

Running head: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Conflict Management Skills to Increase Commitment within the APWUMA

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## Abstract

This project focuses on the need to develop an introductory training program in conflict management skills for officials of the American Postal Workers' Union of Massachusetts (APWUMA). An initial review of the available literature covering labor programs reveals little evidence of conflict management training within the labor movement—except as an ingredient or by-product of leadership courses geared to individuals who hold office at the higher levels of their particular organization. My own experiences within the APWU, the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the International Association of Machinists (IAM), and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs and Warehouseman (IBT) and the United Auto Workers (UAW) support this conclusion.

The APWUMA is a state affiliate of the APWU. Membership consists of local organizations and members-at large that choose to affiliate. Two stated purposes of this organization are to provide training in collective bargaining and to better prepare its membership to become effective leaders. In an effort to address this need, this paper looks at the conflicts that occur within the APWUMA, their impact on member commitment, and the current training curriculum in the APWUMA. It provides recommendations for further education in conflict management skills through the development of a training module that could apply to all levels of the organization. Such training would not only help to address conflicts within the union, but also improve member commitment and participation.

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## Overview

This project explores whether there exists a need to develop an introductory training program in conflict management skills for officials of the American Postal Workers' Union of Massachusetts (APWUMA). An initial review of the available literature covering labor programs reveals little evidence of conflict management training within the labor movement—except as an ingredient or by-product of leadership courses geared to individuals who hold office at the higher levels of their particular organization. My own experiences within the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and various other unions including the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the International Association of Machinists (IAM), the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs and Warehouseman (IBT) and the United Auto Workers (UAW) support this point.

Internal conflicts occur on various levels within any organization and labor is no exception. In unions, conflict can crop up between members, between members and stewards, between stewards and local officials, between local officials and national officials and any combination of the above (Dempsey, 2005). To add to the complexity, much of this conflict arises outside the terms of a collective bargaining agreement (Solstad, 2000) or the provisions of a union's constitution (Dempsey, 2005).

Solstad (2000) provides an extensive study of the various types of conflicts that occur within local unions. She strongly recommends that unions modify their training programs to include a curriculum that will increase their leaders' skills in conflict resolution. Following on Solstad's wide-ranging work on the psychological factors that underlie the internal conflicts that occur in local unions, this project presents a broad

overview of the construct of union conflict, focuses on current training within the APWUMA, and offers a training module that would provide officials within the organization additional tools to manage internal conflicts in a more effective manner.

### Organizational Behavior

The study of Organizational Behavior reveals that organizational conflict is both puzzling and dynamic. Organizational conflict is not a static or isolated event. Rather, as Pondy (1967) asserts, “A conflict relationship between two or more individuals in an organization can be analyzed as a sequence of conflict episodes” (p. 299). Therefore, conflict is usually the result of one or both parties’ dissatisfaction with a prior interaction, which simmers beneath the surface until something causes it to erupt. Harlowe and Hanke (1975) remind us that, “Organizations do not behave—it is the people within them that behave” (p. 5). Moreover, an abundant literature recognizes and supports the idea that organizations, because of their varying structures and the diversity of the individuals that belong to them, have distinct identifiable cultures that include certain behavioral tendencies (Lewis, French, & Steane, 1997).

McNamara (1997) defines such organizational culture as, “the assumptions, values, norms and tangible signs (artifacts) of organization members and their behaviors” (p. 1). Therefore, it is important to understand that while organizations exhibit identifiable cultures, they are in part due to the diversity of the individuals that belong to the organization. Recognizing this diversity will be an important component of this project, keeping in mind that individual behavior toward conflict will vary greatly, necessitating a variety of skills to deal with it in a productive and effective manner.

## Understanding Conflict

Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad. In fact, it can be a catalyst for needed change. When handled constructively it can be a source of personal as well as organizational growth. If handled poorly, conflict can be debilitating and destructive, leading to resentment and alienation among individuals and yielding devastating results for organizations. Before addressing the need for conflict training within the APWUMA, I will focus on definitions and meanings for the term “conflict.” Kolb and Putnam (1992) state that a conflict can be as simple as a basic disagreement over “interests, views or goals” (p. 312). Deutsch (1973) asserts that a conflict occurs when one party obstructs or impedes the goals or desires of another and that “conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur” (p. 10). According to Katz and Kahn (1978), the term conflict has become “colloquial” in our conversation, while it also has “specific formal definitions” (p. 613). Perhaps Deutsch (1973) and Kolb and Putnam (1992) offer the most encompassing explanation for conflict by asserting that it exists when one party simply has the *perception* that an incompatible activity occurred.

### Competition and Conflict

Katz and Kahn (1978) define competition as involving “two or more systems, individual or social, engaged in activities that are in some sense incompatible; the successful completion of one precludes the successful completion of the other” (p. 613). According to their definition of conflict, “Two systems {persons, groups, organizations, nations} are in conflict when they interact directly in such a way that the actions of one

tend to prevent or compel some outcome against the *resistance* of the other” (p. 613) (emphasis added). While the authors speak to the fine line that exists between competition and conflict, they also inform us that repeated competition over scarce resources or other circumstances can morph into conflict situations even in the most peaceful organizational settings. “In the disturbed-reactive environment, competition is heightened and conflict begins” (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p. 614). Furthermore, it is important to note that conflict cannot occur without some type of interaction or mutual dependence. Katz and Kahn (1978) succinctly summarize this point by stating that, “indifference does not motivate conflict behavior” (p. 623).

#### Latent to Manifest Conflict

Pondy (1967) asserts that *most* conflict occurs as a dynamic process, usually happening in various stages from latent to manifest, rather than coming about over one static event. Latent conflict “exists whenever individuals, groups, or nations have differences that bother one or the other, but those differences are not great enough to cause one side to act to alter the situation” (Brahm, 2003). Such latent conflict can simmer for years without either party recognizing that there is an underlying problem (Deutsch, 1973).

Manifest or overt conflict lies at the far end of the spectrum from that of latent conflict. Unlike latent conflict, which usually is dormant, manifest conflict is the outward expression of the conflict that exists between parties. Deutsch (1973) informs us that in most cases manifest conflict “may be symptomatic of an underlying conflict” and that “unless the underlying conflict is dealt with or unless the manifest conflict can be

separated from the underlying conflict and treated in isolation” any resolution would most likely be temporary (p. 13). This seems to support Pondy’s assertion that conflict is a dynamic process; starting with an event so small in scope that it fails to warrant a response, but eventually causes manifest or overt conflict between the parties.

### Attribution Theory

In its simplest form, this construct describes the process by which individuals “attribute” or relate their behavior, or that of others, with the outcome of a given situation. Attribution theory explores the method by which individuals formulate their perceptions with reality (Daley, 1996). Heidler (1958) asserts that individuals justify their actions or responses to a situation from a self-serving perspective. This bias comes from “two behavioral motives: (a) the need to understand the world around them, and (b) the need to control their environment” (Borowski & Allen, 2003, p. 9). Individuals create or control this environment based on at least two additional sets of circumstances; internal-external causes, and controllable-uncontrollable causes (Weiner, 1979). Borowski and Allen (2003) define an internal cause as one for which the individual is responsible for a particular outcome, while an external cause is one for which an outside entity is responsible. Likewise, they define a controllable cause as one for which an individual has the ability to exert control over a particular outcome, while an uncontrollable cause, is as its name implies, a situation where the individual has no influence over the outcome whatsoever. An interesting phenomenon is that this self-serving bias causes an individual to associate positive events with internal/ controllable

causes while disappointments or negative outcomes are the result of external/uncontrollable events (Heidler, 1958).

### Fundamental Attribution Error

Likewise, the fundamental attribution error conveys an individual's propensity to view the circumstances of "others" in a negative manner (Coates & Penrod, 1980). When developing our cognitive perceptions we tend to hold "others" responsible for the negative events that occur in their lives and less deserving of the positive events (Weiner, 1979). While we factor in external events as a causal aspect of our own negative outcomes, we disregard the possibility that external events could be responsible for the bad things that happen to others. Thus, the fundamental attribution error leads us to *blame* "others" for the negative outcomes in our own lives, while failing to recognize the possibility of merit for the positive outcomes in theirs.

A frequent manifestation of the fundamental attribution error can be seen as follows: when something negative happens to me because of your actions, I tend to blame you personally (i.e., you did this negative thing to me because you are a bad person). When I do something negative to you, however, I tend to blame it on external circumstances (i.e., I hit your car not because I am a bad driver, but because the road was too slippery, or someone else cut me off, or because I was under a lot of stress, etc.). The fundamental attribution error is a frequent source of friction in organizations, as individuals can accumulate negative attributions about each other over time (i.e., feeding growing suspicions in one that the other is a "bad person"), creating latent conflicts that can manifest at critical flashpoints

## Organizational Conflict

Over the years, the focus of scholarly research on organizational conflict has varied markedly. According to Kolb and Putnam (1992), “Early social theorists, such as Marx and Weber, viewed group conflict as an inevitable outgrowth of social class and organization hierarchy” (p. 311). Subsequent social scientists subscribed to a managerial theory that promoted “harmony and cooperation in the workplace as desirable and achievable ends” (Kolb & Putnam, 1992, p. 311). Subscribers to this concept seemingly promoted the virtues of harmony and cooperation in the workplace to the exclusion of any other school of thought. Proponents theorized that conflict has no rightful place in an effective well run organization (Zickar, 2004). Accordingly, the existence of conflict was a certain indication that the organization was dysfunctional (Pondy, 1967).

Ensuing research in the late 1960s focused on the “structural” or causal underpinnings of organizational conflict (Kolb & Putnam, 1992). It brought to the forefront the realization that organizational conflict occurs when there is a disparity between the existing organizational culture [“the way we do things around here”] and the organization’s written mission and value statements” (Sources of Conflict, 2006). This focal point helped usher in an atmosphere, which is still accepted today, that recognizes organizational conflict as an inevitable by-product of change or growth, and if managed properly can be a valuable aspect of organizational life (Pondy, 1967).

### Conflicts of Interest within an Organization

Conflicts of interest occur within organizations on various levels. They can be the result of diverging goals within the organization, as when one department's needs conflict with another, or when two departments within the organization need to compete for the same limited resource (Pondy, 1967). Additionally, how an organization deals with conflict can be the catalyst for additional conflict. If an organization deals with conflict in an inconsistent manner, inevitably, members of the organization will lose faith in the organization's ability to resolve its internal disputes, causing confusion among them as to their status within the organization. Deutsch (1973) advises that in order to grasp a better understanding of the nature of these conflicts, it is essential to study the parties involved. He further states that, "one might inquire about the participants in the conflict—how their individual characteristics (strength, cognitive resources, personality, emotional state, etc.) and their prior relationship with one another affected the development and course of the dispute" (p. 3).

### Interpersonal Conflicts within an Organization

Interpersonal conflicts can occur across a wide spectrum within an organization. Kolb and Putnam (1992) highlight the intrapersonal aspect of organizational conflict and assert that it occurs "when there are real or perceived differences that arise in specific organizational circumstances and that engender emotion as a consequence" (p. 312). Interpersonal conflict can occur in organizations because of "poor relationships between managers and employees on the one hand and among peers on the other" (Sources of

Conflict, 2006). This type of conflict can be insidious and extremely debilitating because it can have long lasting effects on the organization. If ignored, there will likely be a further “breakdown of communication” allowing for the formation of latent conflict, a situation where the parties blame each other for a particular “negative” outcome. Eventually, this type of latent conflict can progress into outright overt conflict within the organization leading to further disastrous outcomes (Sources of Conflict, 2006).

### Informal Conflict within an Organization

Solstad (2000) provides an in-depth account of the types of informal conflicts that can occur within an organization. Specifically, her work focused on the conflicts that occurred between members of a local union consisting of airline employees, both at work and within the organization. In that account, she draws attention to the inadequacy of the grievance process and the lack of training within the organizational structure of the local union to manage these conflicts effectively. In fact, in many cases the grievance process served to formalize conflict and acted as a shield to cover up the “underlying issues” (Solstad, 2000). This shielding creates a situation where issues “fester” and subsequently evolve into overt conflict (Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1993).

### Organizational Justice Issues

The concept of Organizational Justice is “defined as an employee’s perception of being treated fairly by the organization and its leaders” (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996, p. 161). Since an individual’s perception is the basis for determining an outcome, organizational justice is a subjective construct (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Yee,

2001). “In particular, justice in organizational settings can be described as focusing on the antecedents and consequences of two types of subjective perceptions: (a) the fairness of outcome distributions as allocations and (b) the fairness of the procedures used to determine distributions or allocations” (Colquitt et al., 2001). Much of the research on organizational justice focuses on employee perceptions of justice in the midst of negative circumstances, such as downsizing or wage reductions (Brockner, Cooper-Schneider, Folger, & Martin, 1994).

Skarlicki and Latham (1996) recognized this gap in the research and decided to test organizational justice theory from a positive perspective. They wanted to find out whether providing union leaders with specific skills to improve organizational justice within local unions could increase the memberships’ “Organizational Citizenship Behaviors” or OCB (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996, p. 161). The term OCB or, “Organizational citizenship behavior refers to [the] discretionary contributions that are organizationally related, but are neither explicitly required nor contractually rewarded by the organization” (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996, p. 161). Organ (1988) points out that these contributions are important factor in the effective functioning of an organization and that the decision to undertake this type of activity is a result of the participant’s perception of justice within the organization.

Skarlicki & Latham's (1996) research affirmed their assertion that “increases in organizational justice are causally related to OCB” and found that “training that increases the skills of the leaders in applying the principles of organizational justice increases citizenship behavior on the part of the organization’s members” (Skarlicki & Latham, 1996, pp. 165-166).

### Distributive Justice

The dimension of distributive justice deals with the manner in which people decide whether their proportion of a specified outcome is fair. Lind and Tyler (1988) describe distributive justice as the study of “fairness oriented responses to outcomes rather than procedures” (p. 7). Adams (1965) focused on equity theory as a method to determine fair outcomes. Equity theory involves the calculation of an individual’s inputs to their outcomes, then comparing the result to that of another, in the hope that the outcomes will be proportional to the inputs (Colquitt et al., 2001). Leventhal (1976) discussed other distributive dimensions such as equality, the equal distribution of the output; and need, wherein as its name implies, individuals receive outcomes according to their need.

### Procedural Justice

The origins of procedural justice come from research performed in the legal context. The dimension of procedural justice explores the validity of decision-making processes with regard to participant control (Colquitt et al., 2001). Participants tend to view a particular procedure as fair, if they believe they had a legitimate opportunity to express their views and provide input into the process (Colquitt et al., 2001). Leventhal (1980) expanded the focus of procedural justice to include situations that occur in the organizational setting. Leventhal (1980) theorized that for procedural judgments to be fair members of the organization must view the procedures as consistent, accurate, bias-free and inclusive.

## Interactional Justice

Initial research on the dimension of interactional justice dealt with the importance of the individual places on the level of interpersonal interaction that takes place within an organization (Bies & Moag, 1986). Subsequent research revealed that there are two components affecting the dimension of interactional justice: interpersonal justice and informational justice (Colquitt et al., 2001). Individuals perceive an interaction as interpersonally fair when they are “treated with dignity and respect, and prejudicial statements are refrained from” (Rupp & Spencer, 2006). The component of informational justice deals with the “explanations provided to people that convey information about why procedures were used in a certain way or why outcomes were distributed in a certain fashion” (Colquitt et al., 2001).

These components are important factors for union officials to understand when interacting with the membership. Members will instinctively react to the manner in which a union official behaves toward them as well as judge the unions’ reasoning as to the fairness of a particular process or the distribution of the good. Therefore, interactional justice works as an instinctive and reciprocal process by which the member can judge their standing in the organization.

## Organizational Conflict Generators

From the above discussion, it is easy to understand how conflict can permeate an organizational setting. Certain identifiable factors or “conflict generators” contribute to the development of organizational conflict. The table below delineates the organizational

“conflict generators” discussed in the above sections. While this list is not exhaustive, the following conditions frequent organizations.

*Table 1: Organizational Conflict Generators*

Competition and Conflict	Incompatible Activity—Can Morph into Conflict
Latent Conflict	Minor Disagreement—Without Counteractive Response
Manifest Conflict	Outward Expression of Conflict
Conflicts of Interest	Divergent Goals or Individual Principles
Interpersonal Conflicts	Poor Relationships Causing Latent to Manifest Conflict
Attribution Theory	Rationalization for Behavior of Self and Others
Fundamental Attribution Error	Self-Serving Bias Affecting Rationalization of Behavior
Distributive Justice	Concerns Judgments about the Fairness of an Outcome
Procedural Justice	Concerns Judgments about the Fairness of a Process
Interactional Justice	Concerns Judgments about Interpersonal Relationships

As we can see from the table above, competition and conflict can arise out of incompatible activity at both the organizational and/or individual level. Such circumstances can lay dormant or manifest into overt conflict. Likewise, conflicts of interests can arise out of divergent organizational goals or differing individual principles. Such differences can be the basis for the development of interpersonal conflicts. Interpersonal conflict can crop up because of poor relationships causing latent conflict to exist, which again can develop into overt or manifest conflict situations. Poor relationships can occur because of misplaced attributions, and perceptions of justice issues. Thus, as Pondy (1967) asserts conflict is neither a static nor an isolated construct, but rather it occurs out of a “sequence of episodes” (p. 299) not necessarily linear in nature.

## Organizational Commitment

Cheung (2000) defines organizational commitment as an individual's "affective attachment to an organization, [their] favorable decision to work in the organization, and [their] intention to continue to work in the organization" (p. 125). Thus, according to Cheung there are cognitive as well as emotional components at work in the construction or development of organizational commitment. While this study does not focus on the factors underlying an individual's decision to continue working for their employer, the concepts involved in an individual's decision-making process concerning "organizational commitment" are important factors for officials of the APWUMA to understand. In fact, most of the research models used to determine union commitment parallel those used to measure the level of commitment employees exhibit to an employer. Furthermore, the study of union commitment, as a method to increase organizational effectiveness and solidarity should be of fundamental concern not only for the APWUMA but also for the labor movement in general (Gallagher & Clark, 1989).

### Union Commitment

Because unions, for the most part, depend upon the voluntary participation of their membership to function, their commitment level is a vital condition that affects the organization's success (Tan & Aryee, 2002). Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, and Spiller (1980) state that the traditional definition of union commitment consists of three concepts: the individual's inclination to remain in the union, the inclination to work for the union, and a belief in the goals of the union. Gallagher and Clark (1989) add a fourth concept to the definition called union loyalty or "the degree to which a member

demonstrates a sense of pride in the union and an awareness of its instrumentality in obtaining benefits for its members” (p. 55). Recent research reveals the existence of four variables affecting the concept of union commitment. The variables include the demographics of the membership, the members’ experience with their job and the employer, the overall labor relations climate within the employment relationship, and their experience within the union (Gallagher & Clark, 1989). While the demographic make-up of the organization is outside the union’s control, it does have the ability to exercise a certain amount of control over the remaining variables. In fact, two of the three variables (the members experience with their job and their employer and the overall labor relations climate) are directly related to collective bargaining. Of course, with these two variables the responsibility for a positive outcome depends on the attitude of the employer as well as the union. However, the final variable, the members experience within the union, is vital because it is the only variable upon which the union can exercise total control regarding the member’s interaction within the union (Gallagher & Clark, 1989).

Tyler (1991) demonstrates that justice issues have a direct affect on organizational commitment. Although his work focuses on employer-employee relationships within work organizations, the same psychological principles should apply to the internal interactions of local unions. This study tested “the possibility of maintaining commitment to the group through the use of fair decision-making procedure, while making allocation and dispute resolution decisions using distribution principles that enhance the attainment of task objectives” (1991, p. 259). In this study Tyler (1991) found that procedural fairness is an important factor in the development and maintenance

of commitment within a group. Similarly, Fullagar and Barling (1991) found that the degree of union commitment and involvement existing within a particular membership is related to level of satisfaction that membership derives from their interactions with their union. Handling conflict situations in an improved manner, a manner in which the membership views the process as *fair* should improve the membership's experience within their union, increase their satisfaction level and thereby increase commitment within the organization (Jarley, Kuruvilla & Casteel, 1990).

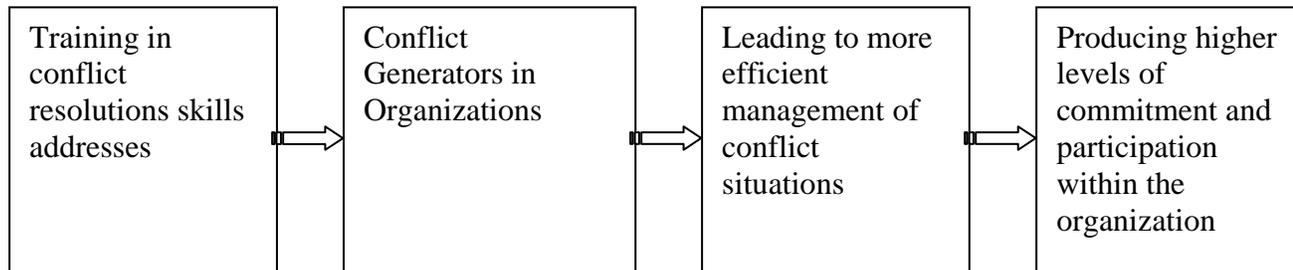
### Analytical Framework

This paper proposes that conflict resolution training within the APWUMA, focusing on the various forms of organizational conflict articulated in Table 1 above, will provide its union officials with the ability to manage internal union conflicts in a more efficient manner. Solstad (2000) states that many of the conflicts that occur within a local union take place outside the scope of the collective bargaining agreement or the union's constitution and bylaws. For instance, a particular local or even a section within a local might experience conflict because there exists a great deal of competition in the workplace. This repeated competition may lead to conflicts of interest among the membership. In many cases the collective bargaining agreement may remain silent on these issues and in some cases the application of the agreement may be the catalyst for the conflict. In other situations conflict may occur within a local because of personality conflicts between members or between members and their representative or both. Sometimes conflict might appear because the union's overall agenda might conflict with

an individual's self-serving desires and the member may express displeasure with the union because they believe they the union acted unjustly.

Conflict resolution training provides participants with a better understanding and a heightened sense of awareness concerning the construct of conflict. Through this training, union officials gain new perspectives and become better equipped to respond to the needs and concerns of their membership by improving their communication techniques and learning new skill sets such as those employed by professional ombudsmen and mediators. These skills will enable union officials to ensure that their interaction with the membership is productive, leading to greater overall satisfaction and increasing the level of commitment within the organization.

Consequently, an analysis of conflicts in APWUMA utilizing the conflict analysis framework in Table 1 can indicate the primary conflicts that a training session must address. This paper will utilize Table 1 to first identify the key conflicts within the APWUMA, and then to judge the effectiveness of a training module designed to address those conflicts. The degree to which the training can address the conflict drivers in Table 1, will impact the union's ability to manage these drivers in a more productive manner. More efficient conflict management, in turn, produces higher levels of commitment and participation in unions, as argued above.



## The State of Labor

For most of the latter half of the twentieth century, the percentage of unionized workers in the United States steadily declined (Flanagan, 2005; Adler, 2006). Numerous causal factors underlie this continued reduction. Losses were inevitable in certain industries, due to increased productivity levels from technological breakthroughs (Baldwin, 2003). New technology provides improvements in information and manufacturing processes that require fewer workers to perform interrelated tasks. However, much of the deterioration stemmed from the historic effort put forth by a sophisticated and dogged business community intent on diminishing labor's effectiveness (Adler, 2006). To accomplish their objective, corporations regularly employ strategies that disregard or ignore timid employee protections offered by current labor legislation (Kleiner, 2001). Additionally, multinational corporations continually lobby governments abroad to implement changes to employment policies—favoring the multi-nationals—concerning international trade and globalization (Baldwin, 2003).

In view of the fact that the Labor Movement faces a continuous assault on its very existence from such corporations (Kuttner, 2007), and their allies in governments throughout the world, it is of the utmost importance that organized labor strengthens its relationship with its current membership base (Gallagher & Clark, 1989). Improving internal relationships between union representatives and the membership helps increase commitment within the organization (Jarley, Kuruvilla & Casteel 1990; Fullagar & Barling, (1991; Tyler, 1991). The capacity to manage internal conflicts effectively will be an important factor in labor's ability to accomplish this goal.

For the labor activist that views the glass half-full, there is reason to believe the future could provide better results. Shostak (1991) points out that during the late 1980's and early 1990's, the rate of decline in union membership actually slowed. Similarly, Kuttner (2007) points out that recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals "that 53 percent of US workers would join a union if they could" (p. A11). This reduction in the rate of decline in union membership along with an increased desire among a majority of US workers to join a union is good news. Nevertheless, a couple of morsels of encouraging news do not provide a cause for celebration.

The Labor Movement needs to learn from its corporate adversaries who regularly employ research from the field of social science to influence their employee's attitudes. Further research into the development of training programs specifically geared to providing union officials, at all levels, with a better understanding of the construct of organizational conflict and which provides them with the skills necessary to manage it effectively, could prove useful in labor's efforts to increase membership commitment and participation.

### Academia and the Labor Movement

Many elected labor leaders are leery of advice from experts functioning solely in the world of academia (Rogin & Rachlin, 1968). Perhaps this distrust is well founded. Shostak (1964) described the relationship between industrial psychology and labor in the early days as one of "mutual indifference". Hartley and Kelly (1986) inform us that for most of the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the academic disciplines of psychology and organizational behavior either dismissed or simply ignored the study of industrial

relations. They further assert that when academia finally did exhibit interest in the field of industrial relations they did so “from an assumption that a well functioning organization would not exhibit worker-management conflict” (1986, p. 163). Since labor’s major accomplishments stem from worker resistance, it is easy to understand that there is a perceptible distrust between the labor movement and the academic disciplines of psychology and organizational behavior. After all, challenging management’s authority proved to be one of labor movement’s most effective tactics for improving the lives of its members. Nevertheless, it is important that the labor movement take advantage of the concepts, constructs and theories academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, organizational behavior, and industrial relations have to offer.

#### Limited Resources and the Division of Labor

Today’s labor movement suffers from decreasing financial resources, in no small part due to the declining membership issue raised earlier in this paper. In 2005, The American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) reported on its website ([www.afl-cio.org](http://www.afl-cio.org)) that roughly 13 million workers belonged to a union and that figure represented approximately ten percent of the American workforce—an all-time low percentage. Adding complexity to this issue is the split that occurred between the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win Coalition (CTW) at the federation’s annual convention in July, 2005 (Hurd, 2007; Masters, Gibney, & Zagenczyk, 2006). The CTW originated as a loosely formed partnership within the AFL-CIO consisting of the IBT, the Service Employee’s Union (SEIU), the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) and UNITE-HERE the newly merged organization representing needle-trade

and hotel/hospitality workers (Masters et al., 2006). Interestingly, the CTW came about over growing frustration that AFL-CIO President John Sweeney was not doing enough to halt the steady decline in the organized workforce, but the split will certainly affect the movement's ability to focus priorities and commit educational resources. The loss of the CTW affiliates has already forced the AFL-CIO cuts "budgets that affected many aspects of the federation's operation" (Hurd, 2007). The split could also lead to the duplication of training programs by limiting access to members only belonging to each body, thus wasting valuable resources. The continual decrease in membership and the aforementioned division in the house of labor could translate into further reductions in funding and jeopardize many prized educational programs within the movement.

#### Limited Resources and Labor's Educators

While labor leaders struggled early on with academia, the tide began to shift in the 1970's (Byrd & Nissen, 2003). In their comprehensive *2003 Report on the State of Labor Education in the United States*, Barbara Byrd and Bruce Nissen cite the following reasons as factors for the increase in collaboration between labor and academia, "...the emergence of labor studies as a discipline (Boyd, 1976; Dwyer, Galvin, & Larson, 1977), the growth of degree programs in labor studies (Gray, 1966 & 1977), and the emergence of labor education programs at the community college level (Stack & Hutton, 1980), as well as "the need of colleges for increased student enrollment" (p. 13).

Unfortunately, this trend was short-lived. Simultaneous with this decrease in union funding, many college and university level programs specifically devoted to labor issues are now in jeopardy too. According to Byrd and Nissen (2003) the decline in the

Labor Movement has had a two-fold effect on labor education. First, an enormous decline in demand for labor education programs occurred in areas hard-hit by manufacturing job loss and secondly, “the unfavorable political changes that have swept the country from the 1980’s to the present” (Byrd & Nissen, 2003, p. 67). This decrease in labor’s clout and the shifting political trends equates to less state and federal funding available for labor programs at institutions of higher education (Byrd & Nissen, 2003).

This decrease in funding could reopen some of the wounds between academia and the Labor Movement that existed prior to the 1970’s. Additionally, the lack of resources is creating conflict among academics whose institutions have dedicated labor programs. The subtle struggle involves the divergent goals within the academic disciplines of Labor Education and Labor Studies. According to Schachhuber (1979), Labor Education’s overall objective is the education of working people in an effort to provide them with the ability to rise “above their mire of ignorance and frustration to take them to new educational heights and a middle-class existence (pp. 148-149). Equally important is the goal of Labor Studies, which focuses on the development of programs to provide specific skills to union officials in an effort to protect “bread and butter” issues. Such syllabi “include basic union skills for members and part-time local officers, such as organizing and representative skills, grievance procedures, job functions of union officers, convention procedures and rules of order” (Schachhuber, 1979, p. 149).

While such a debate over the merits of Labor Education versus Labor Studies may seem esoteric to the casual observer, each discipline is necessary and serves a particular purpose. For instance, those who advocate on behalf of Labor Education argue that it is difficult to organize workers or to maintain support among current members if they do

not understand or believe the positive and direct impact unionization has upon their work lives, as well as their entire quality of life. On the other hand, those in support of Labor Studies argue that it is impossible to organize new workers without a trained workforce dedicated to this task. Additionally, they state that organized labor will not be able to attract new members if it cannot protect the rights of its current members.

The financial impact from this continual decline in union membership has devastated the institutions of higher education that support labor and the education departments within their own national and international organizations. The APWU is no exception. In fact, the APWU experienced a major decline in its membership base over the last decade, forcing many spending reductions at the Headquarters level. Therefore, local and state organizations operating underneath the APWU umbrella need to take on more of the responsibilities formerly performed and funded by the national union. Assuming more responsibility for conflict resolution training would be a cost-effective measure as well as provide additional skill sets to the officials of the APWUMA.

### Structure of the American Postal Workers Union

The APWU is a national union representing roughly three hundred thousand members employed by the United States Postal Service (USPS). It is a quasi-craft union, meaning that although the majority of its membership belongs to one of three crafts, they work within an industrial setting and share, for the most part, the same collective bargaining agreement. The largest craft with the APWU is the Clerk Craft, followed by the Maintenance Craft, and then the Motor Vehicle Craft. The APWU also represents employees in the Support Services Division, which includes members who work in the

Postal Service's Information Technology/Accounting Service Centers and some that work in various capacities in the private sector.

On a day-to-day basis, the APWU operates on three distinct levels belonging to the National, Regional and Local segments of the organization. However, these divisions are a bit of a misnomer. While the officers that work in the regional offices must win election in their respective region, in reality they work for the national office as they receive their compensation and direction from the national union. Local unions, however, are autonomous organizations where local officers receive their compensation from the treasury of the local union raised through a per capita tax based on the total members in their local. Local officers must win election among the members in their respective local, and are primarily responsible to the membership of their local.

As well as the three levels cited above, the APWU Constitution provides for the establishment of state organizations. State organizations are comprised of affiliated locals within a particular geographical area. Similar to local unions, state organizations are autonomous bodies whose officers are primarily responsible to their affiliated locals.

### The National Level

The APWU at the National Level consists of nationally elected officers, professional staff and administrative personnel. The APWU Constitution provides that the office of President preside over the organization's biennial convention and oversee the daily operations of the union between national conventions (APWU, 2004). The National Executive Board consists of "the President, Executive Vice President, Secretary Treasurer, Industrial Relations Director, Clerk Division Director, Motor Vehicle Service

Division Director, Maintenance Division Director, and the five (5) Regional Coordinators (APWU, 2004, p. 31). The Executive Council consists of the National Executive Board, other nationally elected division officers, and the National Business Agents (NBA's), who run for office regionally throughout the country within their respective divisions or crafts (APWU, 2004).

The union at the national level is responsible for negotiating the collective bargaining agreement (CBA). The agreement is extensive covering every APWU bargaining unit employee working in the United States and its territories. The first thirty-six articles are generic in principle in that they cover issues that affect every member of the bargaining unit, while the remaining articles are craft specific and deal with issues that are of concern to a particular craft. The CBA also contains provisions for local unions to negotiate certain items with local management. Specifically, Article 30 of the CBA allows local unions to negotiate with local management over twenty-two items that are of local interest. For instance, the local union can negotiate with local management over the dates that the choice vacation period will occur, where the need can vary according to the local's geographical location within the country.

### The Regional Level

There are five regions within the APWU structure, each directed by a Regional Coordinator. The coordinator is a direct report to the National President and aside from dealing with their counterparts in management at the regional level, the coordinators serve as a liaison or buffer between the locals in their respective region and the national union. The National Business Agents (NBA's), whose primary day-to-day responsibility

is the enforcement of the collective bargaining agreement in the arbitration arena, receive their daily assignments from their regional coordinator. Of all the national officers the NBA's have the most day to day interaction with the local officers, stewards, and rank and file members.

### The Local Level

Local unions in the APWU are a diverse category within the organization, both in size and structure. For instance in Massachusetts, there are large locals with approximately three-thousand members that exist in urban areas while at the same time there are small locals that have ten members or less. In the larger locals, it is common practice to have "full-time" elected local officers, as well as numerous "volunteers". For instance, one Massachusetts local has over three-thousand members and employs four (4) full-time officers, each with different areas of responsibility. It also has two (2) full-time secretaries, a twenty-member executive board and over one-hundred stewards working throughout the local on its behalf.

Conversely, there exist smaller locals that cannot afford to employ "full-time" officers. Instead, they depend upon officers who volunteer much of their time and operate on a budget that provides only for the reimbursement of their "lost time" and a small stipend to cover expenses, such as the use of personal telephones. Additionally, they depend heavily upon the state and national organizations for resources. For example, during the afore-mentioned local negotiations, small locals cannot afford to pay their officers to perform the negotiations and depend upon the national union to assign a NBA to negotiate their local agreement with local management.

## The State Organization

If, as I argue, the development of an introductory training program in conflict resolution skills for the APWUMA is important, it would need to be embedded in the union structure in order to succeed. State Organizations within the APWU typically consist of local unions and members-at-large within a specific geographical area that choose to affiliate with the state organization for economic, educational and political purposes. A member-at-large is an individual member or a few members that work in small, one or two person post offices. These members lack the resources to establish their own local, but still wish to affiliate with the state or national organization. The National Constitution contains language encouraging members-at-large to affiliate with both the state and national sectors of the organization.

The Massachusetts State APWU (APWUMA) is a state affiliate of the APWU. Membership consists of local organizations and members-at large that choose to affiliate. One stated purpose of the state organization is to provide training in the collective bargaining arena and to better prepare its membership to become effective leaders. In an effort to address this need, this paper looks at its current training curriculum and provides an outline for further education in conflict resolution skills.

Specifically, the APWUMA Constitution states, “Section 1. The objectives of this body shall be to federate the Locals and Members-at-Large of the APWU employed within the State of Massachusetts into a State Federation for the social, economic, and educational betterment of postal employees and for the improvement of postal services”

(APWUMA, 2004). Currently, the state organization consists of nineteen (19) local affiliates and twenty-five (25) members-at-large.

The APWUMA Constitution provides that the organization hold its convention on an annual basis and that it conduct elections for officers during the convention. The structure of the organization provides for continuity within the executive board by splitting the election of officers between what the organization categorizes as general officers and representative officers. The general officers represent the organization in its entirety, while representative officers are responsible for members that reside in a specific geographic area. The breakdown replicates the state's congressional districts. Elected officers serve a two-year term. The constitution assures continuity by requiring alternating elections at each convention. Thus, at each convention, delegates vote for candidates running either for a general office or for a representative office.

As with many of the smaller locals in the APWU, the state organization cannot afford to employ full-time elected officers. Rather, it depends on officers that volunteer much of their time. Because the state organization is a body formed by the affiliation of local organizations, many of the officers that serve on the state executive board also hold office, and are the decision makers, in their respective local. Although, this may be an unfortunate situation in terms of diminishing opportunities that would encourage greater member participation, there is a logical reason for its occurrence. Since local union monies fund the state organization, it is natural that local officers feel obligated to exert a certain amount of control over the manner in which the state spends its funds. While this situation may have an adverse impact on member participation, it is a reality of the democratic election process.

In an effort to comply with the objectives set out in Section 1 of the Constitution, the APWUMA holds at least two educational seminars in a given calendar year. As stated earlier, many of the affiliates of the state organization have limited resources. One area where limited resources directly affect the membership, in a negative sense, is the inability of a local or locals to provide adequate training for their officials. By combining resources, the state organization is able to provide some assistance in this matter through the semi-annual seminar.

### Downsizings Impact

The APWU as with many labor organizations suffered drastic reductions in both its membership base and financial resources over the last decade. Automation and the employer's increased reliance on outsourcing have had an enormously negative impact on the organization as a whole. In an effort to stretch resources, individual craft conferences merged into one single event and the national union deemed it necessary to change the structure for training seminars offered at national conventions. Nevertheless, the national organization's ability to maintain its level of training "in the field" diminished.

State organizations within the APWU, which were experiencing the same declines in terms of membership and financial resources, found it necessary to assume a larger role for training within their affiliates. Because of the reduced revenues, state organizations find it necessary to focus their remaining resources on training that concerns contract enforcement and grievance procedures. Current training models for entry level stewards and representatives within the affiliates of the APWUMA focus

mainly on “bread and butter” issues. Specifically, the training focuses on “winning” in the grievance procedure.

Concurrent with the declines in overall membership and the organization’s financial resources, membership participation within the APWU is steadily decreasing. During the last national contract vote that occurred in 2007, less than forty (40) percent of the membership took part in the ratification process. This low participation rate indicates a low satisfaction level among APWU members. The APWU needs to take steps to improve its internal relations (relationships between representatives and members) in an effort to increase the membership’s satisfaction level with the organization, thereby increasing the commitment level of the membership. Training APWU representatives about conflict generators (e.g. competition and conflict; attribution theory; justice issues), will help them recognize their existence on the workroom-floor, and how these generators affect their relationship with their membership could be an important first step. Training should also provide representatives with skill sets that help them deal with conflict generators once recognized. Such training could improve the APWU’s internal relations with its membership and provide an avenue for improving the membership’s satisfaction with the union thereby increasing commitment to the organization.

### Methods

In an effort to test whether conflict resolution training would be beneficial to the APWUMA, I employed a “Needs Assessment” as a method to attain the proper data. Cline and Seibert (1993) point out that, “A needs assessment is the first step in almost

any training program” (p. 99). Since the goal of the project is the design of an introductory training program, the needs assessment specifically addresses training within the affiliates of the APWUMA. Brown (2002) states that a detailed needs assessment, geared to the particular organization, is important in order to “identify specific problem areas in the organization” to “obtain management support” to “develop data for evaluation” and to “determine the costs and benefits of training” (p. 570). Furthermore, Cline and Seibert (1993) recommend the collection of both “hard data” and “soft data” when using a needs assessment (p. 100). They define hard data as data that provides “real numbers that you can count, analyze, and translate into statistics”, while soft data “are pieces of information that are obtained through such means as group discussions, interviews, questionnaires, and literature reviews. Soft data are subjective bits of data—similar to opinions and beliefs—but often supported by hard data (p. 100). In other words, hard data is subject to quantitative analysis, while soft data is subject to qualitative analysis. Following Cline and Seibert’s recommendation, I made use of both types of data collection in the assessment.

[What were the goals of the survey? How do they reflect the conflict drivers in Table 1?]

Upon obtaining approval from the University of Massachusetts’ Institutional Review Board, I mailed out surveys to every local affiliated with the APWUMA. The survey instrument included a signed release form and allowed for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. By employing both a “yes-no” section along with a “comments” section it was possible to perform both quantitative as well as qualitative analysis. The main goal of the survey focused on obtaining an overall “snap shot” of the internal

training that occurs within APWUMA affiliates, while also determining whether any training specifically geared toward the application of conflict management skills is taking place, and whether affiliates are interested in participating in such training.

Subsequent to the survey process, I employed the use of an internet random generator to select three local presidents, from various sized locals within the APWUMA, to participate in an interview concerning conflict (s) within their organization. The interview lasted roughly one-half hour. Additionally, I used the random generator to select one APWU NBA, from the state of Massachusetts to participate in the interview. Each of the individuals selected by the random generator agreed to participate in the process with the understanding that their comments would remain anonymous. After receiving a signed release form from each individual, the taped interview process began. For purposes of clarity, and in order to assure participant anonymity, I assigned each taped interview a separate identifying letter, ranging from A to D, prior to performing the qualitative analysis.

After the qualitative data collection was complete, I transcribed the data and entered it into a qualitative software program for data analysis. Using the software, I was able to code the data and analyze it to extrapolate various themes.

## Results

Currently there are nineteen (19) locals affiliated with the APWUMA. Each local received a survey with fourteen (14) locals returning valid surveys—for a participation rate of seventy-four per-cent (74%). For a survey to be valid, it had to contain a signed release form, with no identifiable marks appearing on the survey instrument itself. The

respondent locals ranged in size from twenty-one (21) members to well over two-thousand (2000) members, demonstrating a representative cross section of the locals affiliated with the APWUMA.

### Surveys

The surveys indicate there is a large discrepancy between locals concerning the level of training they provide for their officials. Sixty four percent (64%) of the respondent locals indicated that their local allocates some resources for training officers and stewards. Among those locals that provide training, most responded that they spend less than eight (8) hours per year per individual on training, with one local spending roughly sixteen (16) hours per year per individual. Conversely, forty-three percent (43%) of the respondent locals indicated that they do not provide any kind of training whatsoever. All fourteen respondents indicated that their local does not provide training in conflict management skills. These statistics seem rather low when compared with that of other labor organizations. For instance, stewards in the United Brotherhood Carpenters and Joiners of America participate in an eight segment training course that spans four and one-half days and includes a module dedicated to effective communication (Grabelsky, 1993).

Nevertheless, thirteen (13) respondents to this survey or ninety-three percent (93 %) indicated that they thought training in conflict management skills, specifically geared to internal conflicts, is necessary and would be a valuable asset to the state organization. These locals indicated that they would provide the resources for their officials to attend such training. One respondent or seven percent (7 %) of the group indicated that their

local did not believe such training is a priority and wondered whether it would be a productive use of resources. Furthermore, this respondent indicated that their local would not authorize participation for their officials, because it would be “counter productive”. This respondent stated that “we have enough trouble with management and a dispute resolution system (Binding Arbitration) that is broken and desperately needs help. I have cases that are 6 and 7 years old waiting for adjudication.” Clearly, this respondent believes that all of the union’s resources (whether they be local, state or national), need to be singularly devoted the grievance-arbitration process. While the respondents remarks have validity (we do have ongoing problems with management and the grievance-arbitration process), the training put forward in this project would be in addition to current training concerning grievance-arbitration issues and for the most part cost-neutral as it would occur at existing seminars. Furthermore, the respondent’s remarks indicate a possible misunderstanding of the intent of this training module, perhaps believing that this project intended to introduce a mechanism for Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) with the employer. Clearly, the introduction of ADR is not the intent of this project. Specifically, this project’s focus is geared to helping the APWUMA deal with its internal conflicts in a more effective manner.

#### Survey Questions

In the boxes below you will find the questions applied in the survey. There is a brief summation of the respondent’s answers after each question.

1.) How many members belong to your local?
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Out of a possible nineteen (19) responses there were fourteen (14) valid respondents for a seventy-four percent (74%) response rate. The respondent locals varied in size from twenty-one (21) members to twenty-eight hundred (2800) members.

2.) Does your local conduct or provide any training for your representatives and/or officials? If yes, what type (s)?

Six of the respondents or 43 percent (43%) stated they do not provide any training for their representatives. Eight respondents or fifty-seven percent (57%) stated that they provide some type of basic steward training to their representatives.

3.) On average, how many hours per year/per individual does your local devote to training?

Five of the respondents or thirty-six percent (36%) stated that they do not devote any time to training. Interestingly, one (1) of the respondents that does not conduct their own training stated they devote eight (8) hours per year/per individual for training through state and national programs. The remaining eight (8) respondents or fifty-seven percent (57%) stated that they devote from one (1) to sixteen (16) hours of training per individual per year. All of these respondents stated that this figure represents a combination of local, state and national training programs.

4.) Does your local conduct or provide specific training in conflict management skills for your representatives and/or officials? If yes, please describe the training.

All fourteen respondents stated that they do not provide training in conflict management skills.

5.) If yes, how many hours does you union devote to conflict management skills training?

N/A

6.) If your local provides conflict management skills training, does it focus on resolving internal disputes or external disputes, such as with your employer?

N/A

7.) Do you think conflict management skills training for internal disputes would be useful to your local organization? Please comment.

Thirteen (13) respondents or ninety-three percent (93%) stated they thought conflict management skills training geared to resolving internal disputes would be valuable. One (1) of those respondents or seven percent (7%) stated that it would be helpful because, “I

am seeing more internal conflict as the organization evolves.”

Conversely, one (1) respondent or seven percent (7%) stated that he/she did not see any value in this kind of training and thought it might detract from training on collective bargaining and grievance-arbitration issues.

8.) Would you participate in such training—if offered?
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Thirteen (13) respondents or ninety-three percent (93%) stated they would participate in such training, while one (1) respondent (7%) stated they would not.

From the information contained in the survey it appears there is a large variation in the size (in terms of numbers of members) of affiliates within the APWUMA. It is also clear that there is a large discrepancy concerning the amount of time and resources each affiliate devotes to training its representatives. This variation may be a product of the size of the local; however, this is speculation because the survey did not concentrate on this point. The surveys clearly demonstrated two important points in regards to this project. First, there is an absolute void concerning conflict management training within the APWUMA, and secondly there is overwhelming interest within these affiliates to participate in such training.

## Interviews

Each interview lasted approximately one-half hour and was conducted in an open manner, which allowed the participants to individually define the type and intensity of conflict they experience within their local. Upon performing the qualitative analysis of the interviews, some strong themes emerged regarding conflict in APWUMA affiliates.

### **Theme 1: Affiliates experience conflict from competition:**

All four of the participants, after listening to the introduction portion of the interview, candidly offered that their local experiences a great deal of conflict. Participant C stated, "Conflict is a way of life for my local; bidding, choice vacations and holiday work always cause us problems". This constant competition over workplace benefits can have a long lasting impact on the parties involved. For instance, if a member loses out on a vacation choice to someone with more seniority, that member may begin to sow the seeds of latent conflict. While the senior member may have had no intention to harm the junior member, the senior member's actions prevented the junior member from attaining their desired need. This situation can be so subtle that neither employee is aware of the brewing conflict. Eventually, after repeated instances this conflict can morph into an overt conflict. Participant D stated that, "Junior employees sometimes lash out at the union when they can't get what they want". Three of the participants stated that they "have to get involved in some type of disagreement daily". The other participant stated that although he/she does not become aware or get involved in every conflict, he/she usually learns about it, sometime later.

## **Theme 2: Conflicts become personal—blaming occurs:**

Participant D stated, “A lot of our conflict between members start out as misunderstandings, then they become personal. There’s a lot of petty jealousy on the floor—it always seems to mushroom when people don’t get what their way. And they always want to blame someone else.” Such situations could stem from the constant competition described above. When junior employees constantly lose out on bids, holiday scheduling and vacation choices, they will most likely blame or attribute their situation to those they feel are responsible for their plight. Participant B stated, “Sometimes members blame the union when they don’t get what they want”. The Fundamental Attribution Error could be at work in such situations as members will hold those they believe are to blame for their negative outcome personally responsible. In some cases, they may blame the senior member for simply exercising their rights. In other cases they may blame the union because for enforcing the collective bargaining agreement or for not providing better rights to meet their individual needs. All of the participants conveyed that the “blame” sentiment was prevalent in their local.

## **Theme 3: Interpersonal conflicts occur “across the board”:**

When responding to inquiries as to what types of conflicts their locals experience, the participants described the conflicts as occurring “across the board” stating that interpersonal conflicts occur between members, between members and management, between members and stewards, between stewards and officers and also among their stewards. Participant C stated that while his/her local experiences a lot of conflict between members, there is also a lot of apathy concerning the union. “There’s a lot of

apathy out there; we can't get members involved in anything, even when it's free. This kind of reaction causes a lot of frustration among my stewards.”

While this atmosphere understandably creates frustration among stewards it might also indicate a more important point. This situation could be a revelation that the membership is dissatisfied with the union. If the membership views their interactions or experiences with the union as negative, they will forego further participation and their commitment level toward the organization will be low. For an organization to build commitment among its members it must have positive interactions with its members creating a greater level of satisfaction.

#### **Theme 4: Conflict distracts from organizational goals:**

Additionally, each participant revealed they were frustrated by the level of conflict that occurs within their local. Concerning member-to-member conflicts all of the participants stated that there is a lot of conflict between members. Participant A stated, “It’s frustrating—a lot of our conflict comes about from the contract being misused, but we spend so much time on the personality conflicts--it seems like we never have time to educate our members about the contract”. Participant B stated, “I can’t get the things done that I need to be doing for the local, because I get caught up in arguments between members. It eats up a lot of my time and in most cases, they don’t know what they want from me. People think they’re getting screwed by another member, or that they’re being treated unfairly by the union, but it’s just what the contract calls for”. These quotes reveal a viscous cycle. Representatives are frustrated because they spend so much time dealing with internal conflicts that they cannot devote time to educate the membership

about the collective bargaining agreement and the value of its enforcement. And because they cannot spend time educating the membership, they end up devoting their time to internal conflicts. This situation detracts from the union's ability to have positive interactions with the membership, thereby denying the opportunity to establish better relationships with the membership and increasing their overall satisfaction level toward the union.

**Theme 5: Justice Issues affects member's perspectives and commitment level:**

All four participants stated that enforcing the APWU contract can be a difficult task. Participant A stated "The contract is purposely ambiguous, so it can lead to conflict." Participant B stated, "Members like to interpret the contract their way, even though there might be a practice or arbitration, member's usually don't know or care and get angry if we don't go their way." This quote suggests that the contract is a source of conflict between members and between members and the union, especially if members *perceive* the union's actions as unjust. Participant C stated, "We had a situation where one of my stewards screwed up the overtime rotation, the member felt he got screwed twice, by management and the union—and there was nothing I could do to fix it because it was my steward who told management who was up for overtime." This situation demonstrates at least two conflict generators at work, which have a direct impact on the member's perception of their experience with the union. First, the member is rightfully upset because they were treated unjustly in the distribution of a benefit (Distributive

Justice). The contract provides the mechanism for the distribution of overtime and this employee was entitled to perform this work and receive due compensation. To add insult to injury, because the union steward was involved in the initial mistake, the president believed the union could not pursue this issue in the grievance process, leaving the member to feel that they were treated unfairly by the process too (Procedural Justice). Participant C also stated that, “Sometimes members feel this way even if we handled it right. Sometimes they just don’t like the way the steward talked to them.” This quote indicates that in certain circumstances members may feel they were treated unjustly by the union (even when the union was correct) because of the tone of the conversation with their steward (Interactional Justice).

**Theme 6: Lack of training causes officials to avoid conflicts:**

Participant A stated that he/she tries to remain neutral when dealing with conflicts among members stating, “You have to remain neutral or you’ll lose your credibility, but it’s not an easy thing to do.” Neutrality is a sticky issue. Conflict training does not necessarily make an individual neutral, everyone has certain biases. However, training can be beneficial if it helps officials become aware of their biases and assists them in approaching conflict situations from a more open-minded stance. Training will also help officials listen more attentively to individuals whose opinions differ greatly from their own. This participant also stated that, “some people are naturally better at dealing with conflict than others”, but thought training would be “helpful.” Participant A also stated that stewards have complained about not wanting to get involved in intra-personal conflicts because “they don’t know what to do about them, but, I wish they would deal

them.” Participant D openly admitted that he/she tries to avoid getting involved in member-member conflicts unless there is a specific contract violation. Conflict training will provide officials with new skills that will help them improve their interaction with members that find themselves in the midst of a conflict situation. As cited earlier, improving the member’s interaction and overall experience within the union will increase their satisfaction level, thereby enhancing commitment and participation within the organization.

**Theme 7: Training would be beneficial/must be economical.**

When asked whether they thought a training program centering on conflict skills would be beneficial to the organization, all of the participants stated that they thought training would help. Participant A stated that he/she would authorize their officials to attend conflict training on the clock, meaning that he/she would use union funds to pay for it. Participants B and C stated that they thought it would be a good idea, but stated that they do not have the resources to send their officials to additional training seminars. They also stated that they would support the idea, if the training occurred during an existing seminar. Participant D did not see the value in this type of training if it meant expending additional resources. While Participant D represents twenty-five percent (25) of the sampling, the training module can be designed to accommodate all of the participants concerns by integrating it into existing seminars and conferences. Thus, there seems to be overwhelming support within the organization for the introduction of conflict training within the APWUMA.

## Analysis

### *Conflicts within the APWUMA*

This research demonstrates that conflict is prevalent in the affiliates of the APWUMA. It also reveals that conflict occurs on various levels within the affiliates. Analysis of this conflict begins with understanding the environment in which members of the APWUMA interact, which for the most part occurs within the confines of the Postal Service.

From the member's perspective, the workplace is bursting with competition. From the first day of their employment, members of the APWUMA are constantly in direct competition with each other for the distribution of benefits. For instance, seniority is the deciding factor in most instances where bidding for preferred duty assignments (positions) occurs. Because the Postal Service is constantly updating its mail processing capabilities (through advances in automation and technology), members regularly compete for dwindling jobs. Most people simply attempt to maintain positions with daytime hours and weekends off, even if this means bidding to facilities with longer commutes. While the exercise of seniority is the best method to reward members for their time in service, it offers little remuneration to members who cannot better their situation after decades of employment. Additionally, the selection process for the remaining preferred duty assignments, called "best qualified positions", allows management complete authority to decide which employee will "win" a particular bid. This "best qualified" scenario usually causes conflict between the "successful" applicant and those not chosen, especially if the "successful" applicant is a junior employee. Therefore, competition is an integral part of the everyday work life for members of the

APWUMA and, as Katz and Kahn (1978) remind us, it can be the source for conflict even in the most peaceful organizations. This factor was readily apparent during the interview process. The participants stated the competition is “a way of life” for their membership and that this constant competition leads to the development of latent conflict, which morphs into overt conflict. Interestingly, much of this competition is the result of the collective bargaining process. Bidding for jobs, holiday work and vacations is accomplished through the exercise of seniority, a core principle of the labor movement. From the data we learned that many members are unaware of the rules set forth in the contract, which allows them to personalize the issue and sets the stage for the conflict process to begin. In such cases, members tend to “blame” their fellow members or the union for their negative outcomes (Fundamental Attribution Error) causing them to believe that “others” willfully undertook such actions to personally deny them a specific benefit or personally harm them in some manner. Educating the membership about the terms of the collective bargaining agreement will go a long way to “de-personalize” these conflicts of interest.

The Postal Service has a notorious reputation as a workplace rife with conflict—far from what one would term a peaceful environment. Some union leaders attribute this harsh environment to the Postal Service’s status as a quasi-government agency with a history of operating in a militaristic fashion as its organizational culture. Regardless of the reason, the environment in which the members of the APWUMA exist contributes to the conversion of repeated competition into manifest conflict.

The type of conflict discussed above occurs within the confines of the APWU’s collective bargaining agreement. As stated earlier, Solstad (2000) provides an in-depth

account of the informal conflict that occurs on the workroom floor. She draws attention to the inadequacy of most grievance processes for dealing with this type of conflict in an effective manner. In fact, in many cases the grievance process formalizes conflict and serves as a shield that covers up the “underlying issues” (Solstad, 2000, p. 10). This creates a condition where issues “fester” and allows for the evolution of serious conflict in the future (Ury et al., 1993).

The affiliates of the APWUMA, like any organization, are susceptible to this evolution of conflict. In the interviews, the participants openly revealed that there is a high level of conflict existing within their locals. They also stated that there is a high level of jealousy among the members, and that the members are always watching each other to insure that they get what they “deserve” and that it usually mushrooms into some type of conflict activity. This is indicative of the conflict process. Where latent conflict exists, which could be in the form of jealousy over the distribution of limited resources, an event can trigger the latent conflict sending the parties through the conflict process until the conflict becomes manifest or overt. Officials need to establish better *lines of communications* with the membership to increase the member’s perception of the organization and their place in it. If the membership understands the collective bargaining agreement, understands the procedures that control their work life and that {seniority like democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others} they will view the process as fair, diminishing jealousy and reducing the platform for latent conflict.

Likewise, conflicts within APWUMA affiliates sometimes occur as a result of the interaction between members and between members and their union representatives. In

fact, how an organization handles its disagreements has a direct impact on how its members' determine their overall satisfaction level with the organization. Within the affiliates of the APWUMA, this is an ongoing problem. If stewards do not have the skills to deal with member to member problems they could become part of the problem. The data reveals that conflict avoidance in the APWUMA is prevalent because officials feel they do not have the proper skills. Participant A stated that stewards have complained about not wanting to get involved in intra-personal conflicts because "they don't know what to do about them, but, I wish they would deal with them." Nevertheless, conflict avoidance not only leads to the development of latent conflicts among members, but it can also be a source of friction between the members and the union.

In an effort increase member satisfaction and commitment levels, officials need to increase their interaction with the membership and try to insure that the interaction it is a positive experience from the member's standpoint. This is not an easy task. The interviews revealed that members can become angry with the union when "they don't get what they want." In these situations officials need to employ skills such as *active listening*, which allows the member "to be heard" and learn to *re-frame issues* so that members can view a particular situation from another perspective. They can also serve as an *information source* for issues that are not directly related to the contract, but impact the member's lives. For instance, officials can inform the member about additional services the unions provides, or assist them in receiving help from another organization or government agency. By communicating with the members directly, and by providing them with pertinent information, officials create an atmosphere where the membership views their interaction with the union as a positive experience. Such positive experience

translates to higher levels of satisfaction among the membership and creates greater levels of commitment and participation within the organization.

The data reveals an overarching theme where the seniority based contractual provisions creates an extremely competitive work environment, leading to the development of latent conflict. The data also reveals that much of the conflict occurs as a result of the application of the collective bargaining agreement, and that the grievance process is ill equipped to deal with these issues. This highlights the importance of educating the membership about the collective bargaining agreement and the importance of developing skills to improve the members' interaction with the union enabling the member to perceive the process as fair. Conflict training can address these specific issues and help build stronger levels of commitment and participation within the APWUMA.

### Conflict Resolution Skills Training for the APWUMA

Strong advocacy to enforce collective bargaining agreements is paramount, given that stewards and shop floor representatives are the “first responders” of the labor movement, but a singular approach to their training is simply not enough. Despite the fact that contract enforcement is the core function for stewards and local officers, many of the problems these representatives encounter involve “gray” areas, not specifically addressed by the agreement.

My research demonstrates that a large gap exists in the training that occurs within APWUMA affiliates. It is understandable that larger affiliates with more available resources would be able to provide better training than the smaller affiliates within the organization. What is surprising and discouraging, however, is that the overwhelming

majority of the larger locals dedicate less than eight hours of training to each representative per year. Even more disturbing is the fact that almost half (43%) of the respondents to the surveys indicated that they do not provide any training for their stewards and officers and that none of the affiliates offer specific training concerning internal conflict resolution. However, one encouraging outcome of the research is the fact that the majority of the respondents to both the surveys and interviews believe that conflict resolution training, specifically geared to the types of conflicts that occur within their affiliates, would be beneficial to their organization and provide their officials with additional tools to service their membership.

There is an abundance of literature concerning the application of conflict resolution skills to deal with organizational conflict. However, because of time restraints specified by the participants in this research, the majority of this training necessarily focuses on the constructs of conflict at work in the AP WUMA. Specifically, the training focuses on competition in the workplace and how conflict avoidance can advance the development of latent conflict, and the personalization of conflicts of interest. The training then focuses on providing officials of the APWUMA with additional skill sets to help them deal with internal conflicts in a more effective manner, in an effort to increase the memberships' perception of justice within the organization.

While competition is an unavoidable by-product of the collective bargaining agreement, effective conflict management can lead to a reduction in the development of latent conflict. The data reveals that much of this conflict develops because there is a lack of knowledge about the collective bargaining agreement. Of course, the first logical step to reduce such conflict would be to find better methods to reach out to the

membership and educate them about the terms (and the rationale) of the collective bargaining agreement. However, this approach by itself probably would not go far enough. To effectively manage conflicts within the APWUMA officials need to understand the affect the competitive process can have upon the membership. Union officials by their involvement within the organization exhibit a higher level of commitment to the organization than the ordinary member and because of that commitment may view the competitive process in a different manner than a regular dues paying member. Officials, for the most part, understand the rationale behind the provisions of the collective bargaining agreement and may be more willing to readily accept the negative by-products resulting from the competitive process.

However, in an effort to develop better relations with the membership officials need to understand that members, as individuals, may react quite differently to this process. Learning about the ramifications of the competitive process, specifically, its relationship to the development of latent conflict will help officials understand their memberships varied reactions and help them approach such situations in a positive manner. Since the data clearly revealed that competition causes conflict within the APWUMA and that avoidance exacerbates the problem a useful tool to employ in this training is one that would measure these types of conflicts. Learning how to gauge internal conflicts provides officials with the ability to recognize reactions and provides insight into how to manage rather than avoid simmering conflicts within the organization.

**Elements of the Training:**

**1. Safely Surfacing and Talking about Competition and Avoidance in Unions:**

An overarching theme of this research is that conflict is abundant in the affiliates of the APWUMA. While this is problematic, it also provides opportunity. As shown, the use of effective conflict resolution skills can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes within the APWUMA. Thomas and Kilmann (1974) assert that individuals have five varying modes or styles that guide them when dealing with conflict situations. The five styles include, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing and collaborating. They also note that each of the five styles is useful in certain given situations, but most individuals consistently favor a certain conflict style. As a result of their research they developed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) to help identify an individual's conflict tendencies. From material obtained from the UMASS Boston Graduate Program in Dispute Resolution, the training module provides scenarios for each of the five styles from the TKI and discusses the situations where each may or may not be the appropriate style to employ. Of course, this is not to suggest that official's subject their membership to such a test, rather its value in this forum, relies in the knowledge it provides to officials about their own tendencies as well as the tendencies of members involved in conflict situations. Understanding the concept that individuals approach conflict situations from markedly different positions will help officials identify each participant's tendencies and provide officials with valuable guidance toward resolving particular conflicts within the APWUMA.

## 2. Listening Skills:

Listening to parties is an important skill for any intervener, since many people tend to "hear" one another as opposed to listening to what the other person is actually saying. The APWU teaches its stewards and officers to listen carefully to its members

concerns when dealing with collective bargaining issues. However, this research demonstrated that many stewards are reluctant to deal with issues that fall outside the purview of the contract. The participants or local presidents stated that they believe many stewards do not want to get involved in interpersonal conflicts because they lack the training. In many cases the stewards stop listening once they determine the issue falls outside the contract. From an organizational commitment perspective this behavior could be damaging to the APWUMA. Sometimes members need to voice their frustration and feel that the union is listening. If not us, then who?

“Active Listening” is an effective method to demonstrate to the speaker that they have your undivided attention. You perform this method by listening intently to what the speaker has to say, and then you repeat in your own words, what you believe the speaker said. Active listening accomplishes three important objectives. It insures that the listener is paying attention; it helps avoid misunderstandings between the speaker and the listener; and it helps open up the dialogue between the parties (Intractable Conflict, 1998). Active listening also allows the speaker to feel validated, to feel that the listener understands the situation from the speaker’s point of view, and it allows the listener to express empathy toward the speaker, while not necessarily agreeing with the speaker’s arguments (Intractable Conflict, 1998). Validation and the expression of empathy are powerful tools to bring about behavioral changes that will the help parties resolve their conflicts (Institute of Management & Administration, 2005).

Reframing Issues. Reframing issues for parties in conflict comes from the world of mediation. In mediation, when parties are “stuck” or refuse to move from their position it usually involves the belief that the other party is somewhat to “blame” for the

situation. Mediators must find ways to get the parties away from the “blame game” in order to conduct constructive negotiations. “The mediator, then, has the task of trying to redefine the problem to alleviate the paralysis” (Matz, 1996). Sometimes reframing an issue simply entails substituting one phrase for another. “For example, ‘positions’ reframed become ‘perspectives;’ a ‘compromise’ reframed becomes ‘meeting the needs or interests of both parties’ (van Ginkel, 2004, p. 483) Through reframing or redefining issues officials can move the parties (or members) away from “blaming” and allows them to view the situation from a new perspective and to focus their efforts on finding joint solutions (Matz, 1996).

### 3. Information Source.

Rowe (1995) states that an ombudsperson may provide clients with information about the organization that otherwise would be difficult or cumbersome to attain (p. 106). In much the same way, stewards and other officials can be a valuable resource to members who are having difficulty either at work or in their private lives. Of course, this information is in addition to the expertise officials can provide concerning collective bargaining issues. For instance, the APWU has a Voluntary Benefits Plan that members can join. Enrollment in this plan provides the member with additional services such as legal representation, life insurance and supplemental health insurance, to name just a few, at reduced costs. Access to this information may reduce the stress level of the member and help them associate their interaction with the union as a positive experience. Additionally, if the membership views the union in a positive light, if they believe that

the union can “satisfy” a particular conflict they may be more forthright with officials about their internal conflicts.

#### 4. Helping People Help Themselves.

Rowe (1995) talks about the role of the mediator/ombudsman in what she calls the “Direct Approach” (p. 107). In this type of interaction, “An ombuds practitioner may help a visitor or complainant to deal directly with the perceived source of a problem. Through discussion, support and role-playing, a visitor may develop the skills and self-confidence to work on an issue without third party intervention” (Rowe, 1995, p. 107). One tool for this approach is the drafting of a private letter (Rowe, 1995). Rowe (1990) states that such a direct approach “is most likely to be effective in harassment cases, in terms of stopping the offense and in meeting the stated interests of the majority of offended persons.” This direct approach could be a useful tool for APWUMA officials to employ when they are faced with a situation where one member states that another member is harassing them in some form. Such cases usually present a dilemma for union officials because they involve competing claims without direct evidence. Likewise, in such cases, acting on behalf of one member’s interests most certainly alienates the other. Rowe (1990) also informs us that the offended party does not necessarily have to follow through and send the letter for this act to serve its purpose. In many cases the act of writing the letter provides an outlet for the offended party to relieve their anger and also provides them with a sense of empowerment regarding the offense.

While the above-mentioned skills are by no means exhaustive, they offer the officials of the APWUMA a cross-section of tools that will help them manage internal

conflicts in a more effective manner and in doing so increase organizational commitment. Conflict training will provide officials with a better understanding of the constructs of conflict at work in the affiliates of the APWUMA. Specifically, the training addresses the effects of competition and conflict, latent conflict, interpersonal conflict, conflict avoidance and their impact on organizational justice issues and its impact on overall member satisfaction. Officials will learn to apply the necessary skills to manage internal conflicts effectively, thereby improving their interactions with the membership, increasing their members' satisfaction level and providing the basis for increasing the level of commitment within the organization.

#### Impacts of the Training: An Initial Review

In response to the research, this project undertook the development of a training module that would provide officials of the APWUMA with an introduction to the construct of organizational conflict and provide them with an overview of the skill sets that are available to help them resolve internal conflicts in a more effective manner (see Appendix A). In keeping with the recommendations of the participants, the program's design allows for the training to occur within a two-hour window, making it viable for incorporation into the organization's existing conventions and seminars. By including the training module into existing conferences it will be feasible for a greater number of affiliates to participate.

This module was put to test as part of the curriculum for the University of Massachusetts' Labor Resource Center's Union Administration Certificate Program in 2006. When learning of my interest in researching this subject, Susan Moir, Director of

the Labor Resource Center, approached me about co-facilitating a class with her for the university's certificate program using this model. The class was successful, earning an overall approval rating of 4.3 on a 5 point scale.

Unfortunately, in order to fit this module to the APWUMA's schedule, it was necessary to trim the module to suit their two-hour time frame. A major concern is that this time restriction does not allow for an in depth conversation regarding the skills section of the class. This dilemma suggests the opportunity for future work in this area. Specifically, the module could be expanded to consist of two separate classes. The first session would deal solely with the construct of conflict, while the second session would focus on the skills that would help officials resolve internal conflicts effectively.

### Conclusion

Within the affiliates of the APWUMA, as with most organizations, there exists a sufficient amount of internal conflict to warrant the introduction of a training program specifically geared to conflict resolution. A good deal of conflict within the APWUMA comes about from the interaction of the work force. APWUMA representatives need training to help them better understand the constructs of organizational conflict and introduce them to skill sets that will help them deal with internal conflicts in a more effective manner. However, like many labor organizations, the APWUMA is suffering from dwindling resources. This fact presents both a problem and an opportunity. The problem is that affiliates have fewer resources to devote to training. The opportunity arises from the fact that an abbreviated introductory course in conflict training can occur within the framework of existing conferences and seminars. Even in its abbreviated format, the inclusion of this introductory training module into the curricula of the

APWUMA will provide its officials with a better understanding of the construct of conflict and allow them to manage it in a more effective manner, thereby increasing organizational commitment.

In doing so, the APWUMA will help its affiliates build better relationships between their representatives and its membership and help both groups develop a higher level of commitment toward the organization.

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## Appendix

### Course Description

#### Conflict Training to Increase Commitment within the APWUMA

Instructor: Mike McDonald

#### **Class Description:**

The objective of this class is to provide union officials of the APWUMA with a brief overview of conflict and its resolution. Conflict by itself is neither good nor bad. In fact, it can be a catalyst for needed change. When handled constructively it can be a source of personal as well as organizational growth. If handled poorly, conflict can be debilitating and destructive, leading to resentment and alienation among individuals and yielding devastating results for organizations.

#### **Class Goal:**

The goal of this class is to provide you with a brief overview of the construct of conflict and offer you some skills to help manage it in an effective manner.

This class is not about developing or promoting alternative dispute resolution skills for dealing with employers in the collective bargaining arena. Rather, its focus is on alerting you to the discipline of conflict management: and to encourage you to develop the skills necessary to deal with the conflicts that occur within the union environment in a constructive manner.

#### **Participation:**

For adult learners like us education is not a spectator sport, and teaching is not performance art. This is an interactive course where we will all learn from each other. When it comes to conflict studies, nobody is a novice—we all deal with conflict on a daily basis—so please prepare and be ready to share.

**Note:** Unfortunately, little scholarly writing specifically deals with *internal* union conflict resolution. However, organizations whether they are for profit businesses or non-profits like labor organizations share many of the same characteristics. Therefore, as you read the following articles, try to imagine that the authors are speaking to your particular labor organization.

## Course Readings:

### 1. Introduction to Conflict Resolution

Burnside, Charles. Coping with conflict in the workplace.  
[http://web.archive.org/web/20020202160034re\\_/www.tccta.org/Messengerbackissues/Dec95Messengerarticles/Conflict.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20020202160034re_/www.tccta.org/Messengerbackissues/Dec95Messengerarticles/Conflict.html)

Deutsch, M. (1994). Constructive conflict resolution: Principles, training, and research. *Journal of Social Issues*, *50* (1), pp. 12-33.

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Rowe, M., Options, Functions, and Skills: What an Organizational Ombudsman Might Want to Know, from *Negotiation Journal*, April, (1995) pp. 103-114.

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### 2. Suggested Readings for Further Learning on Conflict in Organizations

Berg, D. N. & Smith, K. (1987). Paradoxes of group life. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. *Ch. 5, pp. 89-108*.

Kolb D. M. & Bartunek J. M. (Eds.). (1992). Hidden conflict in organizations. Newbury Park: CA: Sage Publications.

Schein, E. H. (1988). *Process consultation, volume I: Its role in organization development*, 2nd Ed. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Co.

### 3. A Sample of Web Sites on Conflict Resolution

[www.fmcs.gov](http://www.fmcs.gov)

[www.beyondintractibility.org](http://www.beyondintractibility.org)

[www.neacr.org](http://www.neacr.org)

<http://conflict.colorado.edu/>

<http://www.crinfo.org/>

### 4. Interesting Links for Labor Education Issues

<http://www.georgemeany.org/>

<http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/workered/LaborResource.htm>

<http://www.labor-studies.org/>

[http://www.ilir.uiuc.edu/labor/edu\\_overview.htm](http://www.ilir.uiuc.edu/labor/edu_overview.htm)

<http://www.labor.iu.edu/InDLS/LaborStudiesEducation/CourseOfferings.htm>

<http://www.lir.msu.edu/lep/>

<http://www.h-net.org/~uclea/>

## Instructor's Notes: Conflict Training to Increase Commitment within the APWUMA

### Objectives:

First, let me say what this course is not about. This course is not about using Alternative Dispute Resolution methods with employers in collective bargaining. Rather, this course provides you a better understanding of the construct of conflict and offers you some tools to manage internal conflicts within your organization in a more effective manner. Learning these skill sets can be useful on the shop floor and assist us in providing a positive experience for our members when they interact with our union.

### How I got into this:

I've been a union member since the age of eighteen. During this time I've belonged to the ATU, the IBT, the IAM for ten years while working as a part-time baggage handler at US Airways—where we had union representation, lost it because of the merger with non-union Piedmont Airlines and finally got it back after three years of pay and benefit cuts. I also belonged to the UAW while working as a Graduate Assistant at the University of Massachusetts Boston Harbor Campus.

I began my employment with the Postal Service in 1985 as a tractor-trailer operator. In 1986, I became a steward in the Boston Metro Local and from that time up until the year 2002, I served in various capacities on the local's executive board. In 1990, I won

my first election to serve as the Motor Vehicle Craft President, representing roughly 250 truck drivers and mechanics. I served in that position for over ten years, and finished my career within the local as the full-time Vice-President/Treasurer.

Through my involvement with the APWU, I became increasingly aware that management was spending a lot of resources to continually training their labor reps. At one time, our level of sophistication equaled that of management, but we were losing our edge. I decided that I needed to improve my skills so that I could provide the type of representation our membership had become accustomed to.

I was lucky to learn about a unique program offered by the AFL-CIO at its educational campus in Silver Springs, MD. This program operated in conjunction with Antioch University and provided union officers and members the opportunity to earn a BA in Labor Studies. I applied, was accepted to the program in January of 1995 and graduated in June of 2000. That program was incorporated into what is now known as the National Labor College operating on the same campus. Subsequently, I decided to pursue a Masters Degree in Dispute Resolution, which brings us together today.

The Postal Service is way ahead of us on the learning curve concerning conflict management. I'm not saying that every supervisor applies what they learn, but they have provided their people with an abundance of training concerning communicating with their employees (our members). I'm sure you've all experienced a situation where members say they don't want to get the union involved because their supervisor told them management would take care of their problem. Then when the member finally asks you to get involved you find that the issue could've been easily resolved had you known about it from the start.

Anyway, the purpose of this rather long-winded discussion was to provide you with some of my personal experiences and to emphasize our need to constantly improve our skill sets.

## Conflict Training to Increase Commitment within the APWUMA

Mike McDonald

*APWUMA*

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## Class objectives

- Provide a brief overview of the construct of conflict and offer you some skills to manage it in an effective manner
- This training is “NOT” about using ADR methods to deal with employers over collective bargaining rights!

# Conflict Theory

- Understanding Conflict
  - Competition and Conflict
  - Latent to Manifest Conflict
  - Attribution Theory
  - Fundamental Attribution Error
- Organizational Conflict
  - Conflicts of Interest
  - Interpersonal Conflicts
  - Informal Conflicts

## Organizational Justice Issues

- Distributive Justice
- Procedural Justice
- Interactional Justice

# Organizational Commitment

–Union Commitment

## Outcomes from Differing Approaches to Conflict Modes

- Competition: “Win/Lose”
- Accommodation: “Lose/Win”
- Avoidance: “Lose/Lose”
- Compromise: “Win/Lose; Win/Lose”
- Collaboration: “Win/Win”

Conflict Mode

May be appropriate when...

May be inappropriate

when...

Avoiding

- The issue is trivial
- The relationship is unimportant
- Time is short and no decision is needed
- You have little

- You care about the relationship and the issues
- Used routinely
- Negative feelings may linger

Accommodating	<p>power, but still wish to block the other person</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You don't care about the issues</li> <li>• You want harmony or "credits" toward an issue that is more important to you</li> <li>• Your safety is challenged</li> <li>• You realize you are wrong</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Others would benefit from productive confrontation</li> <li>• You are likely to be resentful</li> <li>• Used routinely (e.g. to gain acceptance)</li> <li>• There is an opportunity to collaborate</li> </ul>
Conflict Mode	May be appropriate when...	May be inappropriate when...
Compromising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperation is important, but time or resources are limited</li> <li>• Finding any solution is better than complete stalemate</li> <li>• The other party does not respond to efforts at collaboration</li> <li>• Quick, decisive action is required (emergencies)</li> <li>• You're sure you're right and being right matters more than the relationship</li> <li>• The issue is trivial and others aren't interested in the outcome</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finding the best solution possible is important</li> <li>• Building the relationship is important</li> <li>• "Getting half the pie" is unacceptable</li> <li>• Collaboration hasn't been tried</li> <li>• Cooperation from others is unimportant</li> <li>• Used routinely</li> <li>• Long term gains and relationships are a priority</li> </ul>
Competing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issues and relationships are significant</li> <li>• Cooperation is important</li> <li>• A mutually-beneficial outcome</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time is short</li> <li>• The issues are unimportant</li> <li>• The other person's goals are unjustifiable</li> <li>• The relationship is</li> </ul>
Collaborating		

- is important
- Reasonable hope exists of addressing all concerns

less important than the outcome

## 5 Myths about Conflict

- Conflict in the workplace is dysfunctional.
- Conflict represents communication breakdown.
- If avoided, conflict will go away.
- All conflicts can be resolved.
- Conflict always results in a winner and a loser.

## Conflict Resolution Skills for the APWUMA

- Safely Surfacing and Talking about Competition and Avoidance in Unions
- Listening Skills
- Reframing Issues
- Information Source
- Helping People Help Themselves

## Case Study

Presenting a case study within the two-hour time limit prescribed by the APWUMA would probably be impractical. However, if time permits it would be useful to introduce a case study (drawn from an actual experience of the participants), in an effort to let the participants exercise their new found understanding of conflict and allow them the opportunity to use some of the skills sets discussed in the class. Additionally, the case

studies will vary dependent upon the particular class participants (i.e. craft group).

## A case study: discuss in small groups

- The parties
- The problem:
- What do you do? Who do you do it with?
- What are your goals?