INTERNAL DYNAMICS:
A CASE STUDY OF THE MULTICULTURAL ALLIANCE (MCA) AKA ALLIANCE

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This is one perspective about a group that has a long history of internal and external dynamics. In the past, as I understand it, the Alliance (and its historical counterparts i.e. the MCA) has often fallen apart not entirely from external pressures but from internal dynamics.

In our group, dynamics of insider-outsider have been so strong that the group has nearly split, to summarize the issue, into at least one major schism across college class standing (senior vs. non-senior). On the one hand, there are seniors with a lot of experience, battle scars, information and cynicism – these constructed what I call the mainstream. On the other hand, there are newer members of the group, all non-seniors, who carried less of these qualities but came with new energy and insights: margins. For weeks, tension built between “old” members and “new” members (from a recent influx). Eventually a meeting came in which nearly half the group (both “old” and “new” members) was prepared to leave after the meeting and never return to the group. A conflict had been brewing and finally emerged in a massive storm yielding positive fruits. From what I have heard, the group in 1994 split for similar reasons, exaggerated by internal race dynamics. With recognition that issues still exist and may divide our group, this paper looks at what helped that meeting finally emerge.

This is not a precise historical account. It is a paper for people to notice and thereby learn from past dynamics. No matter how glorious the days in the past may seem, they were (have been and continue to be) conflict-filled, tension-filled and fear-filled. That does not mean things do not get changed and that the group is not a powerful group; it means that just as we are asking Earlham to step out of its conflict avoidance to deal with reality, so to we need to stay on top of our internal “shit.”

While we did achieve at least one major internal victory after the storm, many of us recognize further conversations needed to happen. However, I want to touch on several lessons we learned to positively address conflicts:

- Margin’s of the group getting together to share experiences;
- Inviting margin voices to share experiences (both historically oppressed groups and margins of the particular group at the time: i.e. “new” people);
- Confirming the margin’s experiences;
- Naming when something feels off (i.e. name the “elephant in the living room”) so all the group knows the rest of the group knows;
- Give permission for tension (listen to it);
- Keep asking the mainstream to respond;
• Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when you are the mainstream, respond!

Each of these emerged in specific ways. It may be interesting to notice that these methods are similar to how Earlham needs to deal with its own issue of diversity. I believe this because the dynamic of the group has mirrored the dynamic of the college. For example, the old timers were accused of acting just like Len Clark, Doug Bennett and Dick Smith in their practice of not sharing information and in not responding to concerns as they were raised.

1) HEARING MARGIN’S EXPERIENCES

Just as people of color need to get together and share their experiences, so margins need to do the same. They need to be reminded that they are not the only ones so that they can articulate their concerns. As they get articulated, one finds additional margins speaking up as they find resonance. Sometimes they are shocked to find that others are also having that experience!

The mainstream can have a role in assisting this by listening and confirming margin’s experiences. It is harder for the mainstream to listen to the margin, because it tends not to be aware of the margin’s experience. However, a positive ally can help balance and give insight to the margins about how the mainstream is dealing with the issue.

• Sharing happened especially via margin’s natural friendships (an important group of three people kept sharing and confirming each other’s experiences).
• While no formal groups developed, informal groups get created that can be opportunity for sharing (i.e. notice carefully the sitting patterns – for a lot of the time it was subconsciously divided).
• Some people from the mainstream, noticing the margins, told individuals who felt isolated to talk to others from the margins and gave suggestions (the mainstream can be allies).
• As awareness increased, mixed conversations with mainstream and margin members occurred, giving insight to both. Some of these conversations were extremely hot, but personal relationships often held the container. They often, although not always, resulted in an increase in compassion and awareness for those involved.

2) NAMING WHEN SOMETHING FEELS OFF (GROUP TENSION) / GIVE PERMISSION FOR TENSION

During a meeting in which a storm hit, numerous people were feeling that some dynamic was definitely affecting the meeting. An explicit statement was made that did nothing more than acknowledge: “There’s something going on here. I don’t know what it is. But I just wanted to say I feel it.”

Group tension is not what hurts groups; not dealing with the tension hurts them. Therefore, dealing with the conflict - what Arnold Mindell calls “Sitting in the Fire” - is the only way to deal with group conflicts.

• Just notice the conflict objectively – don’t judge it; give it some space to be talked about.
3) **KEEP GETTING THE MAINSTREAM TO RESPOND**

After the tension was named in a larger meeting, several margins quickly began talking. After several minutes, the mainstream had still not said anything. Eventually, a person from the margins spoke up and asked the mainstream to respond.

Where dialogue begins, it is an opportunity for the mainstream to not accept its “responsability” (a term from Rus Funk) by personalizing, deflecting, denying, or ignoring the structural reality. For the mainstream, then, it is important to stay in the moment and not evade but truly respond. This requires a level of vulnerability.

- Asking the mainstream to respond.
- If you are the mainstream: respond! Think of when you are a margin – what are the things that would be useful to hear (stay honest – margins will see through facades).

4) **LET THE FIGHT HAPPEN!**

Particularly in a place like Earlham that emphasizes middle-class values of processing conversations and “valuing everyone’s voice,” there can be a tendency to “code” conflicts instead of openly dealing with them. That is, while everyone knows a conflict is occurring beneath the surface, there may be no safe space to actually have the conflict. A language is built around the conflict (“coding”) without ever naming the conflict (i.e. people talking about race only via implication and never naming race). So create, via personal relationships (if they don’t exist build them!), a safe space for the fight to happen. Safety does not mean everyone must be comfortable!

- Not letting the conflict have time to be addressed often occurs when we stick to an agenda and do not let the agenda reflect or get crafted by the deeper, even more immediate, conflicts that may be developed.
- Creating of a safe space through a lot of intentional interpersonal relationships, especially between the mainstream and margins.

**CONCLUSION**

An organization fighting against a structure is bound to come up against conflict. It is important that when conflicts emerge they are done so with awareness and compassion. The margins are the growth point for a group and the mainstream offers a structure to a group. As we learn how to play our roles we can also recognize our role – and other’s role – in the Earlham structure we are working to change.
Two Roles in Conflict

Mainstream and margins are two roles that often appear in group conflicts. The mainstream is part of the group that has its interest’s recognized; the margin, however, is not part of this universalized interest. Margins are any sub-group (or sub-groups) whose voice is not recognized by the group. In every group, there are mainstream and margins.

For example, in a group that communicates by talking loud, people who tend to be quiet may go left unheard. The people who tend to talk loud, in this case, are playing the “mainstream” role while the quiet people are the “margins.” Both roles are important. The mainstream offers commonality (such as an accepted way of communicating) to the group; the margins offer growth for new behaviors, insights and understandings.

At any time, we might be one role or another (or playing several roles at once) – what is important is for us to recognize which role we are at any time. Each role can make moves to a resolution of conflict – integrating the margin into the mainstream through expanding what defines the mainstream.

Mainstream
- Has interests universalized
- Clueless to the margin and their experience
- Identity taken as assumption
- Unconscious to its privileges and rank

Negative Approaches to Conflict
- Staying unengaged (does not need to deal with issue)
- Will personalize (hearing the individual, not the margins)
- Will require safety/comfort before entering into dialogue
- Will evade structures (i.e. “I don’t see race, I just see human beings”)

Positive Approaches to Conflict
- Listen, listen, listen!
- Staying engaged
- Try to understand the margin’s experience and what it can teach

Margin
- Naturally conscious (at least subconsciously) of power differences
- Has experiences and insights not recognized by the mainstream
- Growth for a group always occurs at the margins

Negative Approaches to Conflict
- Avoidance (especially due to fear of sanctions)
- Isolation (“I’m the only one.”)
- Accept internalized oppression
- Get stuck into an identity of oppression

Positive Approaches to Conflict
- Remember they are worthy of justice
- Don’t trust the isolation: there is never a margin of one!
- Grow in compassion for the mainstream’s lack of power because of its cluelessness