Win-Lose Struggles and Their Costs[1]

Win-lose, in one form or another, appears to be the prevailing strategy for making decisions and resolving conflicts in the church. This is true of local churches, regional church bodies such as Presbyteries, conferences, districts, synods, or dioceses, and it is true of national agency staffs and boards. Without counting the costs of win-lose, church members and leaders have tended to create competitive norms and operating procedures within their organizations.

Confrontation from a fixed position, nonnegotiable demands, attempts by one party to compel another party to do what the first has decided it wants, attempts to take unfair advantage of one's colleagues and peers, use of the filibuster in parliamentary gatherings, pitting group against group and person against person, are all examples of the ways in which win-lose strategies are manifested.

But win-lose struggles have costs and other consequences that, in the long run, are harmful to persons and the church. Some of the characteristics of win-lose struggles are shown below, along with their costs.

A. Characteristics and Costs of Win-Lose Struggles

1. When a conflict starts and a group sets out to win, group cohesion mounts rapidly. People often refer to it as "team spirit." The group closes ranks against the "enemy."

   Cost: Differences of opinion among group members, which can lead to new and better solutions, are no longer tolerated. Decisions cannot be questioned or reexamined. Diversity and disagreement are not allowed. Therefore the most creative problem-solving processes are eliminated. Costly inferior decisions will result.

2. Leadership becomes more concentrated, with the more aggressive or those who express themselves better taking over. The power structure becomes clear and establishes control.

   Cost: Those members who can provide the best leadership and the most skillful

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[1] This essay is adapted from Rensis Likert and Jane Gibson Likert, *New Ways of Managing Conflict*.

processes are often submerged along with the questioning and the sounder thinking which they would foster. This "steamroller" method of dealing with people lays the foundation for serious internal strife which often backfires after the pressures created by the initial conflict subside. This may set the group back seriously in efforts it subsequently may make to become a highly effective working unit.

3. The deliberative processes of the group become accelerated with less and less time taken for deliberative decision making.

   Cost: Disagreements, questioning the advantages of alternative courses of action, diversity in outlook, and other behaviors leading to effective and creative problem-solving are snuffed out as the group concentrates on achieving unanimity rapidly.

4. Judgmental and perceptual distortions occur and become progressively greater. The solution of one's own group is seen as superior; the solution of the other group is seen as inferior. Even when measurable differences in the solutions demonstrate the superiority of one solution over the other, the group fails to perceive and accept them.

   Cost: Groups operate on the basis of pressure and make decisions based on unreality. Heightened conflict eliminates objectivity. Reason is lost.

5. These perceptual distortions are extended to each group's view of the other. Attitudes become increasingly hostile.

   Cost: Confidence and trust disappear. Members of the one's own group are seen more and more favorably, members of the other group--the "enemy"--less and less so.

6. Distortions occur in the intellectual as well as in the perceptual processes. Memory biases occur which magnify the conflict. Differences in position are remembered, commonalties are overlooked or forgotten. Each group understands its own proposal better than that of the other group, even after careful study of the other proposal.

   Cost: These cognitive blind spots prevent people from seeing the problem or the other group accurately. Group members tend to ignore important information.

7. Those representing one group to the other are put under pressure by each group to win at any cost, by parrying, jabbing, and probing for weaknesses in the other's proposal.

Representatives who win are treated as heroes by their group. The losers are often viewed by their own group as "weak" or "traitors."

> ***Cost:*** *A residue of unresolved conflict remains. Hostile, resentful attitudes, especially in the group experiencing the greater defeat, provides a fertile seedbed for the germination and growth of more bitter conflict. Every subsequent situation is viewed through hostile and suspicious eyes. The intentions and motives of the opposing groups are always suspect.*

8. The erroneous perceptions that each group holds of the other are continued and further distorted by the absence of accurate and reassuring communication. Sometimes there is no communication between them. Often what communication does take place is biased.

> ***Cost:*** *Anxieties stimulated by the continuing hostility and lack of communication lead to musings enlarge, exaggerate, and intensify the actual differences and produce even more hostile attitudes. Members of each side feel the need to demonstrate their loyalty by viewing every development with suspicion and by unconsciously exaggerating its adverse significance in discussions with members of their group.*

9. Each side seeks to mobilize all the power and authority available to compel the other party to accept its decision. Coalitions may be formed and alliances established by one or both sides to mobilize more power in support of each side's preferred solution. Every effort is made by each side to give the least and gain the most from its original position.

> ***Cost:*** *Hostile, bitter attitudes intensify between the conflicting parties. This makes it even harder to resolve the conflict constructively.*

B. Conflict is Managed Best in the Most Highly Developed System

Over the years, social and organizational systems have been developing. These have been carefully examined by social scientists. Those organizational systems that promote and exist on the basis of win-lose norms and operating procedures are seen as less socially mature and most costly.

Win-win organizational systems can be developed, even in the church, which provide more effective means of managing conflict. Win-win organizational systems require high levels of interpersonal competence, along with the desire to seek and find a consensus which does not

require any party to the conflict to lose those things which are essential to it.

A period of time is required to build an effective social system and have its full potential ready to use in a difficult, emotion-laden conflict. For this reason, it is desirable to anticipate major crises and create a social system built on win-win norms and operating procedures before the conflict erupts.

The more socially mature the church system, both in its structure and in its interaction processes, the greater is the probability that the conflict will be solved constructively.

<center>QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION</center>

1. When in your church organization have you experienced any of the costs of win-lose struggles?

2. What has been the residue of these struggles in the church? What ill-effects are still being felt?

3. When have you experienced win-win norms and operating procedures at work in your church? What have been their long-term effects?