CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG SENIOR LEADERS

WITHIN

THE U.S. MILITARY

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty
In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements
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14 February 2013
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Biography

Colonel Knowles is a U.S. Air Force Dental Officer assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He earned a Bachelor’s of Arts in Biology from Albion College, Michigan in 1992 and a Doctor of Dental Surgery in 1996 from the University of Michigan. After graduating from the University of Michigan School of Dentistry in 1996, Col Knowles was commissioned in the Air Force and has completed two post-graduate education programs in general dentistry. Colonel Knowles has served in multiple levels teaching residents in general dentistry and is a graduated squadron commander.
Abstract
Conflict is prevalent within society and conflict management is challenging in any situation. Within the military, conflict brings some added considerations to that challenge. The Base Realignment of Closure (BRAC) process is one such example that drives conflict within the military. In the 2005 BRAC, medicine was directed to consolidate medical capability into a joint function at many locations. One of the directives was to realign the two major military medical centers in San Antonio – Wilford Hall Medical Center (WHMC) and Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC). This paper assesses the application of negotiation concepts within a framework of organization change within the military. These concepts include the influence of organizational cultural on conflict resolution, dynamics of conflict resolution, and a model for negotiation strategies in the military. The importance of key elements during the negotiation process to include trust, information, power, and development of options will also be addressed. These concepts will be applied to the organizational change, in which, BRAC directed the realignment of WHMC and BAMC. Throughout the realignment between WHMC and BAMC, there were significant challenges to the resolution of this conflict to include parochial service-specific attitudes, trust issues, insistent negotiation strategies, and positional power struggles. This paper will provide the reader with a better understanding of how effective management techniques enhances organizational change or, conversely, how misapplication damages the process.
Introduction

Conflict is prevalent within society and conflict management is challenging in any situation. Within the military, conflict brings some considerations that adds to the challenge. One of the most significant causes of friction within the military is the Base Realignment and Closures (BRAC) process. Of the various categories of BRAC, consolidation of military functions was one of the driving forces behind the 2005 BRAC process. One military function that was perceived as amenable to the consolidation process was medicine. The 2005 BRAC was different from past BRACs in a number of ways. Important to this paper is that this consolidation didn’t focus on the numbers associated with military end strength. Rather, it focused on capability-based planning and joint military capability. It also emphasized functional consolidation represented by “Joint Cross-Service Groups” to include the Medical Joint Cross-Service Group. Part of the 2005 BRAC’s final recommendation was to realign the two major military medical centers in San Antonio - Wilford Hall Medical Center (WHMC) and Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC).

This wasn’t the first attempt at consolidating medical assets in San Antonio. The WHMC and BAMC leadership functions merged in the late 1980s under the Joint Military Medical Command. This eventually unsuccessful venture was abandoned in the early 1990s and the leadership functions reverted back to the specific services. Similarly, limited consolidation of medical enlisted training was also not new to the services. Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas had a history of joint training with its Dental Laboratory Technician, Dental Assistant Technician, and Biomedical Equipment Maintenance Courses.

The 2005 BRAC decisions to realign medical assets raised many concerns, including command and control structure, manning, and course development issues. Conflict is a natural
component of any change process. Conflict arises from multiple sources to include miscommunication, emotions, differences in values, organizational structure, and historical context.\textsuperscript{5} Conflict management through negotiations is a proven process to resolve conflict. However, the hierarchical structure and inter-service cultural differences associated with the U.S. military can make finding a resolution through negotiations a difficult process.

This paper assesses the application of negotiation concepts within the framework of organizational change within the military. As a result of this paper, the reader will better understand how effective management techniques enhances organizational change or, conversely, how misapplication damages the process.

**Considerations for Conflict Resolution**

There is copious literature on how to best manage conflict when it comes to organizational change. To better understand conflict management within an organization, it is important to understand organizational culture. Organizational culture shapes the decision-making process. It is strongly influenced by how the organization’s members perceive the other’s culture as well as how they perceive there own culture.\textsuperscript{6} The United States Air Force defines culture as:

“The creation, maintenance and transformation across generations of semi-shared patterns of meaning, sense-making, affiliation, action and organization by groups. Essentially, culture is the mechanism people use to adapt to the world around them and interact with others…and the filter through which people view reality to make sense of events.”\textsuperscript{7}

Edgar Schein’s research establishes four main categories for culture. They include macro-cultures, organizational cultures, subcultures, and micro-cultures. Macro-cultures consist of nations, ethical and religious groups, or occupations that exist globally. Organizational cultures include private, public, nonprofit, and government organizations. Occupational groups
within organizations like law or medicine would be considered subcultures. Micro-cultures are microsystems within or outside an organization. Recognizing cultural differences at the ethnic or national level is much more apparent than appreciating them at the organizational level. Culture, within the context of this paper, will focus at the organizational level.

Within organizations there are three levels of culture. These levels include artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions. Artifacts are the visible or observable things. Examples of artifacts include the organization’s language, technology, style, myths and stories as well as its rituals and ceremonies. Espoused beliefs and values are those articulated assumptions about right verses wrong, and what does or does not work. Ideals, goals, aspirations, and ideologies are illustrations of an organization’s beliefs and values. Sometimes there is conflict between these espoused beliefs and values and the organization’s observed behavior. As a result of this discrepancy, an observer may have a partial understanding of an organization’s culture but still be left confused. This is why appreciating basic underlying assumptions is important. They are the organization’s “taken for granted” things and have little variation within the organization. These assumptions result from the successful and long-lasting implementation of certain beliefs and values. In short, the history of an organization is the audit trail of its culture; how it came to be what it is today and why it is the way it is today.

According to Schein, these basic assumptions are so ingrained, they become non-debatable and any challenge to those shared basic assumptions results in some form of anxiety or defensiveness. Recognizing that these basic shared assumptions exist in an organizations culture helps one understand that significant conflict can occur as a result of organizational change. Therefore, this cannot be ignored during conflict management. It is also important to understand that our own assumptions can create biases that subsequently influence decisions.
Understanding that conflict is a component of any organizational change is only the first part. Dealing with conflict effectively is the second part and to effectively manage it, the nature of conflict must be understood. Conflict can be viewed in many ways through many lenses. Mayer, in his book, *The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution*, views it in three dimensions; cognitive, emotional, and behavioral.11

In the cognitive dimension, conflict is the impression that one’s own needs, interests or values are not reconcilable with another’s. Conflict occurs even if only one party believes it exists; and as a result, that party will engage in a conflict process.12 The cognitive dimension is where perceptions have significant influence and directly ties in with Schein’s basic underlying assumptions of individuals and organizations. What we think about how things should be accomplished, how goals are met or how a mission should be executed are deeply ingrained in organizational culture and impacts decision-making throughout all levels.13 As a result, these “norm” perceptions can negatively affect conflict resolution or the negotiation process if gone unchecked.14 Being aware of and managing these preconceived perceptions can help neutralize conflict and facilitate the negotiation process.

Conflict inevitably involves feelings, which is at the heart of the emotional dimension. These feelings are expressed in many ways, both positively and negatively. As in the cognitive dimension, emotional conflict can exist and is very real to the person feeling them even if the other party is not aware of them.15 Emotions have two significant roles in conflict resolution. They influence the development of relationships and trust between parties and can expedite or delay the negotiation process.16 For example, studies show that positive emotional expression can facilitate creative problem solving, increase faith in judgments, and the expectation of agreeable end results. However, if positive emotion is seen as insincere then it can be viewed as
manipulation and hinder conflict resolution.\textsuperscript{17}

Combining the cognitive and emotional dimensions creates the behavioral dimension. It takes one’s perceptions and feelings and then expresses them through action to help one achieve their needs. This action has the potential to cause conflict as we try to meet our needs while preventing others from meeting their needs. These three dimensions are not linear in nature and don’t exist in a vacuum by themselves. They are intimately related and interact with one another.\textsuperscript{18}

It is important to recognize that all the above factors are important when managing organizational conflict. Understanding that conflict is not a bad thing helps one approach conflict in a different manner. More importantly, understanding the nature of conflict helps those in its midst by providing concepts to better manage the negotiation process and resolve conflict in ways that benefit all parties involved.\textsuperscript{19}

**Negotiation Strategies**

Strategies to manage conflict have been described by many authors. Dr. Stefan Eisen in his “Practical Guide to Negotiating in the Military” describes five different strategies useful in negotiations: (1) Evade, (2) Comply, (3) Insist, (4) Settle, and (5) Cooperative.

In the model describing the above five strategies, two variables help frame which negotiating strategy may be most appropriate. The first is people or relationships. Developing and maintaining a trusting relationship within the context of negotiating means a willingness to take the other’s needs into account as well as trusting in shared, truthful information. On the other hand, if relationships are not important then considering other’s needs and trusting in their information takes a less significant role in the negotiation process. When deciding which approach to take in regards to the relationship, it is important to consider the frequency of
interaction that will occur as well as the effect on the reputation of individuals as well as the organization. Another consideration is how much involvement the other party will have for developing resolution options in the negotiation process. Relationships become critical when interactions are frequent and there is significant involvement of the other party or parties.\textsuperscript{20}

The task or problem being considered is the other variable. High task orientation involves being focused on successfully completing the task at hand in a way that achieves one’s goals. A low task orientation means that there is no desire for a positive resolution, or there are no specific preferences, or there is a poor understanding of the problem. Usually, achieving the best outcome for the organization can be realized through a cooperative negotiation strategy that requires the willingness of all parties to seek a successful resolution through active engagement, and flexibility in the timing of task completion.\textsuperscript{21}

There are four framing elements, which need consideration before selecting one of the five negotiating strategies. Those elements are Trust, Information, Power, and Options. As discussed earlier, trust is important in building relationships. It is also significant in the overall negotiation process. It defines whether or not the interactions with the opposing party are genuine and truthful. Trust can be either in a process or in a person. Trust in a process can exist when all parties trust in an institutional process and therefore individuals don’t necessarily have to know one other to trust in that process. Personal trust is just that, personal. It involves knowing the individual(s) on a personal level and can only happen through interaction with the individual and evaluating their words and actions. In reality, trust is not viewed in this dichotomy, but parties usually rely on both process and personal trust during most negotiations. Only when a party chooses to devalue or ignore trust by adopting an Insist or Evade Strategy is trust not critical to the negotiation process.\textsuperscript{22}
For cooperative negotiations to be successful, valid information needs to be presented. This is directly related to trust. The level of trust will determine whether or not the information presented will be viewed as truthful and reliable which will affect the decision making process.\(^{23}\)

Arguably the most influential aspect of the negotiation process is power. Mayer describes power as the currency of conflict. Whether we consciously realize it or not, we use power within the negotiation process. To use power effectively, one must first understand each party’s sources and forms of power. Understanding power is crucial to understanding conflict.\(^{24}\) Types of power include, but are not limited to, formal authority as authorized by a given position or rank; expertise based on knowledge or information; power of resources such as money, time or labor; personal characteristics power such as charisma, wit, communication skills; power of reward (providing of rewards); coercive power (withholding rewards), and the power of influence which is a combination of the reward and coercive power.\(^{25}\)

Power must be implemented carefully. Sources of power do not equate to the use of power. Power can be used in one of three ways. First, it can be used to appeal to other’s beliefs and values. Second, it can be used to appeal to other’s self-interests. Third, it can be used to force people through coercion. If done overtly, it can have a negative impact, leading to the potential for no resolution to the conflict. Conversely, this does not mean that power should not be used overtly. The use of overt power can be very effective under the right circumstances, for example, during a crisis situation. It is essential to master this balance when seeking effective conflict management. All parties involved in conflict have a choice about both the use of power and how to respond to it.\(^{26}\)

The fourth element in the framework is the development of options. Development of options to solve a task depends on all the other elements—trust, information, and power. The key
to developing viable options is information. The key to implementation of options is power. When trust is high, information is seen as valid and tends to be more forthcoming and as a result more viable options become available. Conversely, when trust is low, information is not considered as valid and development of options is significantly decreased. These conditions can lead to less than ideal outcomes.27

As individuals or organizations encounter conflict they will bring their history, their power, and their culture to the negotiating table. With an understanding of the essentials that influence a negotiation, an investigation of the five negotiation strategies is warranted; Evade, Comply, Insist, Settle, and Cooperative. These strategies can be divided up into passive and active approaches as well as integrative or distributive. Table one provides an illustration of the five strategies.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active</th>
<th>Distributive</th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Integrative</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Insist, Settle</td>
<td>Comply, Evade</td>
<td>Cooperative</td>
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Table 1

The Evade strategy, as it sounds, implies avoidance. It is not concerned about developing a resolution or building relationships. The goal is status quo as opposed to a solution to the problem. With this strategy, trust is low and information is minimal either because too little information is available or the unwillingness to gain information. Power in this type of strategy is minimal mainly because of the lack of importance of the task at hand. From the standpoint of developing options, the preference is to stick with the status quo because the status quo is better
than any perceived alternative outcomes. Employing this strategy has significant limitations but may be useful when delaying will allow you to get better information, increase support of your side (gain power), or find flaws in the other party’s proposed options.\textsuperscript{28}

The Comply strategy essentially places the resolution of the conflict in the other party’s hands. This strategy is used when the absolute priority is preserving the relationship even at the expense of the task. Trust in this strategy is necessary because the compliant party is allowing the other to drive the conflict resolution. To maintain the relationship between the parties, there needs to be a trusting relationship. Power in this situation takes a back seat to ensuring the relationship between parties is maintained. As a result, one seeks to work with the other party and may even accept an outcome that is worse than the status quo. Being too quick to use this strategy has the potential to negatively impact long-term relationships, as it could be seen as a sign of weakness and may effect future negotiations.\textsuperscript{29}

The Insist strategy is the opposite of the Comply strategy. This strategy’s priority is meeting your objectives, often to the detriment of the other party’s interests or the relationship. This strategy is usually employed from a standpoint of positional authority and through demands or ultimatums. Trust in this strategy does not exist or is not valued. Information is not freely given and relationships are put at significant risk, which makes long-term negotiating very difficult. Power is used to dominate the outcome and as a result, options are one-sided. This approach can be useful during situations where future interaction with existing parties is unlikely. This strategy can be seen as a winner-take-all approach and can be useful to achieve specific objectives. The Insist strategy is also very useful in crisis situations in which time is limited to gather information and develop mutually beneficial options. Once the crisis has subsided, other negotiation strategies can be utilized to develop a long-term solution.\textsuperscript{30}
The Settle strategy can be defined by one word, compromise. It sits in the middle between Insist and Comply. It is lukewarm when considering task orientation and relationships. In this strategy, each party achieves some of their goals but both come away from the negotiations not fully satisfied. There are moderate amounts of trust and power tends to be divided equally among parties. Because trust is somewhere in the middle, information tends to be protected and disclosed only as needed to support one’s side. Compromise results because neither party is willing to concede on objectives or time constraints. This hinders the development of better options. As a result, options tend to be limited. On the surface this sounds like an effective strategy, but it rarely achieves an optimal outcome for the parties involved.31

The final strategy is the Cooperative Negotiation Strategy (CNS), which best leverages the concepts contained within classic Interest-Based Negotiations.32 This strategy has the potential to be the most productive but it depends on each party’s willingness for a mutually acceptable outcome while actively managing the relationships. This occurs because trust is high between parties and information and decision-making power is shared. The cooperative strategy can address multiple issues within a negotiation better than the other strategies because it is not a zero-sum, or distributive game as in the Insist or Comply strategies. One of the main foci of the CNS is on the underlying basic interests or assumptions of an organization. This ties in with Schein’s third level of organizational cultural-basic underlying assumptions. Understanding an organization’s basic underlying assumptions or interests can lead to a better understanding of the nature of the existing conflict. With high levels of trust and the sharing of information and power, a common ground can be identified and the development of multiple, mutually satisfying solutions becomes possible. These mutually developed options are usually better than what each
party could generate individually.\textsuperscript{33}

The advantages to the CNS are: (1) focuses on the underlying interests and assumptions, (2) turns the conflict into a search for solutions, (3) focuses on both the problem while maintaining an effective relationship, (4) allows for solutions based on differences, (5) leverages information and critical thinking to support problem solving, (6) enables the development of multiple solution sets to the problem, (7) uses objective standards in solution selection.\textsuperscript{34}

With the basic understanding of organizational culture, variables in conflict management, and strategies for conflict resolution through different negotiation strategies, the remainder of the paper focuses on one case study illustrating how some of these factors influenced the conflict resolution process as a result of the BRAC decision to consolidate the medical functions of Wilford Hall and Brooke Army Medical Centers.

\textbf{Case Study}

This case study is not designed to place blame but to look at the lessons learned and some factors worth considering in future conflict resolution situations in the U.S. military. This is especially important as more and more common functions among services have the potential to become integrated.

In the 2005 BRAC, the Secretary of Defense made a recommendation to “realign Lackland Air Force Base, TX, by relocating the inpatient medical function of the 59th Medical Wing (Wilford Hall Medical Center) to the Brooke Army Medical Center, Fort Sam Houston, TX, establishing it as the San Antonio Regional Military Medical Center, and converting Wilford Hall Medical Center into an ambulatory care center.”\textsuperscript{35}

The realignment of Wilford Hall and Brooke Army Medical center immediately met challenges with command and control. At its onset, authority to direct the transition was met
with resistance to include which service would take the lead in the transition. One senior leader who was involved at the onset of this transition stated that positional attitudes dominated the environment, which was influenced by service-specific loyalties. Despite that challenge, this senior leader went on to say that relationships built on mutual trust with Army and Navy colleagues allowed for an environment to help work around those with service-specific agendas and successfully start the BRAC-directed transition.36

Throughout the transition, there were challenges in developing these trusting relationships at different levels and thus the ability for a smooth integration. At the clinical levels, this seemed to be less of an issue. One medical service leader stated that relationships at their level were “extremely successful [however], relationships beyond [my level] have been more challenging and time consuming.” From his standpoint, above the clinical level, the perception was that the integration of Army and Air Force assets was challenging because both parties wanted to be in charge and take primary sponsorship. There also seemed to be a sense of unwillingness to trust each other.37

In addition to the varying degrees of trust, the use of positional power came into play. This dynamic was seen at the highest levels. Even after years of discussion and tentative agreements being made on the realignment’s command and control structure, in Aug of 2009, the Army Surgeon General suddenly rejected the proposed organizational structure. As a result, the services went back to the drawing board. The Two Surgeon Generals ultimately could not reach an agreement and as a result, the Air Force Chief of Staff and the Army Chief of Staff became involved to “work it out.” Ultimately the Chiefs of Staff settled on an organizational agreement and the Surgeon Generals finalized the construct to meet the intent of the Chiefs. The Chiefs of the Staff of the Air Force and Army signed the agreement in September of 2010.38 This paper
doesn’t judge the use of positional power in this situation, as all the circumstances surrounding the decision are not readily available. However, this situation is an example of how the military’s hierarchy and positional power can significantly influence a negotiation.

Despite the challenges in developing command and control in this case, a key point brought out above is that successful outcomes require mutual trusting relationships to help parties work through differences regardless of the organizational level. Without trusting relationships, successful long-term negotiations are severely hindered. The challenge to reach a command and control structure in a timely manner led to a lack of clarity of the final end state which made it more difficult for lower level action officers to work the details.

Lack in clarity of the end state caused significant amounts of confusion. The BRAC gave the objective to consolidate, but it was up to the services to figure out how to accomplish the objective. This was even more complicated when services go in with the mindset of making the transition happen without losing anything in the process. This was apparent throughout as each service had their own doctrinal or cultural interests in mind. One senior leader noted that working groups “often became very difficult as service representatives at the O-5/O-6 and senior civilian level sought to maintain their service interests [which were] often couched in terms of doctrine.” He continued, “the tone seemed to be always win/lose versus any sense of win/win.”39 This is an example of the “Insist” strategy in which positional power as well as defensive maneuvering is utilized to protect interests and achieve objectives. This is counterproductive and results in less than optimal outcomes.

In addition to positioning and defensive maneuvers, decision-making between services was delegated down to different rank levels and, as a result, during the resolution process some decision makers often were not the ones in the room during discussions. This represents a
difference in organizational culture. Being sensitive to this approach, each service had to ensure equal rank representation otherwise lower ranking representatives were treated dismissively. Leaders not knowing what “handshake” agreements were made at the most senior levels also complicated the negotiation process.40

Lack of clarity, doctrinal/cultural service differences, differing levels of decision-making authority made it extremely difficult to reach the end state. One Air Force Medical Service Officer summed up the lesson learned from this realignment nicely.

“In order to succeed, all parties must agree on the endpoint…not their perception of what that endpoint is. The leadership must be agreed upon that final endpoint and what it really looks like before those in subordinate positions can work anything successfully. That agreement and endpoint has to be communicated down to the lowest levels so all parties understand that direction.”41

This statement may be obvious but the execution of it, as seen in this case, is not always straightforward. By understanding organizational culture, negotiation theory and the framing elements like power and trust, navigating through conflict management and ultimately conflict resolution can make the process less intimidating and more productive.

**Conclusion**

Organizational and cultural influences were significant in the consolidation of Wilford Hall Medical Center and Brooke Army Medical Center especially with respect to command and control. Being proud of one’s service is important and can bring different perspectives to the negotiating table. Differences used effectively can result in optimal resolution. In this case, there appeared to be a strong “Insist” strategy applied to ensure minimal changes to the status quo that inhibited the resolution process. At one point during this process one individual used his authoritative power to send it all back to the drawing board, which ultimately required the direct involvement of multiple service Chiefs of Staff.
From one perspective, the hierarchical structure worked. The chain of command was followed in order to ultimately reach a resolution. Conversely, it could be argued that the organizational structure hindered the decision-making process to the point that it required four-star general officer involvement.

There were some successes during the consolidation processes to include understanding the value of mutually trusting relationships. This could be seen throughout the organizational change in which individuals understood that the job needed to get done and successfully executed. Ultimately the consolidation occurred according to the BRAC recommendation, however, the conflict resolution process had its challenges. These challenges included parochial service-specific attitudes, trust issues, insistent strategies of negotiations, and positional power struggles. As a result, the hierarchical structures within the military and service culture differences played a significant role in hindering the resolution process of re-aligning Wilford Hall and Brooke Army Medical Centers.

As the military continues to consolidate functions across services, it is important to recognize these challenges to better effect organizational change and conflict resolution. The Cooperative Negotiation Strategy, as described above, can achieve a more effective outcome. This requires all parties to put aside parochialism and utilize service differences appropriately in order to achieve a mutually acceptable result by building a trusting relationship and sharing decision-making power. This can only be done if we understand others basic interests and underlying assumptions.
Notes


10. Ibid., 29.


12. Ibid., pg. 4.


14 “Norming” is the lens one uses to evaluate if something is being done correctly or not – it is how the world “should be” according to our biased lens.


19. Ibid., 24.


22. Ibid., 6-7.

23. Ibid., 7.


28. Ibid., 10.

29. Ibid., 11.

30. Ibid., 12.

31. Ibid., 13.


34. Ibid., 15-17.


36. Feedback from Senior Air Force Medical Service Personnel.

37. Ibid.


39. Feedback from Senior Air Force Medical Service Personnel.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.
Bibliography


