



THE “ARIA” APPROACH TO CONFLICT ENGAGEMENT

BY JAY ROTHMAN

If a leadership team asked me for the key to nurturing Tom Peters’s WOW organizations, to empowering people to learn and grow their companies à la Peter Senge, or to cultivating the human side of enterprise as defined by Douglas McGregor, I would advise them to focus their attention on engaging identity-based conflict within their organization. In a workplace, identity-based disputes generally center around different groups of individuals who share certain characteristics, such as doctors versus nurses or designers versus engineers. Because it involves people’s sense of who they are, this

kind of conflict is often rooted in perceived threats to the groups’ collective need for dignity, recognition, safety, control, purpose, and efficacy.

However, if addressed effectively, identity-based conflict can surface people’s most profound thoughts and feelings about what gives their work—and their lives—meaning and engender vitality and dynamism in organizations. In this way, addressing identity conflict can be a source of ongoing learning and lasting change.

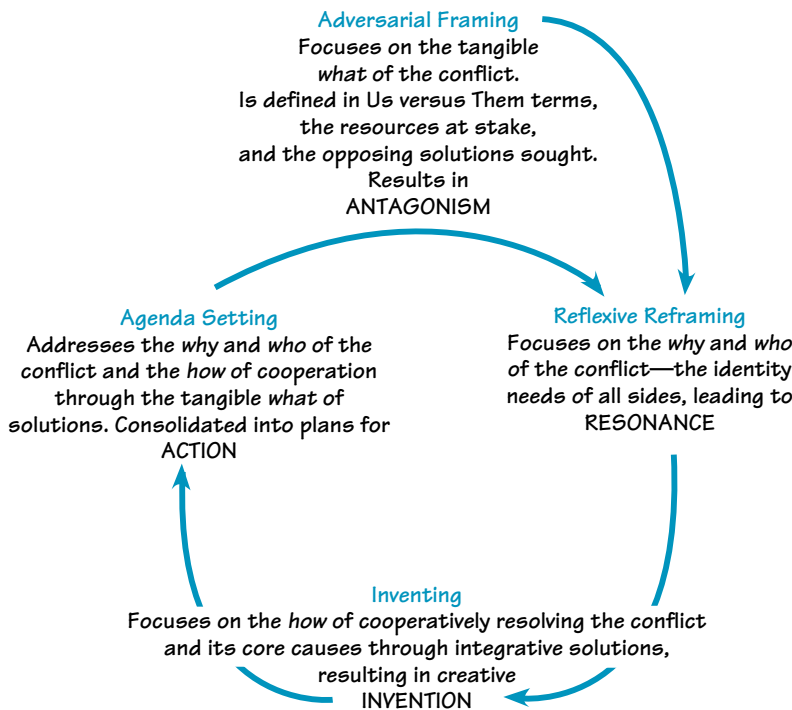
Engaging Conflict

Some everyday interpersonal conflict should be avoided or preempted, such

as when coworkers have continued personality differences. In this case, reassigning one of the parties to another department can make sense.

However, deeper conflicts often can’t be dismissed with minor adjustments or settled with a handshake. Instead, leaders must learn how to engage these instances of ongoing strife, that is, surface, study, and generally view them as opportunities for learning. This is particularly the case with identity-based conflicts, such as when two companies merge and experience a clash of cultures. In these instances, learning itself may be all that is initially necessary or advisable. In other words, engaging conflict provides an opportunity for self-study, which will eventually enable the business to design and implement change.

THE “ARIA” PROCESS



The ultimate goal of the ARIA process is to foster harmony and resonance from adversaries’ full and honest expression of the deeply felt human motivations that lie beneath their conflict.

Rethinking Conflict

But how can organizations ensure that deep conflict becomes constructive, and that it promotes real learning and change? The first step is to look at conflict itself with new eyes, changing the common perception of it from a destructive burden to a creative possibility. Thinking differently about conflict is a prerequisite for acting differently when it occurs.

For example, stop for a moment and reflect on an interpersonal conflict that you were involved in that ended badly. Now replay it with a positive ending. Instead of slamming the door and rushing away in anger, imagine how different it would have been had you said, “I’m really upset; I want to take a few minutes to calm down and then come back and talk with you about what is bothering me.” Or had your antagonist said, “I’m sorry I’ve made you so angry. Let’s talk; I’d like to understand why.”

In this way, the engagement can serve as a catalyst for new insights. This same approach holds true when groups are locked in identity conflict. If group members can stop and learn from their difficulties, organizational transformation can follow.

Developing effective conflict-engagement skills should begin with careful consideration of several questions, such as, What is conflict in general (e.g., a bad thing, a good thing, or something that is neutral and dependent on how we respond to it)? At what level of depth and complexity does it present itself in particular instances? Why has it occurred in this case? Only after individuals gain insight into the nature of conflict and how it manifests itself can they learn new ways for effectively engaging it. One such way is the ROI-ARIA diagnostic and intervention process described below.

Step One: Diagnosis

The first step in effective conflict engagement is developing the art of going slow to go fast. When people in conflict rush to solutions before fully understanding the parameters and causes of the conflicts they seek to address, they often end up solving the wrong problems. Instead, conflicting parties need to learn new frameworks for fully defining and analyzing their conflict before selecting an intervention strategy.

I use a diagnostic tool called “ROI”—Resources, Objectives, Identity—that helps people do a full but relatively quick diagnosis about the level of a given conflict. The example of a merger between companies illustrates the differences among these three levels. In a merger, two formerly separate entities may be forced to compete for the same scarce funds. This is a conflict around “Resources.” At a deeper level, conflict may result when the management team in the acquiring company threatens or rejects the core goals of a department in the acquired company. This is a conflict at the “Objectives” level. At the deepest level, mergers often cause people to feel that their “way of working,” including their values and accepted

norms, is threatened, jeopardizing their fundamental sense of who they are—both as workers and as individuals. This is an “Identity” conflict.

Step Two: Intervening

Once the level of the conflict has been ascertained, the appropriate intervention strategy must be selected. The four-level ARIA framework can

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help transform the dissonance of conflict into the resonance of creativity and cooperation as it gradually becomes a vehicle for inquiry, learning, and planned change (see “The ARIA Process”). The framework consists of four phases:

- **Surfacing Antagonism** (What caused the conflict between the parties in the first place? What are the main symptoms of the problem?)
- **Fostering Resonance** (What does each side care about most and why? Where is there an overlap of underlying concerns?)
- **Generating Inventions** (What solutions can the parties apply to convert the negative dynamics of conflict to an opportunity for addressing underlying—and often shared—concerns?)
- **Planning Action** (How can the parties design a specific action plan for clarifying who will do what, why, when, and how?)

The level of the conflict determines the appropriate phase in which to start the ARIA process (see “The ‘ARIA’ Steps”). For instance, in an identity-level conflict, Antagonism between the parties to the conflict must first be safely surfaced (“We didn’t ask to be bought by you!” or “Why do you resist our every step?”) before Resonance can be fostered and solutions designed (“We are in this together now, so how can we pull in the same direction?”). In an objective-level conflict, cultivating Reso-

nance helps clarify what people care about and thus what goals any solution must seek to advance. In a resource-level conflict, Inventing creative solutions for mutual gains can begin immediately. No matter where the process begins, planning Action should be the final step.

Given that we have all been “burned” by conflict, we need new ways to think about its light rather than its heat. The ROI-ARIA diagnosis and intervention process provides an effective way to promote positive engagement with conflict and transform it from an obstacle to an opportunity for creating ongoing organizational learning. ■

Jay Rothman, Ph.D., is the director of The ARIA Group, Inc., a consulting firm offering training and consultation in conflict resolution and “action evaluation.” The ARIA model forms the basis of his book, *Resolving Identity-Based Conflict in Nations, Organizations, and Communities* (Jossey-Bass, 1997).

THE “ARIA” STEPS

- **Antagonism surfaces the battle.** It brings out festering angst and anger and puts them out for discussion. It is also useful later in providing a negative frame of reference such as, “We don’t want to do that anymore!”
- **Resonance fosters a harmony that can emerge between disputants,** a harmony growing out of a deep exploration and articulation of what goes on within them. It grows from an expression of the needs and values that have been threatened or frustrated by the conflict and the relations between adversaries. They may discover that “We are in this together.”
- **Inventing is the process of brainstorming** mutually acceptable, creative, and integrative options for addressing central and underlying aspects of the conflict. They learn that “We can get out of this together.”
- **Action is then built upon the previous stages,** implementing what should be done and why, by whom, and how.