a) **Disciplined 'conflict-aware' thinking**
The first major battle in every conflict occurs in the mind. Long before conflict becomes explicit in behaviour it is an internal process in which perceptions of different views and the meanings attached to these views create internal tension. This is a dangerous stage in a conflict as it often occurs prior to real listening and sharing exchanges between individuals. Assumptions and misinformation create intra-personal tension which then flows over into inter-personal tension.

The challenge here is for individuals to be self-disciplined and conflict-aware enough to at least attempt to be objective in their thinking. This is of course a huge ask and not often possible. The natural tendency is to indulge in what feels like justified blaming and a bit of rant or rage to blow off some anger.

While this feel like a release, it is not all that helpful for conflict in that it rehearses a position, solidifies assumptions and often blocks good thinking.

Working on some disciplined conflict-aware thinking is important at this point. By 'conflict-aware' we mean – understanding how conflict polarisation and escalation works, knowing the cognitive biases and carefully countering them.

b) **Integrative complexity and integrative thinking**
The elements of integrative thinking encourage several processes. First is the capacity to understand the real differences between positions and options and to see both the positive or constructive side of each and also to be realistic about the difficulties raised by each side. This is the process of 'differentiation', an objective assessment of what really separates two viewpoints. The second element is 'integration'. This is the process of recognising connections, common values, shared interests and mutual benefits which do or might exist. There is a final element in integrative thinking and this is the capacity for creating new possibilities out of the process of deepening understanding of the differences and also the connections. This process can start individually but is actually dependent on the next two steps.

c) **Coaching and encouraging careful and 'conflict-informed' selection of language**
Each of the biases listed above, if allowed to freely influence thinking, will lead to **language** that tends to inflame and polarise the conflict.   Coaching individuals in how to craft language to express their thoughts and ideas accurately without simplifying and personalising contributes to lowering polarisation and to encouraging the kind of thinking required above.

d) **Genuine deep listening to understand**
Listening deeply in conflict is hard work. Those seeking to listen need to be able to put aside the natural tendency to feel threatened by ideas and perceptions which challenge them and to temporarily suspend judgement. Listening is best done as a specific focus rather than as part of an exchange. Discussion can come later. The listener needs the opportunity to ask questions, not to challenge, but to seek clarification. If it is possible to get under the surface

to hear the needs, interests, values, experiences, and concerns of the other, this can be significant in getting to a realistic understanding of the points of difference and the potential for some elements of integration.

e) Perspective taking
We know genuine listening has taken place when a party is capable of articulating the perspective of the other party in way that the other can affirm is a fair and objective representation of their viewpoint including their needs, interests, values, experiences and concerns (NIVEC).

f) Seeking creative means of resolving issues and managing polarities
Once parties have been able to communicate (sharing and listening) in ways which limit the tendency to polarise and open the potential for creativity we are in a position to engage standing processes of conflict resolution like exploring the dimensions of the conflict, generating options, establishing criteria for resolutions or management and then deciding on outcomes.

NB: The need for relational reconciliation, process agreement and conflict competency training runs parallel to this process of helping parties with their thinking.

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