RESPONDING EFFECTIVELY TO CONFLICTS

THE TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH

Brno, Czechia -- March, 2017

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Goals of the Training

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- Understand the need for and usefulness of having
  a moral grounding to guide our conflict behavior.

- Understand the transformative view of conflict
  and how it can serve as a useful guiding framework
  for us in conflict.

- Develop practical strategies for responding to
  conflict, using the transformative framework to guide
  our actions and responses.

Common Sources of Significant Conflicts

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- Managers' Conflict Avoidance

- Employee Incompetence or Lack of Accountability

- Desire for Independent Work

- Understaffing, Overwork, Burnout

- Competition for Advancement and Promotion

- Blinding Egocentrism

- Workplace Relationships Not Seen as Personal
  Relationships

- Diversity & Different Work and Communication Styles

- Inadequate Conflict Training

The Experience of Conflict: What is Most Challenging?

Think about a difficult workplace or family conflict you have had.
Discuss the following questions:

~ What was most challenging for you about the conflict?

~ Looking back on it, what did you like about
how you acted as the conflict unfolded?   What made
you feel good about how you acted or reacted
during this difficult conflict?

~ Looking back on it, what did you dislike about how
you acted as the conflict unfolded? What made you
feel badly about how you acted or reacted?

What is a Moral Grounding for Conflict?

Relying on a moral grounding in conflict means that:

- We have developed a personal standard that allows us to guide and assess our own behaviors and responses in conflict.

- We have a practical framework that allows us to align our behaviors with our own sense of what is right/wrong when we respond to difficult conflicts or challenging behaviors of others.

- Our personal grounding encourages us to act from our best human qualities and capacities, rather than our human weaknesses and frailties.

- Our efforts in dealing with conflict contribute to our life-long moral growth. Conflict provides life-long opportunities to learn how to live in a diverse world, to struggle with difference, and to connect with others with whom we disagree. Our choices, and the basis on which we make them, can foster our personal development throughout our lives.

Why Do We Need A Moral Grounding?

- Conflicts that arise throughout our lives challenge us to act in a way that reflects our own sense of right and wrong. A moral grounding gives us a standard to guide and assess our reactions and behaviors.

- When we feel we have acted from a clear moral standard, we are more comfortable with ourselves during the conflict and after it is over. We can gain confidence and clarity amid confusion and

    challenge.

- When we rely upon a clear moral standard we are less likely to act in ways that we regret later. When we regret our actions, the effects of our actions can stay with us -- we carry them into our future.

- Without a moral foundation to guide our responses, we often flounder and are unsure of ourselves. This uncertainty often exacerbates the negative effects and outcomes of conflict.

- Without a moral standard to keep us focused on our own behavior, we can become overly focused on the other's behavior and our ability or desire to change them.

> *"If one is right with oneself, the actions of others diminish in importance because one's well-being no longer depends on*
>
> *them."*   *Basia Solarz*

The Transformative View of Conflict

Conflict can best be understood as a **crisis in human interaction**.
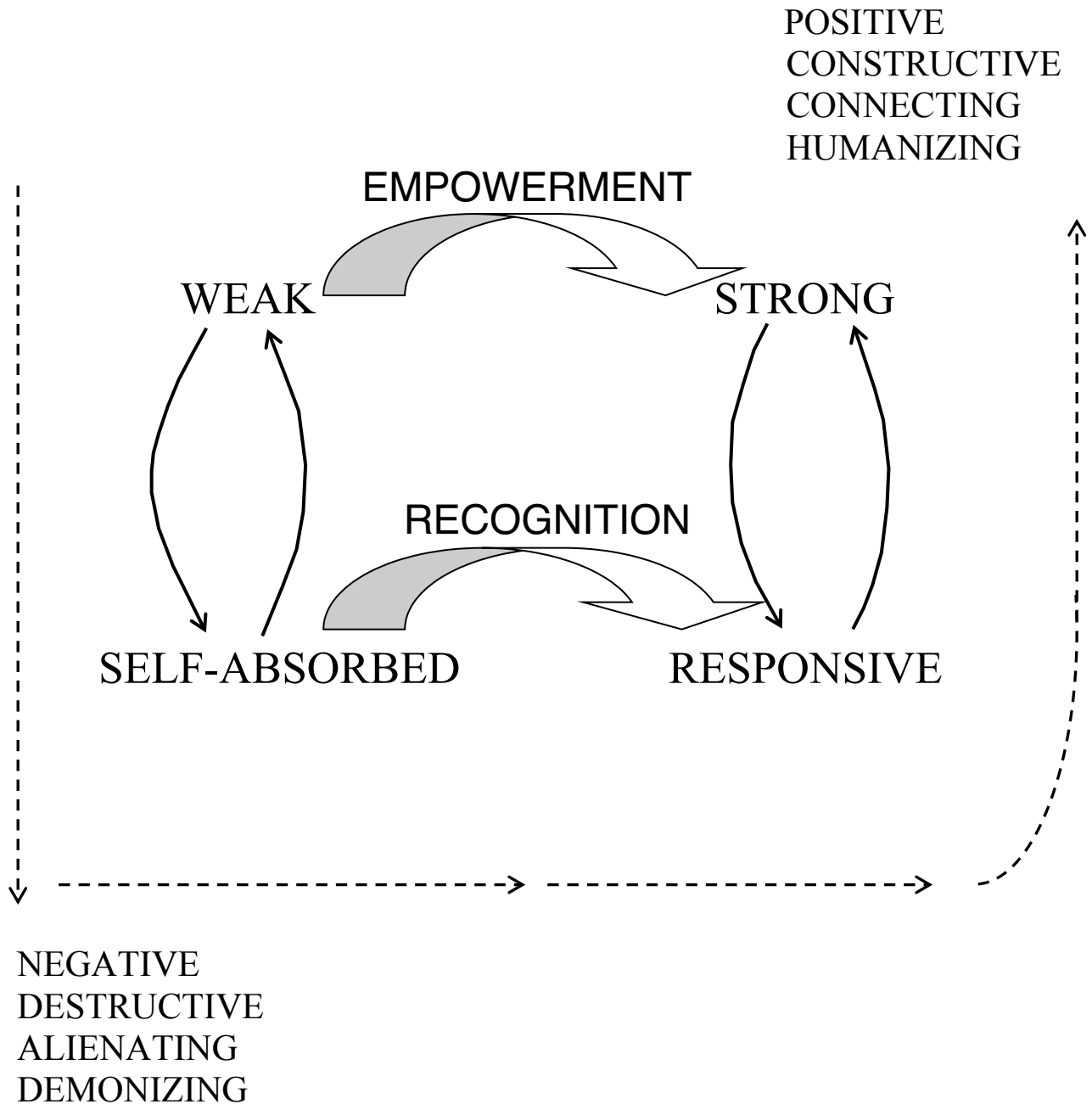
More specifically:

- The occurrence of conflict tends to destabilize the parties' experience of both **self and other**, so that they interact in ways that are both more vulnerable and more self-absorbed than they did before the conflict.

- People in conflict tend to experience a sense of both:

    o Relative **weakness**
        (confusion, fear, disorganization, vulnerability, powerlessness, uncertainty, indecisiveness)
    and

    o Relative **self-absorption**
        (self-protection, defensiveness, suspicion, hostility, closed-mindedness).

- These negative dynamics often feed into each other in a vicious circle that intensifies each party's sense of weakness and self-absorption.

- As a result, the interaction between the parties quickly degenerates and assumes a mutually destructive, alienating, and dehumanizing character.

- Despite conflict's destabilizing impact, people have the ability to rebound and recover from its incapacitating effects.

- Specifically, people can and do make dynamic **shifts** along two dimensions while conflict unfolds:

  - **Empowerment**
    (shifts toward increasing clarity, confidence, personal strength, organization, decisiveness)

  and

  - **Recognition**
    (shifts toward increasing attentiveness to other, responsiveness to other, openness to the other's humanity, and appreciation for the other's situation).

- Thus, despite conflict's potentially destructive impacts, people have the capacity to move back into their sense of personal strength or self-confidence (the empowerment shift) and their sense of openness or responsiveness to the other (the recognition shift).

- As these positive shifts feed into each other, the interaction can regenerate and assume a constructive, connecting, and humanizing character.

DESTRUCTIVE AND CONSTRUCTIVE CYCLES

POSITIVE
CONSTRUCTIVE
CONNECTING
HUMANIZING

EMPOWERMENT

WEAK

STRONG

RECOGNITION

SELF-ABSORBED

RESPONSIVE

NEGATIVE
DESTRUCTIVE
ALIENATING
DEMONIZING

Empowerment and Recognition in Relationships

Balancing empowerment and recognition can lead to different relationship outcomes. We may decide to strengthen or weaken a relationship bond as a result of our deliberate and reflective efforts to balance empowerment and recognition as we respond to someone.

Building Bonds Through Understanding of, or Empathy for, Another

Seeing another's point of view, situation, or human condition can make us more sympathetic to their desires, concerns, perspectives, etc. Our understanding can lead us to decide to act in ways that accommodates, provides support for, or cooperate with the other.

Minimizing Bonds or Ending a Relationship Through an Understanding of Another.

A measured understanding of another's limitations, intentions, weaknesses, situational constraints, etc. can lead us to move away from a relationship with someone. A balance of empowerment and recognition can lead us to decide to change or end a relationship but to do so with greater awareness and human understanding. How we end the relationship is what matters.

Ending Relationships Relationally

Provide a specific example where you consciously decided to minimize or end a professional (or personal) relationship.

Discuss your example by addressing the following questions:

1. *What understanding of the other person led to the decision to end the relationship?*

2. *How comfortable were you with the decision when you made it?*

3. *How did you back away to end the relationship? What did you do?*

4. *Do you believe your behavior reflected a good balance of empowerment and recognition? If so, how? If not, why not?*

5. *What were the consequences of your decision to end the relationship?*

In general, what are the greatest challenges to ending relationships relationally?

How Does The Transformative View Provide
A Personal Grounding for Responding to Conflict?

The transformative framework provides us with a useful grounding in conflict because:

- It encourages us to act with a balance of empowerment and recognition so that we respond to conflict with our fullest human capacity rather than from human weakness and self-absorption.

- We can assess our behaviors in conflict by assessing how well we balance self and other in all our responses to difficult conflict situations.

- We can strive to act with *Compassionate Strength*

  Staying true to ourselves, our values, our beliefs, while simultaneously being open to and understanding of those who differ from us.

- The struggle to act with strength and connection – in the face of differences with others -- is a life-long opportunity for moral growth. It supports our effort not to act out of our lesser human traits of weakness and self-centeredness.

  > *" ... awareness of both individual agency and social connection...*
  > *is the very essence of human consciousness, the core of our*
  > *identity as human beings. Each part of this duality -- individuality*
  > *and connectedness -- is equally important to our fundamental*
  > *sense of human identity.... "*

  *Bush and Folger, **The Promise of Mediation***

Using the Transformative View of Conflict
As A Personal Grounding in Conflict

How do we use the transformative framework in dealing with our own conflicts?
What are the practical implications of viewing conflict from this perspective?
How do we rely upon the framework in responding to difficult conflicts?

Three Key Insights:

1) The transformative framework encourages us to **recognize the incapacitating effects** of Weakness and Self-Absorption in ourselves.

2) The transformative view encourages us to **create and rely upon strategies that support our shifts** towards greater Empowerment and Recognition as we respond in conflict.

3) The transformative framework encourages us to **actively assess our own responses/behaviors** and to see that balancing empowerment and recognition is success, no matter what the outcomes may be.

Insight #1: Gain Awareness of the Incapacitating Effects of Weakness and

Self-Absorption as Conflicts Unfold.

We cannot a reach a balance if we are not conscious of our own incapacity in dealing with the conflict.

- Weakness is an incapacitating state

    Inability to draw on one's best insights, reactions, deliberative abilities, and to perceive and integrate relevant and important information.

- Self-absorption is, by nature, a blinding experience

    Being trapped to some degree within a limited way of thinking, perceiving, understanding the situation and others.

    The Paradox of Self-Absorption

    Being self-absorbed means we don't know we are self-absorbed.

    Becoming aware of our own self-absorbed state, by nature, makes us somewhat less self-absorbed.

Experiencing Weakness and Self-Absorption

Key Self-Reflective Questions:

   1) What tend to be your initial thoughts and emotions when confronted with a difficult conflict?

   2) What physiological reactions do you tend to have in the midst of a difficult conflict? How aware are you of any physiological changes the conflict is creating?   When are you most likely to sense these changes?

   3) How would you describe any feelings of fear, confusion, or sense of weakness you experience during a difficult conflict interaction?

   4) When do your responses in conflict tend to be driven by defensiveness and self-protective urges?   What does it feel like when you are deeply defensive or acting mostly out of self-protection?

   5) Under what conditions is it difficult for you to see the other's perspective during a conflict?   What does it feel like when you cannot let yourself see the other's perspective?

   6) In challenging conflicts, when do you tend to simply react rather than being able to consider what your alternative responses might be?

Insight# 2: Create and Rely Upon Strategies that Support Your Own Shifts to

Greater Empowerment and Recognition.

How do we make shifts from weakness and self-absorption in deciding how to deal with a conflict?   Each of us needs to find our own best strategies and ways of making these shifts. Helpful strategies are idiosyncratic and situational – they may depend upon our own individual capabilities and on the nature of the conflict we are facing.

There are many different approaches to discovering effective strategies, including:

     Creating the Time & Space to Deliberate and Decide

          Delay a response in the moment
          Remain Silent
          Set a specific date/time for when you will respond
          Look reflectively away in the moment to disengage

     Developing Strategies that Break Limited or Restricted Thinking

          Question one's own assumptions about the other
              (e.g., Consider both dispositional and situational attributions of
              the other)
          Ask the other questions that deepen your understanding of them
          Brainstorm alternative options and potential consequences

          Conduct a personal inquisition:
              Are their other ways to view this situation?
              Am I jumping to conclusions?
              Am I taking things too personally?
              Am I under or over-estimating what the other will do?
              What risks am I willing to take/not take in this situation?
              How do I want to be seen?
              What do I want to achieve?

     Seeking Input/Feedback
          Talk to 'trusted advisors' about the situation and possible options
          Ask someone to challenge your own thought processes

     Enhancing Personal Resources for Dealing with the Conflict

Find support and backing of others
Obtain and use an advocate to enhance influence
Find viable alternatives outside of the situation

Preparing & Rehearsing Communication Responses

Prepare a limited response and stick to it to buy time for reflection
Make a list of things you will not say
Decide whether talking to the other person is in itself a good or
   bad move
Mentally rehearse what you will say and how you will say it
Seek input from trusted advisors regarding the situation and
   possible responses to it
Test the waters by suggesting a small change/assess response

Personal Strategies for Transformation

1. ***What are your own most effective strategies for moving towards greater empowerment and recognition in a workplace conflicts?***

2. ***Discuss how you relied upon particular strategies to move toward greater empowerment and recognition in a specific conflict you have experienced.***

Insight #3: The transformative framework encourages us to **actively assess our own responses/behaviors** and to see that the balance of empowerment and recognition is success, no matter what the outcomes may be.

Why is reaching for this balance useful?   What is the value of always trying to act with compassionate strength -- independent of the substantive outcomes of the conflict?

      Benefits of working from this moral grounding:

- We gain an inner-sense of strength, stability, & calmness

- We make decisions that support our ability to continue to
    connect with & not vilify people despite significant
    differences we have with them

- We can more easily live with the undesirable outcomes and
    unintended consequences that unfold in our conflicts

- We are seen as someone who tries to "do right" no matter
    what difficult situations we face

- We become an influential role model for others

- Our behavior influences those with whom we are in conflict,
    slowing or stopping destructive cycles of conflict interaction.
    Stability breeds stability, chaos breeds more chaos.

- We remove a primary focus on the final outcomes of conflict and
    focus instead on the way we act and react during conflict

Workplace Conflict -- A Case Study

When people are in a negative conflict spiral, they experience deep feelings of personal weakness and alienation from others. For most people these feelings are very hard to cope with or change. They make all of us feel less like the person we want to be in most situations.   As a result, people do their best to try to get out of a negative conflict spiral and restore their humanity.   How are we able to do that? The answer lies in trusting our human capabilities and our ability to make decisions with a balance of self and other in mind. We are capable of transforming negative and destructive behavior with other people into positive and constructive responses by relying on our strength (clarity, integrity, decisiveness) and responsiveness (perspective taking, appreciation for the other's situation, empathy).   In other words, we change our selves and the nature of our conflict by acting with a greater balance of empowerment and recognition.

I will provide an example of one of the prolonged conflicts I had in my work experience. This conflict affected me deeply and caused some significant emotional and psychological damage over the course of it.   The conflict involved a former supervisor and me. Although we got along at first, within a few months I felt she soon took any opportunity to pick on me and to tell me that everything was wrong no matter what I did. I felt very confused, not knowing what to expect from her or how to respond to her. And I felt fearful because I was becoming increasingly unsure of my future in the company because of her attitude toward me and her constant negative assessment of my work.   I was at a loss for what to do.   Because she was my boss, I felt I could not defend myself from her attacks and initially chose to stay in a purely self-protective and isolated state. I felt nothing but hostility towards her and it was easy

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for others in the office to see that we could not stand each other. All the signs of weakness

and self-absorption were present for both of us. Our communication with each other seemed to get increasingly destructive with every passing day even though we both felt quite unhappy about this and were miserable most of the time at work. Neither of us did anything to improve the situation for quite some time.

At times, I would leave her office regretting what I had said to her and wishing I could have said something differently or not have been so defensive and accusatory.   I felt that this conflict transformed me into someone I did not want to be. As a result of feeling inadequate and being beside myself, I felt even more hostility toward her and alienation from her. I saw her as an enemy and as someone who was just out to get me. There was a negative downward spiral in the conflict, and it seemed like there was nothing that could be done to help us get out of the vicious trap we seemed to keep ourselves in.

At some point, I realized this situation had to change otherwise I would not be able to be at peace with myself.   I felt that something had to be done or I would just look for work elsewhere, even though I knew this would be difficult to do. I could not take it anymore.   I also sensed that we both understood that our unproductive conflict had a negative impact on the working climate within our department overall. Other people could sense the tension and were affected by it. They felt they were beginning to have to choose sides, even though I tried not to talk to many people about how I felt out of fear that it would reach my supervisor's ears.   It was clear, however, that we needed to somehow get through it for the sake of the workplace.   The consequences were just getting too big and noticeable.

I think my decision just to try to do something about the situation was my first

empowerment shift.   It felt like I had got to the point where I had greater clarity and

decisiveness.   I decided to go to my HR rep and talk with her about the situation.   She said that

it sounded like it was a situation that required an open conversation between the two of us.

Although I felt it was not my place to initiate such a conversation, talking with the HR rep did

get me thinking differently. I also had the feeling that she might tell my supervisor to initiate a

conversation with me, but I did not know this for sure and my supervisor never did start such a

conversation.

My first recognition shift involved my feeling that I wanted to try to figure out on my

own why she behaved the way she did.   I could feel myself making a 'toss of the will' and

telling myself I should try to see the problem from her perspective. In thinking about her role,

I realized that even though she was my boss 'in name' she had less influence over me than I had

really recognized. I actually received most of my work assignments from her supervisor -- not

her.   And I realized that this senior manager frequently did not keep my immediate boss in the

loop.   I began to recognize that many times my boss did not have full understanding of what I

was doing and what instructions had been given to me by her supervisor. A lot of her

questioning was about what I was doing and why I was doing it.   I began to see that this

communication from the senior supervisor was probably making her feel quite uncertain about

her role and whether she, herself, was supervising me adequately.   I sensed that she thought her

authority was being undermined within our department because everyone in the department was

aware of this situation, and the fact that, in actuality, I had direct access and accountability to

the senior manager.

In addition, I thought about the fact that I knew she was a single mother and had been

raising a difficult teenage son by herself. Although she did not disclose a lot of the details to me

about her personal life, I knew that sometimes she had such difficulties with her son that she needed to take some days off occasionally to see counselors and teachers.   Her single mom status meant that she desperately needed her job so that she would not be fearful of her future. The fact that her manager was relating to me so much and at times ignoring her meant that she might have viewed me -- and the situation as a whole -- as a potential danger to her career. By being hostile and cold she probably was trying to protect herself from where this might head and could be sending me a message that I was a threat.   She may have thought that I was initiating the skip-level relationship with her manager when in fact her manager was doing this on her own.

Just thinking her situation through on my own, changed me.   By stepping outside of my own frame of self-absorption and defensiveness, I was able to see things from her perspective, acknowledge her feelings of frustration, and even felt some empathy towards her. These thoughts about her resulted in a powerful recognition shift, which helped me immensely in creating more constructive interaction with my boss.   On my way towards greater clarity and recognition, I also took into account the fact that all people were different, and my reality did not automatically mean that it was her reality.   People have different backgrounds, circumstances, and experiences that affect how they see things. Keeping this in mind helped me to understand my boss better and I become more attentive to her point of view. I felt I showed a definite change in tone and was less reactive to her.

Her behavior toward me did not change completely at first and I still found it hard to tolerate some of her behavior towards me, but at least I understood the reasons behind this

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behavior by trying to put myself "in her shoes."   This helped me feel, in a way, more connected

to her and I became less defensive to things she would say to me. Moreover, I think the fact that we both wanted to improve the working climate in our department (and not look bad to our co-workers) helped us achieve more constructive and positive interaction overall. I remained true to my beliefs about the way she was acting, but at the same time I was able to find similar goals
and a sense of where she was coming from.

I cannot say that everything went smoothly or that our interaction was always positive. There were situations when it seemed that no matter what we did, we were unable to get out of the negative conflict spiral. But I felt that some of the edge had been taken off and I felt better because I was always more aware of how I wanted to act. I rarely walked away from an interaction with her and thought 'I wish had said something differently' – as I had in the past. I was able to overcome many of the negative and destructive impacts of our interaction by acting with greater personal strength and understanding. I knew I could not change her relationship with her supervisor or reduce her own insecurities about her role. But whether or not my supervisor could change her feelings of threat and defensiveness, I felt that I could act in ways that were consistent with who I wanted to be as a professional and as a person. This made all the difference day-to-day for me.

Workplace Case Study: Discussion Questions

***1. The author of this conflict had studied the transformative view
of conflict. How did viewing the conflict from this***
perspective
***help her to see why the conflict interaction was destructive and
why it changed?***

***2. How did this woman get to a personally satisfying balance of
empowerment and recognition in this conflict? What produced
some of the shifts?***

***3. How did reaching this balance actually help her, despite some
continuation of the conflict?***

4. What might you have done differently in this conflict and why?

Workplace Climates and Conflict

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Research on organizational dynamics indicates that the climate established in workplace, strongly influences people's behavior and communication, including their conflict behaviors.

What organizational factors influence whether a workplace climate encourages people to engage in conflict behaviors that are rooted in a balance of empowerment and recognition rather than weakness and self-absorption?

- Principled, Relational Leadership Styles

- Concrete, Shared and Widely Supported Organizational Goals

- Rewards for Positive, Ethical Behavior in the Workplace

- A Skilled, Confident and Rewarded Workforce

- Explicit Emphasis on the Value of Dialogue & Communication

- Explicit Emphasis on the Value of Diversity

- Openness to Meta-communicating

Workplace Climates and Conflict

Drawing from your own experience in workplace settings, identify and describe a workplace climate that promoted conflict responses that were rooted in a balance of empowerment and recognition.

How did any of the following factors contribute to this conflict positive workplace climate?

~ _Specific practices of the senior leader or leaders_

~ _Shared goals_

~ _Emphasis on dialogue and openness_

~ _Rewards for constructive, ethical behaviors_

~ _Other factors?_

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