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Resolving Conflicts Through Soft Leadership— *An Academic Case Study*

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Abstract

The purpose is to present a case study on soft leadership to resolve conflict effectively. It adopts the 11 Cs of Professor M.S. Rao, the father of “soft leadership” — character, charisma, conscience, conviction, courage, communication, compassion, commitment, consistency, consideration, and contribution. It draws a blueprint to resolve conflicts amicably. It emphasizes that leaders have to act according to the situation, with more emphasis on soft leadership, for resolving conflicts to achieve a win-win outcome. It describes how to redress grievance in a private Indian educational institution through soft leadership. It offers practical ideas and innovative tools and techniques to resolve conflicts. It points out that conflicts cannot be eliminated in organizations, but can only be minimized if leaders and stakeholders adopt a proactive attitude. Understanding this philosophy and exploring soft leadership to resolve conflicts helps organizations enhance their productivity and performance.

Introduction

The good leaders do the best thing in the prevailing situation whereas the great leaders do the right thing in any situation — irrespective of the effects and outcomes. Professor Ken worked in a private educational institution in India as a Professor teaching MBA students. He received a letter of appointment for the post of Professor in an X educational institution from the Secretary of an educational society consisting of seven educational institutions. After joining, the Professor was instructed to impart soft-skills training to the students of the seven educational institutions since the Professor earned his doctoral degree in the area of soft skills. The Professor did not appreciate the role’s ambiguity. Hence, he asked the educational institution about the same. The Principal of the X institution informed the Professor in the presence of the Secretary that he had to offer soft-skills training as an additional responsibility, and not at the cost of his management subjects.

Since the Professor was passionate about sharing his knowledge with the students, he agreed to impart soft-skills training to the students of all educational institutions. He encountered organizational politics as he had to report to multiple Principals and the Head of the Departments (HODs) of each institution to coordinate and organize soft-skills training to students. It was indeed a tough task, pleasing the egos of intellectuals of various educational institutions. If he had worked only for X educational institution, he would have confined sharing his knowledge to the students effectively and avoided politics. Somehow, he managed to work there for 3 years successfully despite organizational politics. At the end of the third year, the X educational institution transferred the Professor to another educational institution Y which lacked an adequate intake of students and was inferior in infrastructure and image. He reported to the Principal of Y educational institution as per the instructions of the Secretary of the Educational Society. He realized that there was a scarcity of Professors with Ph.D. qualifications in the Y institution. However, the Professor was dejected as he was not consulted before the transfer. He requested the Secretary of the Educational Society to transfer him back to the X institution. But there was no positive response from the Secretary.

The Professor requested two days' leave to attend the anniversary of his father-in-law's passing. He sent an e-mail to the Principal, requesting about two days of leave. It was reported that an inspection team by the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) would visit the institution at any time to check whether everything was proper. The date of the AICTE inspection team visiting the educational institution was not known as it was a sudden inspection to check the irregularities in private educational institutions in India. The Professor addressed over an e-mail to the Principal about proceeding on two days' leave to a far distant place to attend the anniversary.

The Professor received a response by way of a message on his cell phone about the AICTE inspection team visiting the Y educational institution. But he was helpless as he had already boarded the bus to travel to another location. The very next day, he received a telephone call that he must report to the Y institution as the inspection team had already visited the premises. He informed telephonically about his inability to report to the institution as he was in another city to attend the family event.

The Professor returned after two days of leave to the Y institution and resumed performing his roles and responsibilities. He came to know that the AICTE inspection team had visited the institution during his leave. After a month, the report came from the AICTE inspection team about the cancellation of the MBA course due to the shortage of Professors with Ph.D. qualifications. The institution also lacked a favorable reputation and had low student enrollment in previous years. During the last academic year, the institution only registered seven students instead of the usual intake of 60. The institution did not have adequate faculty and the administrators of the institution inflated faculty numbers artificially to show to the AICTE inspection team. In this way, several private educational institutions in India have manipulated their figures sent to the regulating bodies. The institution did have adequate infrastructure to provide the courses. The institution did not maintain its academic records properly and many complaints were filed against the institution in court. It did not pay salaries to departing employees and terminated several employees arbitrarily, subjecting them to debasing humiliation. The Secretary of the Educational Society had both political power and economic resources. He had the power to influence many local politicians and offer bribes to officials. As a result, most employees were scared of the Secretary and refused to file cases against him in a court of law or to the university to which the educational institution was affiliated.

The Y institution applied to the affiliated university to reconsider the cancellation of the MBA course by informing that the Professor was available and was back from leave. The university did not consider their request and canceled the course for an academic year.

In the meanwhile, the institution stopped paying a salary to the Professor. He repeatedly requested payment. Finally, the Professor was terminated from services on administrative grounds with a one-month notice. Professor served for a month as per their notice. On the final working day, he was not given a relieving order and service certificate by the institution. His salary for more than three months was not paid. He requested the Principal and the Secretary while in service to rectify this failure to compensate for services rendered. The Principal supported the Secretary. Finally, the Professor had to leave the college without receiving the relieving order and service certificate and his salary for more than three months.

The Professor approached various forums for redress of his grievance. The Secretary was influenced by his money and political power and avoided paying the salary. Finally, the highest regulating body in India – AICTE – instructed the institution to redress the grievance as there was an embedded system within the college website to constitute a Grievance Committee meeting. The institution conducted the Grievance Committee meeting with their employees and asked the Professor to attend the meeting. Since the Professor lacked any trust in this process, and was additionally receiving threats to his personal security, he did not attend the meeting. The Grievance Committee meeting concluded that the institution lost money due to the cancellation of their MBA course and that damages had to be paid by the Professor. The institution decided to initiate legal action against the Professor. Instead of paying the Professor for his work, the institution threatened to file a legal case to recover damages. Here are some questions to think about this case study:

1. Who was at fault for the cancellation of the MBA course?
2. Was there any miscommunication between the Professor, Principal, and Secretary?
3. Can the institution stop paying a salary to the Professor without giving any supporting reason?
4. Did the Grievance Committee meeting conducted by the institution have any legality and sanctity?
5. Why did the Y institution not conduct the Grievance Committee meeting before terminating the Professor's services?
6. Was it justified by the Secretary of the Educational Society to request that the Professor pay for damages due to the cancellation of their MBA course by the AICTE?
7. What is the role of AICTE and affiliated universities to resolve this grievance?
8. How can the Professor recover his salary?
9. What are the other weaknesses in this case study?
10. What is right and wrong?

Conflicts occur and problems arise in analyzing the issues presented, largely due to variables such as personality, ego, differences of opinions, cultural differences, perceptions, miscommunication, the paucity of information, ambiguity in roles and responsibilities, stress, and scarcity of resources. Usually, conflicts arise when there is a gap between expectations and reality.

A Blueprint to Resolve Conflicts Amicably

Don't avoid conflicts. Resolve them amicably and earnestly. If you postpone addressing conflicts, they become crises later which will be difficult to manage. Concurrently, ensure that conflicts don't become chronic. The following is a blueprint to help resolve such problems in a more judicious and comprehensive manner:

- Consult experts in the area of conflict when in doubt because nobody knows everything.
- Communicate clearly. Shannon L. Alder once remarked, "The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't being said. The art of reading between the lines is a lifelong quest of the wise." Ensure that all stakeholders are respected and treated with dignity and honor.
- Be a good listener. Avoid preconceived notions. Have an open mind to examine the conflicts to resolve them amicably.

- Maintain a positive body language. Observe the body language cues of others to identify their inner motives and intentions.
- Be cool and composed. Maintain a cheerful disposition throughout discussions.
- Keep the doors of negotiation open in the event the negotiators fail to reach an understanding.
- Focus on your strengths and overcome your weaknesses to do better in the negotiation.
- Find out the motives behind the conflict.
- Don't react. Act.
- Take breaks to recharge yourself and view the conflict with a new perspective.
- If the conflict is substantial, dissect it into smaller pieces and address them one by one. However, ensure that you don't lose sight of the big picture.
- Be flexible and at the same time restate your points clearly and assertively.
- Stick to the facts, not opinions.
- Observe the hidden reasons behind the conflicts to adequately address them.
- Attack the issue, not the individuals.
- Emphasize similarities, not differences.
- Empathize with others.
- Strive for a win-win result. Give concessions, if possible. Show a graceful exit to your opponent, if proven culpable.
- Close the issue and avoid boasting about your victory to avoid further complications.

Adopt Soft Leadership to Resolve Conflicts Amicably

Leaders adopt various leadership styles and tools to resolve organizational conflicts. They can adopt a soft leadership style to achieve the desired outcomes without adversely affecting the relations. Soft leadership believes in applying pressure to get things done. It doesn't believe in using force and violence. It believes in cooperation and collaboration, not competition and compromise. It emphasizes persuasion, negotiation, discussion, and dialogue to resolve conflicts with people-orientation without compromising task-orientation. Soft leaders search for synergy and collaboration. They avoid aggressive posture towards conflicts. They explore various options to make the outcome win-win through persuasion and negotiation.

The 11 Cs of Soft Leadership

Leadership basically depends on three aspects – how one communicates with others; how one makes decisions; and how one undertakes action. Executing these activities effectively generates successful leaders. However, to evolve as a soft leader, one must communicate with an emphasis on soft skills: i.e., making decisions by blending one's head, heart, and emotions and taking action which ground realities and establish goals without compromising task-orientation. There are 11 Cs that constitute soft leadership. They are character, charisma, conscience, conviction, courage, communication, compassion, commitment, consistency, consideration, and contribution. It is highly challenging for people to cultivate these 11 characteristics. However, if people possess more than 6 traits, they get into the fold of soft leadership. *Figure 1* shows the connection of the 11 Cs that collectively constitute soft leadership.

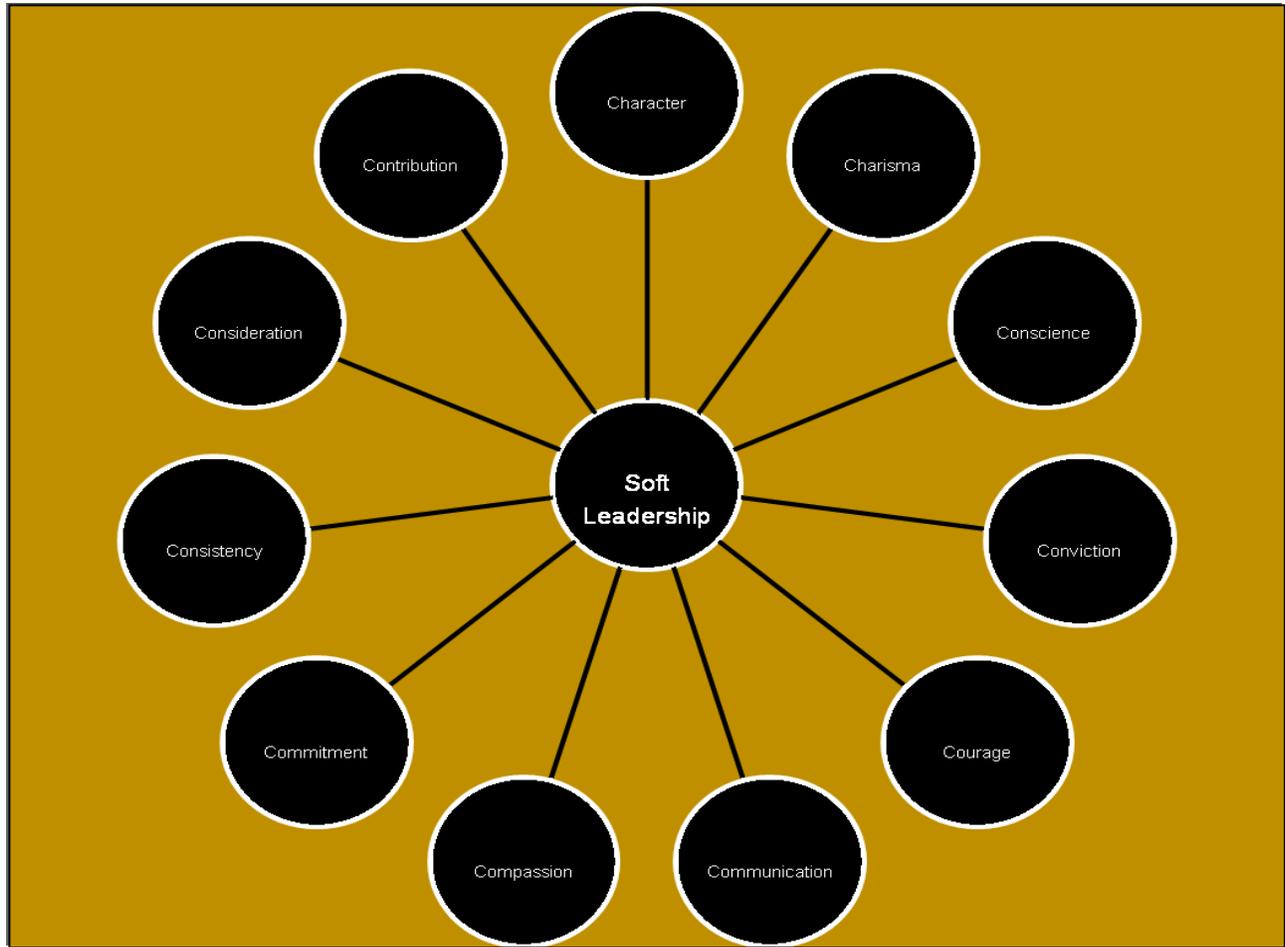


Figure 1: The Eleven Cs of Soft Leadership

Soft leadership is a blend of courageous leadership, thought leadership, servant leadership, and inspirational leadership. It suggests more of a genteel, respectful approach and advocates a transformational rather than a transactional perspective. It focuses more on people rather than orients on tasks. It underscores partnership over the perpetuation of a traditional command-and-control approach. There is an immediate need for young adults to apply it to unlock their potential to contribute their best to organizations. It stresses soft over hard skills. It emphasizes personality, attitude, and behavior rather than technical competency or domain knowledge. Succinctly, soft leadership can be defined as the process of setting goals; influencing people through persuasion; building strong teams; negotiating them with a win-win attitude; respecting their failures; handholding them; motivating them constantly; aligning their energies and efforts; and recognizing and appreciating their contributions to accomplishing organizational objectives. Soft leadership is based on the right mindset, skillset, and toolset.

Solution

“Whenever you’re in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging your relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude.”

– William James

The Y educational institution should have compensated the Professor as the latter served the institution as per the terms of the contract by conducting classes regularly and discharging his duties professionally. If there were any ill will, the Professor, Principal, and Secretary should have met to understand what really went wrong in order to adequately address the problems that arose. Unfortunately, that did not happen. The Y educational institution lacked teamwork. How can an employee be liable for the loss of an MBA course to the educational institution? When the Professor intimated in advance about proceeding on leave, the Principal and the Secretary should have made alternative arrangements to meet the requirements of the AICTE inspection team. The Principal of the institution should have shown the attendance records of the Professor for the last three years and should have persuaded the AICTE inspection team that he had proceeded on leave due to the anniversary of a late relative. Since the Professor returned after two days of leave and worked in the institution for two months thereafter, the Principal should have taken the Professor to the inspection team to show that the Professor was actually serving in the educational institution.

To conclude, the Principal must take the moral responsibility for her failure to persuade the AICTE inspection team. It was purely her inefficiency to handle administrative affairs. It was an attempt by the Principal and the Secretary to make the Professor into a scapegoat for the total mismanagement of the Principal. The Secretary was an autocratic leader with excessive ego and hubris who lacked any concern for rules and regulations. The Secretary of the Educational Society should be punished for causing financial hardships to the Professor by not paying his salary. The educational institution must be closed for its irregularities and unethical practices.

Conclusion

Conflicts help individuals and organizations to iron out differences and reach a conclusion. Realization is the solution to resolve many conflicts in the world. People must sit together to resolve their conflicts. Ronald Reagan rightly remarked, "I've always believed that a lot of the troubles in the world would disappear if we were talking to each other instead of about each other." It is essential to build trust to create a conducive environment for resolving conflicts. Additionally, emphasize on *what* is right and wrong, not *who* is right and wrong to resolve conflicts amicably and effectively. To conclude, conflicts cannot be eliminated in organizations. They can only be minimized if leaders and stakeholders adopt a proactive attitude. Understanding this philosophy and exploring soft leadership to resolve conflicts which arise help organizations to enhance their productivity and performance.

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About the Author



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Professor M.S. Rao, Ph.D. is the Father of “Soft Leadership” and the Founder of MSR Leadership Consultants, India. He is an International Leadership Guru with forty years of experience and the author of fifty books including the award-winning *See the Light in You* URL: <https://www.amazon.com/See-Light-You-Spiritual-Mindfulness/dp/1-949003132>. He is a C-Suite advisor and global keynote speaker. He brings a strategic eye and long-range vision given his multifaceted professional experience in military affairs, teaching, training, research, consultancy, and philosophy. He is passionate about serving and making a difference in the lives of others. He is a regular contributor to *Entrepreneur Magazine*. He trains a new generation of leaders through leadership education and publications. His vision is to mold one million students into global leaders by 2030 (see [http://professormsraovision2030.blogspot.com/2014/12/professor-m-s-raos-vision-2030-one 31.html](http://professormsraovision2030.blogspot.com/2014/12/professor-m-s-raos-vision-2030-one-31.html)). He has the vision to share his knowledge freely with one billion people globally. He advocates gender equality globally (#HeForShe). He was ranked #1 Thought Leader and Influencer in HR globally by Thinkers360 (see <https://www.thinkers360.com/top-50-global-thought-leaders-and-influencers-on-hr-september-2020/>). He invests his time in authoring books and blogging on the topics of executive education, learning, and leadership. Most of his work is available free of charge on his four blogs including <http://professormsraovision2030.blogspot.com>. He is a prolific author and a dynamic, energetic, and inspirational leadership speaker. He can be reached at msrlctr@gmail.com.