disagreement is okay

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The essence of Extension work is interaction with people. Many of these interactions are problem-solving situations in which the individuals and groups involved have opposing viewpoints, dissimilar backgrounds, and unequal degrees of empowerment. The inevitable consequence of such interactions is dissent.

Dissent is defined as a "difference of opinion."[1] The mere fact that different people hold different opinions is so self-evident that it would hardly seem worth mentioning if not for the fact that, despite the omnipresence of dissent, many people have never developed the skills to deal effectively with it. Yet, the way in which dissent is handled can determine whether it leads to a constructive synthesis of ideas or a break-down into irreconcilable conflict.

Dissent or Conflict

First, understanding the distinction between dissent and conflict is important. Dissent has already been defined as a difference of opinion. In contrast, conflict is defined as:

> . . . competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state of action; mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, external or internal demands; hostile encounter.[2]

Conflict, then, embodies competition rather than cooperation, emotion rather than reason.

Morgan refers to conflict as dissension and offers the following characteristics to distinguish dissension from dissent:

> Dissent is usually reasoned and fairly calm; dissension unreasoned and angry.
> Dissent normally stems from honest differences of opinion; dissension often from untenable beliefs or stands.
> People who persist in their dissent usually will gracefully accept their minority position; people bent on dissension frequently want all or nothing.[3]

**Role of
Stress**

Both dissent and conflict cause feelings of stress and tension, sometimes making it difficult to distinguish between them. Most of us, if asked, would probably say that we dislike stress. Yet, stress can be a positive force. According to Albrecht,

... we need not consider either pressure or stress to be intrinsically bad or undesirable. Stress is a natural part of human functioning, and pressure is a normal aspect of human interaction ... [the] quality of life is highest at moderate levels of stress.[4]

**Subjective
Perception**

Not all stress, of course, is positive. Stress caused by the frustration and hostility of open conflict can be destructive. Whether you view a particular disagreement as dissent (positive stress) or conflict (negative stress), however, is a subjective matter. We each perceive what's occurring through the filters of our experience. As a result, each individual's interpretation of the same group dynamic and reactions to it are often quite different from one another. "Whether a situation is a threat or a challenge is largely a matter of how a person views it."[5] These differences in perception can serve as barriers to effective communication.

The degree to which individuals' reactions differ is shown by the divergence of reactions I once heard expressed by two different Extension agents following a rather lively discussion held during an Extension staff meeting earlier in the day. One of the staff members expressed pleasure that the meeting had been so stimulating and constructive, while the other, in reference to the same meeting, described the interchange that had occurred as useless bickering that should have been avoided.

Further complicating the matter that different people attach various meanings to the same occurrences is the fact that individuals also vary in the degree of intensity with which they react to stressful situations. Some people become quite disturbed over relatively minor opposition, while others seem to thrive on high levels of pressure, complexity, ambiguity, and challenge.[6]

**Importance of
Dissent**

To effectively handle dissent, it's necessary to condition yourself to accept dissent as inevitable and desirable and understand its value. Morgan states that "dissent is normal; its absence is abnormal .... You have more to worry about when you encounter no opposition than when you do meet it ...."[7]

Dissenters in a group are often individuals whose experiences enable them to view a particular problem or issue from different vantage points than most—vantage points that can sometimes reveal to the majority insights to which it would otherwise

be blind. Also, the majority, no matter how monolithic in its view, isn't always right.

Strategies for Dealing with Dissent

Disagreement in itself is usually not the cause of antagonism and hostility. More often, failure to give alternative views an adequate airing causes these feelings. For this reason, the process employed in group discussion is important.

A number of different ways exist to categorize the strategies used to deal with dissent. Ultimately, however, each comes under one of four broad categories: power, compromise, consensus, and synergy.

Power

The power process involves resolution through force rather than reason. It may take the form of "pulling rank," voting, browbeating, or simply outmaneuvering the opposition. The distinguishing feature of the power strategy is that resolution of the problem is unrelated to the relative merits of the arguments.

Resorting to the use of power or its opposite, being forced to capitulate to the other party to resolve disagreement, will almost always produce negative results. Not only are these methods unlikely to provide the best solution to the problem at hand, but they're certain to engender a sense of frustration and resentment within the dissenting parties because it emphasizes their lack of empowerment.

Laue suggests that "persons ought to solve problems through a factually based democratic process" and that "everybody with a stake in a particular outcome or decision should have some say in the decision." He also points out that "the democratic process does not work properly unless all groups with a stake in the outcome have sufficient power to represent their own rights in the process."[8] Access to information and the opportunity to speak freely in a democratically controlled forum are sources for this power.

Compromise

A step up from the power strategy is compromise. Compromise is a negotiated resolution based on each party making some concession to the other. However, compromise is still based on power relationships. Within such a process, dissenters tend to be viewed as adversaries. Through preferable to the pure power strategy, compromise doesn't go far to enhance creativity or maximize group satisfaction.

Consensus

Consensus occurs when all parties voice their dissent and the group is willing and able to arrive at a solution with which all of the members can live. This is a win/win outcome in

contrast to the win/lose relationship that prevails in the power and compromise strategies.

Synergism

Synergism is a process whereby differing views are synthesized into new and better ideas through the cooperative efforts of all the parties involved. Synergism means the "cooperative action of discrete agencies such that the total effect is greater than the sum of the effects taken independently."[9] Synergism promotes creativity, making optimal use of the positive stress created by dissent. It's the highest form of problem resolution.[10]

Summary

Dissent is an integral part of human relations; effectively dealing with dissent is a vital skill for every Extension professional. Although dissent can break down into emotional, destructive conflict, it can also bring about a positive stress that stimulates creative problem solving. The first step in learning to deal with dissent is to be able to distinguish between dissent and conflict. Dissent is characterized by reason and cooperation, while conflict tends toward emotionalism and competition.

Dissent can best be managed by promoting a democratic problem-solving process in which all interested parties have the power to make their views known.

Whether a particular disagreement is characterized by dissent or conflict may be subjective, determined within the mind of each participant based on his/her unique perceptions of what's occurring. These perceptions are, in turn, the products of each individual's personal experience, emotional makeup, attitudes, values, and all the other factors that make each of us unique. To accept and understand dissent, we must engage in some critical self-analysis to discover how we react to dissent and why. Then, it may be appropriate to try to modify those reactions. To further real communication, it's also necessary to try to discern where others are "coming from," rather than assuming that others are perceiving the situation in the same way we are.

Dissent can best be managed by promoting a democratic problem-solving process in which all interested parties have the power to make their views known.

Four major strategies for resolving disagreements exist: power, compromise, consensus, and synergy. Power uses force rather than reason. It promotes antagonism and is the least desirable method of resolving disagreements. Compromise makes

use of mutual concessions to arrive at a solution. Compromise casts dissenters as adversaries and, like the power option, is competitive and based on power relationships. Consensus allows dissenting views to be heard and a mutually acceptable solution to result through cooperation. Synergy is the collective development of wholly new ideas that transcend the creative ability of the individual participants. This strategy is what makes the best use of positive stress and represents the most advanced way to deal with dissent.

Footnotes

1. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1980).
2. *Ibid.*
3. John S. Morgan, *Practical Guide to Conference Leadership* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1960), p. 195.
4. Karl Albrecht, *Stress and the Manager: Making It Work for You* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), p. 49.
5. E. M. Gherman, *Stress and the Bottom Line: A Guide to Personal Well-Being and Corporate Health* (New York: AMOCOM, 1981), p. 217.
6. *Ibid.,* pp. 48-49.
7. Morgan, *Practical Guide to Conference Leadership,* p. 145.
8. James Laue, *Value-Free, Objective Educators* (St. Louis: University of Missouri, no date), pp. 2 and 5.
9. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary.*
10. Charles W. Miller and Robert H. Richardson, "Learning To Use Conflict" (Pullman: Washington State University, Group Facilitation Resources, 1976).