



Culture & Conflict: We're Not In Kansas Anymore Toto

Each person in a conflict has their own story. These stories play out as dramas, in which we see ourselves as the innocent victim (or, perhaps, the righteous hero) and cast our adversary as the villain. Our adversaries, on the other hand, see themselves as the victim (or hero, standing up for themselves) and see us as the villain. This cycle of victimization, attack and defense can be characterized as a *drama triangle of conflict* – a dynamic that locks us into confrontation with winners and losers, right and wrong.

One person's hero, however, is another's villain, as both roles are marked by aggressive behaviours that impose what is "right" on others. We label people based on how their actions impact us. When we feel attacked or disrespected, we assume the other person intended that result and characterize them as a villain. (We justify our own actions based on our noble intention and the righteousness of our cause.)

Being aware of the culture in which a conflict occurs helps us clarify these assumptions by understanding someone's motive or intention. I refer to "culture" in the broadest sense – the values and norms that reflect "how we do things around here." "Here" could pertain to religious or ethnic communities, families, organizations or nations. In their book, *Turning Conflict Into Profit*, Larry Axelrod and Roy Johnson go so far as to state "every communication is a cross-cultural communication" (ie. colored and influenced by each person's unique life experience.)

Culture can be seen as the lens through which we judge behaviours and we characterize people as victims, heroes or villains. Behaviours lauded as admirable in one culture ("she is forthright" or "you know where you stand with him") may be judged as inappropriate and unacceptable in another culture ("she is so aggressive" or "he's always in your face.") In some groups, arriving ten minutes late for a meeting would be considered rude and disrespectful. In other groups, no one would think twice about it. People who feel judged and misunderstood naturally become defensive, escalating conflict. To break this cycle, switch from judgement to curiosity and seek to understand the underlying values in a conflict.

A colleague recently moved to a new organization that described itself as open and collaborative. She therefore assumed she would be invited to express herself at meetings and receive balanced and ongoing feedback on her performance. Instead, she became increasingly frustrated as she found herself fighting for airtime at meetings and hearing from co-workers only when there was a problem. It took her several months (and many challenging conversations) to understand this new culture. Reflecting ethnic values around directness, the organization expected people to speak up if they had concerns and took "no news as good news." Behaviours which she judged as rude or even hypocritical were simply "the way we do things around here" and were not intended to disrespect her in the least. Her co-workers likely viewed her as passive or needy. Once the cultural underpinnings of these conflicts were surfaced and addressed, she was able to negotiate about airtime and feedback and adjust her own style (and expectations) accordingly. Had she not remained curious (and had the courage to confront the situation) the cycle of judgement would have reinforced and hardened the conflict. ("They are clearly villains! I can't believe they are treating me this way!")

Our values and history lead us to judge similar behaviours very differently. Consider what values might be reflected in some of the following characteristics normally ascribed to “heroes” and “villains” in our conflicts:

A hero is . . .	while a villain is . . .
confident	arrogant
flexible	wishy-washy
pragmatic	insensitive
direct	rude
creative	manipulative
takes charge	controls
passionate	unreasonable

These can be seen as flip sides of the same coin. In a recent workshop, a participant who had spent years in a male-dominated, competitive industry recent workshop told of attending her first girl guide parents’ group. During the meeting, in the spirit of give and take to which she had become accustomed, she disagreed with another mother’s suggestion. Her comment was met not with the healthy debate she expected, but with tears. It’s not hard to imagine who was cast as the villain in that particular culture – judged for the same behaviour was demanded of her and made her successful in her corporate culture.

So next time you find yourself involved in a conflict, stay curious. Instead of reacting automatically and characterizing the other person as the villain, ask:

- “How might they characterize their behaviour? What’s their intent?”
- “What assumptions might I need to clarify?”
- “What do I value and what might I need to do to assert that value?”

This active curiosity will allow you to clarify assumptions and uncover the problem instead of judging or attacking the person. By separating the person from the problem, you can devote your energy to problem-solving rather than being caught in the ongoing drama triangle of conflict.

This has two benefits: we can make sense of people’s conflict “stories” identify the root of the problem; at the same time, these stories provide us with a window through which to gain insight into the culture in which the conflict occurs.

Stay curious.