

Conflict Administration for the Public Sector

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This article examines the existing methods to address conflict in the public sector and identifies a new approach. Clearly, existing methods of addressing conflict in the public sector are reactionary and place public administrators in a defensive posture. This article offers a more proactive approach and suggests that public administrators can actually move ahead of the curve, taking steps to avoid – or at least minimize – the impacts of conflict. In this article, I identify the origins of conflict (i.e., triggers) and provide outlets (i.e., paths) to defuse conflict. The new platform, *Conflict Administration*, for addressing and assessing conflict before it actually occurs offers a wider range of options for public administrators.

Why study conflict in public organizations? This question is addressed from several perspectives within this article. First, I look at conflict and how it works. Second, I look at the public sector and how conflict exists at the very core of the public sector. I then examine the idea that the definition of public sector conflict may vary slightly depending on the source of the conflict, where the conflict exists, and how the conflict impacts the public sector organization. Finally, another approach to understanding public sector conflict is offered for consideration.

Conflict exists in all public organizations. As the Denhardts (2006, p. 379) assert, “Differences and conflicts inevitably arise in public and nonprofit organizations.” Buss, Redburn, and Guo (2006, p. 11) concur with this assessment, stating that “[i]f everyone readily agreed on the resolution of most public issues, political institutions might not be needed.” However, public administrators are engaged in dealing with conflict on a daily basis. How the public administrator manages conflict determines the effectiveness of the public organization. There is a general belief that all conflict must be resolved or terminated. This perspective would have us believe that all conflict is bad. Actually, this is contrary to the democratic process and demonstrates a lack of understanding regarding the importance of conflict.

Some much needed direction can be gained by reviewing points raised by Stanton (2006):

- “Sound organizational design is an important part of more capable federal, state, and local government” (p. 25).
- “There is no more complex social organization in the world than the federal government” (p. 142).
- “Conflict and disputes erupt between the executive branch and the legislature over

organizational arrangements, because of their implications for oversight and accountability as well as control over public policy and government agencies” (p. 95).

- “Many government organizations today are falling behind in the effort to keep up with demand for their services” (p. 27).

Set in this context, public administration must expand its capacity to identify, assess, and control conflict and its impact on the resources of governments.

First, researchers need to understand conflict. *Conflict* is simply a natural occurrence when there are competing interests. These competing interests could be based on ideological, procedural, strategic, or any other divisive perspective. It could occur from the competition for resources, the use of resources, or any other activity associated with resources. As Starling (2008, p. 94) writes, “Although cooperation and competition are essentially peaceful and governed by formal rules and informal normative constraints, conflict involves situations in which actors pursue goals that are fundamentally incompatible.” Therefore, conflict exists anytime a decision is made or not made. Instead of viewing conflict as good or bad, public administrators must view conflict as an opportunity. This opportunity could be the improvement of an existing process, an expanded service or program, the creation of a new service or program, the resolution of a problem, or any other public action.

There are many definitions for conflict, which I have summarized in Table 1. The depth and breadth of conflict is so vast that to restrict conflict to a single definition would not do it justice. However, Thompson (1998) offers a simple definition that appears to be all-inclusive. Thompson states, “Conflict is the perception of differences of interests among people” (p. 4). This definition allows not only for actual differences but also

for the mere appearance of a difference. In reviewing numerous texts, other definitions do not have as wide a scope as that of Thompson.

There is no way of escaping the fact that conflict exists. Rahim (2001, p. 1) notes that “[c]onflict is [an] inevitable among humans.” There are always multiple methods and means of achieving the same goals. Furthermore, there are always multiple goals at play in any given moment in time. In addition, there is the issue of resources. Resources used to achieve one goal are not available to pursue another goal. However, as Montgomery and Cook (2005, p. 6) state, “Conflict is inevitable and yet desirable part of organizational life.” This implies that conflict does not always carry a negative connotation. Often, conflict can actually be the catalyst for improvements and other forms of positive change.

Conflict can be helpful in many ways. When there is improvement in decision making, performance, and systems as a result of conflict, individuals and organizations benefit. Likewise, when conflict stimulates innovation, creativity, and growth, there are substantial gains for all involved. Finally, when individuals and groups can come together to solve common problems and find new ways to achieve goals, there are both short-term and long-term benefits. (Rahim, 2001)

Conversely, conflict can be harmful, especially when it increases stress, dissatisfaction, and distrust. Similarly, conflict is harmful when it decreases performance, commitment, loyalty, and communication. Finally, conflict can damage relationships and heighten the resistance to change. (Rahim, 2001)

Unlike the private sector, public sector organizations continue to encounter both internal and external conflict after a course of action has been determined as competing factions jockey for position and benefits. This makes conflict a constant and persistent threat for the public sector.

BUILDING THE CASE FOR THE STUDY OF PUBLIC SECTOR CONFLICT

The American democratic system is a haven for conflict. Conflict arises from the checks and balance functions of the three branches of government. The executive branch and the legislative branch are often locked in conflict over the best way to address a wide range of issues. Courts are called upon to review government actions and determine the legal standards. This review function often results in decisions that impact both the legislative and executive branches. Conflict is ever present in each level of government. There are 10th Amendment reserved power issues

between the national level of government and the states. Local governments often find themselves at odds with the very states that created them.

Beyond 10th Amendment issues, the Constitution is a wealth of conflict. Although the Constitution enumerates a specific list of powers (i.e., the enumerated powers) in Article 1, Section 8, additional implied powers can be inferred from the necessary and proper clause. This has been the cause of some debate over the reach of the national government, especially when looking at the cooperative vs. dual models of federalism. There are also statutory provisions that stretch the reach of government. This compounds the potential for conflict in and between public entities.

Intergovernmental relations (IGR) have become an essential element of most public sector organizations. Whether IGR exist between levels of government, between public sector organizations in the same level of government, or a combination of the two, there is generally some conflict in either what is to be accomplished or how it is to be accomplished. IGR are no stranger to conflict. It might even be said that conflict will occur at some point during any IGR operation.

Furthermore, there is super-conflict¹ where several actors work together for a common goal. These iron triangles composed of government agencies, special interest groups, and legislative committees place considerable pressure on public policy and programs. However, the super-conflict occurs when issue networks made up of both public and private actors oppose iron triangles. (Schmidt, Shelley, & Bardes, 2007) This conflict can be so severe that legislative gridlock occurs.

The delivery of public goods and services has always been a very complex operation. These delivery systems have grown rapidly over the last twenty years. There are many reasons for the expansion. The increase in the number of public programs and new public policy initiatives are usually seen as primary sources that fuel this growth. However, government is not the sole actor in these delivery systems. From a macro point of view, researchers traditionally divide this system into three major sectors. These sectors are government (i.e., the public sector), business (i.e., the private sector), and not-for-profit organizations (i.e., the nonprofit sector). Today, these three sectors are further divided into many sub-categories. While there are many cooperative efforts between these sectors, the placement of an organization into any one of the major sectors maybe questionable. In recent decades, there has been a major growth in the nonprofit sector. (Boris and Steuerle, 2006) Likewise, through government privatization and contracting efforts, many private sector entities have entered and/or expanded their operations in the area of what was once considered public goods and services.

TABLE 1. Summary of Definitions and Views of Conflict

FOCUS	DEFINITIONS AND VIEWS OF CONFLICT	CONTRIBUTOR
Interests	Conflict is the perception of differences of interests among people.	Thompson (1998, p. 4)
Bargaining	Conflicts are essentially bargaining situations in which the ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make.	Schelling (1960, p. 5)
Utility	Conflict is an inevitable and yet desirable part of organizational life.	Montgomery & Cook (2005, p. 6)
Interaction	Conflict is the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals, and interference from each other in achieving those goals.	Folger, Poole, & Stutman (1997, p. 404)
Activities	Conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur and one party is interfering, disrupting, obstructing, or in some other way making another party's actions less effective.	Deutsch (1973, p. 10)
Aspirations	Conflict means the perceived divergence of interests, or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously.	Pruitt & Rubin (1986, p. 4)
Interactions	Conflict embodies communicative interactions among people who are interdependent and who perceive that their interests are incompatible.	Conrad (1990, p. 283)

This complex expansion, in the delivery of public goods and services, can be a catalyst for major conflict between public administrators. In actuality, it is only one of many sources of conflict for the public sector.

The creation of public policy is a conflict driven process, but the issue of conflict does not end there.² The efforts of lobbyists, advocacy groups, and special interest groups continue with the implementation of these public policies. Furthermore, there is the issue of authority for public policy. Congress often assigns overlapping authority for policies which is another source of conflict for public administrators and organizations. Public policies are often developed using general language; however, the actual implementation of the policy or program may have a number of possibilities. This can create both internal and external conflict for both the public administrator and the organization.

The fiscal problems, at all levels of government, are another significant source of conflict for public sector organizations. "Doing more with less" is a phrase that circulates at all levels of government. This added stress on the fiscal capacity of the public sector is just one area where conflict has increased significantly. Public sector fiscal systems face revenue and expenditure issues. Couple this with the increased demands for public goods and services on these fiscal systems and conflict will surely ensue. In addition, there are the issues of effectiveness, accountability, and transparency that engulf public sector financial systems. Even the

issue of how best to reform public sector financial systems is a source of conflict.

Similar issues arise with public sector human resource systems, which is another source of conflict. For example, one of the standard measures of the size of the public sector is the number of employees; the size of the public sector sparks many debates. Efforts at reforming the personnel requirements of the public sector have been highly controversial and a major source of conflict for public personnel systems. Internally, public personnel systems struggle with problems relating to position classifications, employee evaluations, disciplinary systems, hiring standards, staffing levels, and other issues.

What is government doing and how will government meet its obligations? Conflict is a central element of the comprehensive strategic planning for public sector organizations. This process revolves around making choices regarding the delivery of public goods and services. It establishes how the public organizations will allocate their resources. Limits and boundaries are placed on what the public organization can achieve. All aspects of the planning process, from the process itself to the final plan, are likely to be controversial and conflict will ensue.

Public sector organizations can not escape the political factors connected with public goods and services that they provide. Whether it is in the framing of public policy or the implementation of public policy, public sector organizations experience the political stress brought on by a wide range of actors and

interests. This political stress can be internal and external. To assert that the public sector organization has no vested interest in both the process and outcome of public policy overlooks yet another source of conflict. In many cases, it is this conflict of interests that results in the consumption of significant public sector organizational resources.³

Whether it is in public policy, fiscal management, human resource systems, public planning or politics, public sector organizations face conflict over their policies, processes, and outcomes. The source of this conflict can be internal or external with respect to the organization. The challenges related to the conflict are no less real regardless of its source or application.

TWO GENERAL VIEWS OF ADDRESSING CONFLICT: RESOLUTION & INTERVENTION

As a separate area of study in the field of public administration, conflict management is a relatively young and developing area. Although there are many points of view regarding conflict management, two general approaches have received the most attention. *Conflict resolution* (Fisher, 1997) is the more traditional and historical approach, while *conflict intervention* (Zartman, 2001) represents a more advanced approach that uses modern concepts in dealing with conflict. A comparison of the two approaches reveals a number of differences.

Conflict resolution operates at the micro-level and on a reactive platform. This means that conflict resolution utilizes reactive measures in the intervening of conflict by a limited number of actors where the purpose is to minimize the conflict, accelerate the settlement of the conflict, establish control mechanisms, and determine any punitive actions for non-compliance. Conflict resolution is a complex process where constructive settlement of disputes occurs through relationships (Fisher, 1997). Continuous involvement is an essential element of this approach. Due to the short-term goals of conflict resolution, the approach may appear to be somewhat fragmented and distant. Conflict resolution is well suited for external conflict, where the actors are separated from each other. With limited involvement in the approach, conflict resolution is well suited for acute and short-term conflict situations.

Conflict intervention assumes a more macro-level and a reactive platform, which means the focus is to include a wide range of actors to mitigate any conflict. The purpose of conflict intervention is to develop capacity to deal with conflict, alleviate any friction, and educate all the actors. As Zartman (2001, p. 5) notes, "Preventing conflict is impossible, but preventing its expression in escalation and violence is a desirable goal." With this more inclusive and comprehensive

approach, conflict intervention is better suited for long-term goals, where actors are closely assembled, and can interact on a regular basis. The focus of conflict intervention is on internal issues; it attempts to include all the actors in the approach. Conflict intervention is not as well-suited for acute situations because of its lengthy approach.

These two approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive. Depending on the dynamics of the situation, conflict resolution and conflict intervention may actually be used to complement each other. Both approaches actually share many of the same successful techniques used to manage conflict. Due to the complexity of the public sector, neither of the approaches could address all the possible situations. This opens the door to the possibility that there may be a better approach – not just in managing conflict, but also in incorporating conflict into the practice of public administration.

One of the characteristics that both of these approaches share is that they operate on a reactive platform. This places the public administrator at a distinct disadvantage from the beginning. In many, if not most, cases the public administrator must assume a defensive posture, which limits the options available. Considering this reactive platform, at least five different methods have been identified as appropriate for dealing with conflict in the public sector. These five methods are: 1) collaboration, 2) compromise, 3) determination, 4) accommodation, and 5) avoidance.⁴

Collaboration suggests the active participation of the public administrator in developing a solution that is acceptable to all parties. Compromising also suggests the active participation of the public administrator in negotiating terms that everyone can accept. Determination suggests a decisive action on the part of the public administrator that establishes how all parties must act. Accommodation is a more passive approach where the public administrator yields to the other parties' solution. Finally, avoidance suggests that the public administrator refuses to engage in the conflict and its resolution. Avoidance has very limited utility for the public administrator because the issue will usually reoccur.

There are other generally accepted approaches to dealing with conflict in the public sector. Four of these approaches include: 1) resolution, 2) management, 3) prevention, and 4) control. Each of these approaches has some elements in common but they contain significantly different methods of application.

Conflict resolution accepts the existence of conflict and emphasizes the finding of solutions. Although this approach does not label conflict as bad, it does stress that conflict has to reach a successful conclusion. This approach does not advocate how conflict is to be

resolved but simply that it must be resolved. Volumes (See, for example, Avruch, 1998; Fisher, 1997; Conrad, 1990; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2001; Deutsch, 1973) have been written about conflict resolution, but there is little guidance for public administrators in the management of conflict in their organizations. One of the major flaws with conflict resolution is that it always places the public administrator in a reactive or defensive position.

Conflict management also accepts the existence of conflict, but it concentrates on minimizing the effects of conflict. This approach incorporates analysis and the selection of the best alternative. Management of resources and modifying processes and procedures are the main methods employed. As with the conflict resolution approach, a considerable amount of literature (Starling, 2008; Rahim, 2001; Montgomery & Cook, 2005) has been written about the management of conflict but most of it deals with regional and global conflicts. There is only limited utility for the public administrator. With this approach the public administrator is always in a reactive position. Another major flaw is that the public administrator constantly has to revisit the conflict.

Conflict prevention (Zartman, 2001) suggests that conflict can be anticipated and measures can be taken to prevent or at least limit its escalation. This is a very resource intensive approach. Although early detection of conflict is a positive facet of this approach, it greatly limits the options when there is a failure to correctly identify the conflict. Even though this approach has had some success in dealing with regional and global conflict, it has only limited utility for the public administrator, who has limited informational sources and inadequate resources to identify potential conflict. Although this approach emphasizes a more proactive position, it is resource intensive.

Conflict control (Blackard & Gibson, 2002) incorporates a combination of the other three approaches. Conflict control seeks to resolve conflict, manage the effects of conflict, or prevent the escalation of conflict. This approach incorporates analysis of the conflict, the creation of boundaries to control the effects of the conflict, and strategies to prevent future conflicts of a similar nature. However, this approach is even more resource intensive than conflict prevention. This approach requires the creation of a new layer of bureaucracy to monitor existing conflicts. In a time of resource downsizing, the approach is clearly beyond the reach of most public organizations.

Almost without exception the approaches presented above operate in a reactive manner. This limits the effectiveness of the public administrator in dealing with conflict and in providing public goods and services. There has to be a better approach for dealing with public sector conflict.

CREATING A NEW PLATFORM FOR DEALING WITH CONFLICT

In this section, I propose a new platform for dealing with conflict. This requires the definition of several terms and an overview of how the elements relate to each other. I take a brief look at how public administration could adjust to this new platform and the major requirements necessary for the new platform to be successful. Finally, some of the benefits from this new platform will be discussed.

The proposed platform is **Conflict Administration**. This all-inclusive platform recognizes the existence and value of all current measures of dealing with conflict. Conflict administration seeks to expand upon these measures and incorporates additional measures for dealing with conflict. One of the significant contributions of conflict administration is that it allows the public administrator to be proactive.

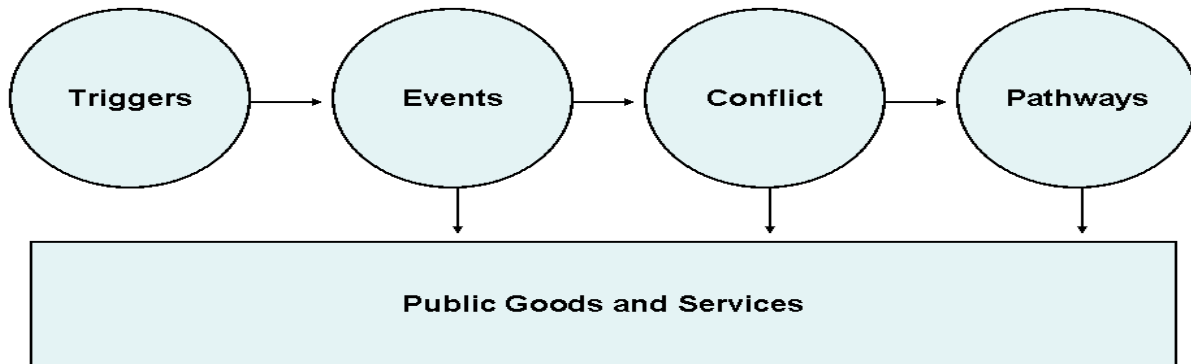
In order for this approach to be successful, the reluctance to study conflict has to change. Perhaps there has been a reluctance to study conflict because many feel it will inevitably lead to even more conflict. This comes from the old avoidance strategy where, if we ignore it, maybe it will go away. There is no real evidence that this strategy has ever worked. As a matter of fact, the literature is ripe with examples of just the opposite. Under this old strategy, there was a compounding effect when conflict was not addressed.

Second, the perception of conflict has to change. No longer can conflict be viewed as good or bad, helpful or harmful. Under this new platform, conflict will simply be viewed as energy. It is the responsibility of the public administrator to channel that energy in a productive way. This will require the public administrator to employ a new set of skills. The acquisition of this skill set may very well encompass the entire professional life of public administrators. It will constantly be evolving as the environment of public administration expands and contracts.

Once conflict is viewed as energy, the public administrator has a new resource at his or her disposal and researchers can begin to discuss conflict in positive terms. Much like the compounding effects of ignored conflict, conflict administration will act to discount the impacts of conflict. No longer will the goal simply be to end the existence of conflict. Since conflict is energy and energy has value, now conflict will be viewed in terms of its value.

There are three essential elements required for conflict administration to work: education, communication, and training. Initially, education is the key. Education incorporates research into conflict and the distribution of the knowledge gained from that research. The collection and analysis of data relating to conflict is critical – not from a personal or organ-

FIGURE 1. The Conflict Administration Approach



izational perspective, but from a holistic or all-inclusive perspective. In addition, the process has to be a multi-disciplinary approach. It is not acceptable to isolate conflict into a single area.

Communication will become the bedrock for successful conflict administration. Sharing lessons learned, approaches validated, and even failures will enhance the ability of public administrators in dealing with conflict. Communication will open new opportunities to expand the use of conflict in a productive manner. Communication will help harness the energy from conflict.

Finally, training about conflict will increase the effectiveness of public organizations. Knowledge gained and shared can be translated into useful skills for all public sector actors. Eventually, education, communication, and training will become three of the primary strategies for conflict administration in the public sector.

So, what does conflict administration look like? Figure 1 shows a very simple diagram that illustrates the proposed platform. Using this approach, the initial step (i.e., the *trigger*) is a pre-defined possibility that could result in an event, but it would not lead to the provision of a public good or service. This simple diagram only shows direction and makes no prediction as to which type of movement will occur or the likelihood of movement occurring. The identification of *triggers* allows the public administrator to act in a proactive manner. In all of the existing approaches dealing with conflict, this concept does not exist.

Triggers work similar to “what if” scenarios, but they do not require any additional options.

Events in the conflict administration diagram represent any possibility that can actually result in conflict. *Events* may or may not be under the control of the public administrator. However, it is possible for the *event* to actually result in the provision of a public good or service. If the *event* results in the intended public good or service, there is still a possibility of conflict also occurring. Again, the diagram only shows direction and offers no additional information. Only a very limited number of current approaches to dealing with conflict include or recognize *events*. The identification of *events* by the public administrator is another opportunity for the public administrator to act in a proactive manner.

Within conflict administration, *conflict* is any unintended by-product of an *event*. As the diagram in Figure 1 demonstrates, *conflict* could result in the provision of a public good or service. However, the diagram does not provide any additional information. If the *conflict* resulted in a public good or service, it may or may not have been the intended public good or service that the *event* was scheduled to produce. However under the conflict administration approach, the public administrator would have the advanced warning and the skill set necessary to move the *conflict* in a positive direction.

In the conflict administration diagram, *pathways* represent options that the public administrator has in dealing with the *conflict*. *Pathways* may be, but are not required to be, preexisting strategies or options for

dealing with known elements of conflict. This is where the real benefits of education and training come into play. *Pathways* offer a wide range of options for the public administrator. They can act like a pressure valve to allow the release of energy created by the *conflict*. A *pathway* could take the same form as some of the current options for dealing with *conflict*, such as collaboration, compromise, accommodation, mediation, negotiation, and dispute resolution. Ultimately, all *pathways* lead to some type of public good or service. In this context, the public good or service could take many forms.

CONCLUSION

One of the essential principles of conflict administration is that it allows the public administrator to remain focused on the delivery of public goods and services instead of allowing the conflict to become the central issue. Conflict administration is the first conflict approach to incorporate a proactive perspective. Conflict, regardless of the definition chosen, is interlaced within society and it is an inevitable part of governance. For public administrators, it is important to understand its sources, evaluate its impacts, adjust to its pressures, and make decisions consistent with current goals and issues while staying within the political and statutory limits of their jurisdiction. Conflict administration is an important step in that direction. However, it is imperative that this initiative, along with other efforts to address public sector conflict, continue. Hopefully, conflict administration will serve to move the discussion and research of conflict in that direction.

NOTES

¹ Legislative gridlock is a form of super-conflict. However, within public administration, super-conflict occurs when the issue reaches beyond the jurisdiction of the public agency and/or the level of government. Statutory conflict, where the laws of one state impact another state, is an example of super-conflict.

² Within the policy process, the ideology, methodology, and political orientation of all the stakeholders establishes various versions of a public policy, which can give rise to conflict in the creation of that public policy. (Wall, 1985, p. 155)

³ The information in this section is a synthesis of theories, including agency theory, capture theory, systems theory, game theory, expectancy theory, and conflict theory.

⁴ This is far from an exhaustive list of methods that can be used in conflict resolution. Additional methods include negotiation, mediation, conciliation, facilitation,

adjudication, arbitration, reconciliation, and peace building.

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