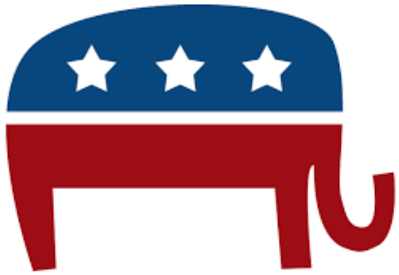


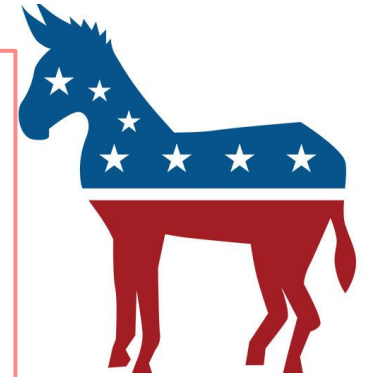
Values Conflicts

Values Conflicts verses Perceived Values Conflicts

Lets take an example which will be familiar to most of us. Even if we are not American – it is impossible not to be aware of the extreme polarisation that has occurred over the past decade or so in American politics.



So, imagine I say “I am a Democrat” or “I am a Republican”. Without any further information a listener is likely to assume that he or she knows where I stand on a whole host of social and political issues. Yet political parties have been declining in influence since as far back as the 50s, and recent research indicates that growing numbers make choices based on policy rather than party. Thus, group membership alone doesn’t predict an individual’s actual values.



For example. 3 out of 10 voters, whether Republican or Democrat disagree with their party’s position on abortion, meaning that members of both parties support abortion rights, though they are far apart on other issues.

Political affiliation isn’t the only group membership that poorly predicts people’s actual values. 56% of US Catholics support abortion rights, and only 8% view contraception as morally wrong – despite very clear Vatican positions on both. Thus, values are in fact individualised and discoverable through dialogue – as opposed to being a blank canvas of allocation. The impact of not realising the ‘group value membership assumption’ as being a misnomer, is that even when there is a perception of a values conflict, those involved will see less opportunity for finding common ground with ‘the other/s’ and any dispute will escalate more quickly. And more worrying, they are disinclined to even try to find possible shared solutions or understanding with each other.

Thus, when discovering that there is a disagreement which may be framed as a conflict of interests, or a clash of worldviews in one arena, it is important not to generalise. And, it is only through dialogue and exploration that it possible to determine whether a values conflict truly exists. And if so, we will understand that the values emanate from deep in each other’s iceberg and thus their true impact might even be out of consciousness.

If a values conflict does exist – what makes them so intractable?

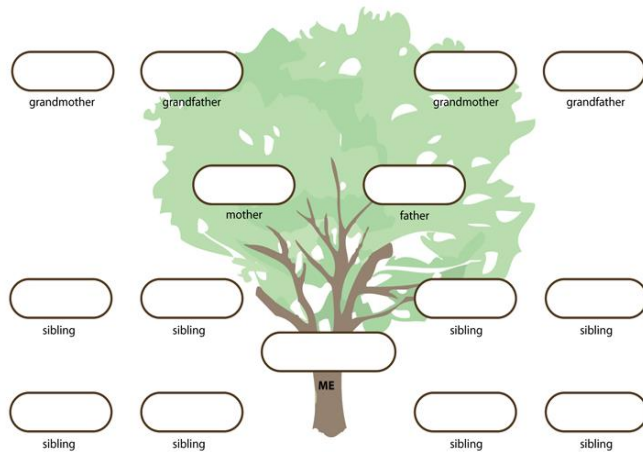
Values Conflicts

Values Conflicts Where There is a Shared Worldview or Culture

Even with a shared worldview or culture in common, values conflicts can arise at the individual level – due to things that one party thinks are normal and acceptable being seen as insulting or hurtful to other parties. Whether in business, friendships or families such dynamics can cause serious relationship harm and even complete breakdowns.

Family/Cultural Values Scenario

FAMILY TREE



Let's imagine that three generations from a family that comes from a 'collectivist' culture, where elders are respected, are living in the same residence. Family harmony is paramount and elders are considered authority figures. The presence of conflict would be considered a disgrace and shameful. However, even though the two elder generations are firm traditionalists, one of the daughters, has adopted due to a liberal education, an individualistic, egalitarian and rights-based values set.

One day, she announces she is dating a boy who is not from the same culture – and would like to introduce him to the family. The Grandmothers agree this is not appropriate and instruct her to stop immediately – making it clear that it is only permissible to date from within their shared culture. She demands an explanation becomes angry when she is told “this is not right” and calls her elders racists and says she will date whomever she likes.

After speaking with the parents, the Grandmothers apologise, losing face but avoiding the disgrace of the conflict in front of the family. Their values of duty, virtue, obedience have been transgressed and is seen as harmful to family, culture and ethnicity. Ans yet a few months later the daughter and her boyfriend break up. Despite this happening a silent tension continues to hinder the relationship between the girl and her Grandmothers, creating a family split.

Given the clash in values, and the family norms, there is no way to resolve the situation, come to peace and shared understanding move on. A process for reconciliation doesn't exist, and the daughter doesn't understand the impact of her violation of her Grandmothers' values. Which were:

- Not treating the Grandmothers as figures of authority in the family, and that their instruction is to be presumed correct and appropriate
- Demanding an explanation and then showing her anger to her elders
- Putting her individual desires above family harmony by causing conflict within the family
- Causing her Grandmothers to lose face by apologising in front of the family in order to end the open conflict

Everything the daughter did would be acceptable in an individualistic culture – even the direct refusal to obey. And her girlfriends even praised her for 'standing up for herself' against oppression. Yet, this is a real values conflict between the individual's rights and harmony of the collective.

Values Conflicts

Mistrust

Shared culture means shared rules of communication and common meaning being ascribed to what is right and what is wrong.

- **Respect:** in one culture may mean being polite when asking questions, in another it may mean not asking questions
- **Honour:** in one culture may mean keeping our word, in another it may mean sacrificing for the sake of the group
- **Eye Contact:** in some cultures this is seen as being truthful during communication, in others rude or even aggressive

All of these examples can create the condition for mistrust to manifest, when there are opposing values systems that drive differing behavioural norms. Opposing values systems can even be perceived as a danger and a threat to a way of life, resulting in strong oppositional reactions to such perceived threats even if objectively it is highly unlikely that feared changes would ever actually happen.

When threatened – the fear response is triggered and this creates a filter that blocks out any information to the contrary as the brain looks for confirmation of what it believes to be the truth. Objectivity goes out the window and trust is destroyed in the process. When this happens it is highly likely that the level of hostility of communication gets ratcheted up, and rather than seeking common ground, seeking to understand from their point of view or reasoning and explaining our own position, we resort to personal attacks, arguing, name calling and indignation – that results in ‘all or nothing’ thinking. Often an individual issue – becomes the basis for judgment of the ‘whole’ of the other person. Such values conflicts are about the way we believe things ‘ought to be’; creating polarisation and a vicious downward cycle of abuse, defensiveness, insults, labels, and harsh words results. Trust is broken.

Now, generally when conflict ends it is because the parties compromise or negotiate some middle ground that each can tolerate. This is relatively straight forward when the issue is about such things as how much money each party should claim from a fixed amount of a settlement, or when different priorities allow trade-offs and integrative solutions.

However, values conflicts are not like that.



Values Conflicts

The Non-Negotiability of Values

Values clashes spring from our most important and deeply held mindsets, beliefs, concerns, and questions about what is acceptable or not. Such choices are binary, not incremental, and they are rarely subject to compromise. If we take an example (**NOTE** – this example may trigger an emotional response – it's real and potentially confronting – and illustrative of what can happen)

- Say I oppose abortion based on my belief that the taking of a life is wrong – then even a ‘few’ abortions, for whatever reason (rape, incest, to save the life of the mother etc.) will still in my mind be wrong and can't be condoned.
- If I am morally consistent in my stance, then capital punishment and even military engagement that takes the lives of others, will also be wrong.

However, if exceptions are made – it would often be in the protection of that same value or one ranked even higher in our values hierarchy. Using the same example, we might concede that abortion is permissible if the life of the mother is at stake, and that this choice balances the loss of a foetus (which might miscarry) against the threat to the life of the mother.

Values conflicts can become extremely emotionally charged and in the most extreme people may even violate their stated value in order to uphold their belief, and be able to justify it in their own minds. Again with the same example – murdering an abortion provider being rationalised as the only way to save the lives of the unborn that would have been lost to legal abortion.



Values Conflicts

The Non-Negotiability of Values

This example, as we know is a very real one, and the positions are often heated and very emotive on both sides of the situation. There is generally little listening nor seeking to understand the 'others' perspective. This is why it does prove a powerful illustration as to why values conflicts are often very difficult to resolve, long lasting, destructive and can create a number of escalating clashes over time. Thus, values conflicts are often "intractable", and are seen as such for a number of reasons:

- The difference in what is deemed important and how these ideas are stated by those caught in such conflict, means its virtually impossible for them to describe the underlying issue in shared terms. Meaning its impossible for any understanding of each other.
- Because the argument is taken from different moral perspectives, there will be disagreement about the significance of issues. (The belief that life begins at the moment of conception is totally irreconcilable with the holding of a debate over when personhood begins)
- The depth of feeling about what matters, makes any negotiation or compromise almost impossible

To make the situation even more complex, in some values clashes, what begins as one issue or conflict, can over time even become irrelevant or secondary to the debate. This is because new grievances arise as a result of actions taken during the on-going dispute. And if it is a moral conflict, actions acceptable to one side will 'prove' to the other side that those 'others' are fools, villains or just downright evil.

Us Them

I Have a pain so mysterious that I shall not name it
My bridges are burnt, i live in hurt. I just can't contain it
I have feelings, i am alive
Although you forget that sometimes
My friends and i, live in lie
Scared of what the truth contains
It could be nice, it could mean death
I fear trauma, therapy, pain

They've written 'pink' in permanent ink on everything i own:

My body's curves, my voices verve
They've engraved it into stone
The word is there on everything i have and everything i had not known

Us. Them

Anonymous Anonymous

Values Conflicts

The Non-Negotiability of Values

Unfortunately when this occurs and there is an evolving centre of conflict which makes the dynamic even more complex and fraught, and efforts at resolution often result in even further conflict and the total breakdown of any connection or relationship between the parties. When the means and intention to resolve generates further conflict, then the original issues can lose their importance as the dispute takes on its own energy and becomes self-perpetuating and self-sustaining, as if it is in fact a living thing.

So this all sounds completely hopeless and depressing. And this is whether you are caught in such a dynamic, or you find your Mentee describing such a circumstance that they want your help to resolve. It is not easy and success may be difficult and in fact impossible to achieve. However there are a couple of things that can be tried:

- Differing values may cause us to avoid contact, or the issue – and we end up ‘walking on eggshells’. This is counterproductive. Disputes do not find resolution or even acceptance and ‘living with’ differences if there is no dialogue.
- Determining whether we are dealing with a real values conflict or a perceived one (generalising by association). The latter provides the opportunity to look for shared values we may hold, beyond the one that is an issue.
- If it is a values conflict, it may be narrower than we believe – if we can look for and mine other commonalities, there will be a reduction on the tendency to generalisations of negative stereotypes. And developing an agreement framework for engagement can be crafted.
- Storytelling. Everyone has a story and using a neutral third party and providing ‘safe space’ for the disputants to tell their story uninterrupted – the how and why, and what the impact of the conflict has been (sacrifices, loss, what needs to be healed)
- Listen to seek to understand through applying empathy – and though our worldview may remain the same, we develop a better understanding of the other
- Reframing - there may be something that sits around the conflict that is not the direct issue itself. Returning our example – ‘That even though we disagree on abortion, we can agree on the fact that violence and the hurting of innocent people isn’t acceptable. And that violence or destruction of people’s livelihoods hurts the cause on both sides’. Can we agree on no more violence