

The Leaf of Goals: The use of a metaphor in conflict management

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Abstract

Much conflict, as often within a not-for-profit organizational environment, occurs not because parties are disputing over property, but because they have differing views about the goals they are trying to achieve and how this might be done. As part of the development of an alternative methodology for causal layered analysis, it was discovered that part of this methodology could be used in such situations to clarify and articulate the extent of a conflict. The concept of the Leaf of Goals was developed: similar to goal hierarchies, means-ends laddering, and scheme theory, but combining this principle with program logic modelling to establish a path through which objectives might be achieved. It was found that if this were done visually, using a wall-mounted display in a workshop situation, that interests of particular parties could be localized in that display. Different parties tended to emphasize objective in different sections of the leaf, and it was often found that some apparent conflicts could be reduced to differences in emphasis, rather than differences in desired outcomes.

The method is illustrated by two case studies: one with a legal aid NGO, and the other with a group of service clubs. In the latter case, the process used led to a realization that different clubs could take different routes to their preferred outcomes, and that their initial conflict had been unnecessary. Though this method cannot be expected to work for zero-sum conflicts, it should have application within broad-based organizations in which members share some common interests.

Introduction

This paper describes the development of a method useful in the management of conflict between groups of people – provided that their goals are not diametrically opposed. The method is derived from combining two other methods: the Consensus Group Technique and (in particular) the Leaf of Goals: a technique developed for a slightly different purpose in the author’s doctoral thesis, which developed a new approach to scenario planning. In both cases, the management or reduction of conflict was not a primary purpose of the development of the method, which was designed more for use in qualitative research. However, both have proved to be useful tools in situations of minor conflict.

The Consensus Group Technique

In the late 1980s the author began to develop a participative research method eventually labelled the Consensus Group Technique (List, 2001). This was intended as an alternative to the focus group, more suitable for use by relatively untrained researchers. This method is in some ways the opposite of a survey: with a survey, the questions are fixed, and the output is the number of people giving each possible answer. With a consensus group, the percentage is fixed: the wording of a statement is varied until either a threshold of consensus is achieved (around 80%) or the statement is modified to maximize disagreement (with close to 50% agreeing and disagreeing). In most of the several hundred such groups conducted so far, the great majority of statements voted on eventually reach consensus – since the goal is to identify similarities rather than differences.

After publishing the first account of this method (List, 1997) the author was at first surprised to hear from a development agency based in Kenya that they had been using the technique to manage conflicts between rival warlords and tribes in Somalia. This had not been the original intention, but on reflection it was obvious that the format could be used in this way. Using consensus groups for research, the purpose was not to build consensus but to identify the extent to which it existed in the population. In conflict management – provided that disputing parties were evenly represented – the statements from the groups could be used for effectively the same purpose: to clarify the areas of disagreement.

The Leaf of Goals

The other component in this conflict management is the need for a structure in which to place the statements arising from the consensus group technique. For this purpose, the Leaf of Goals is used. The concept was originally derived from the observation (found in the development of the consensus group technique; List, 2001): that the more general an objective, the more participants agreed with it. Conversely, the more specific and local an objective, the more preferences were voiced.

To simplify, human action could be divided into “push” and “pull” factors. The pull involved aiming towards goals and objectives, while the push involved circumstances impelling people from a present state to a small number of immediately visible future states. The resulting hierarchical branching structure can be shown in the shape of a leaf, thus:

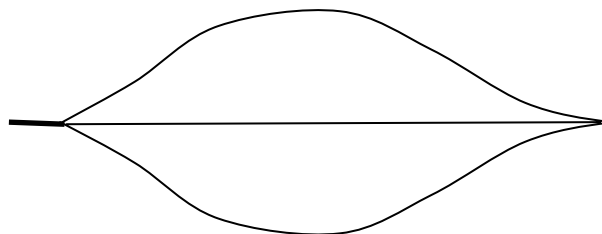


FIGURE 1. THE LEAF OF GOALS

With time moving from left to right, the leaf shape demonstrates that at the present moment (on the left) few options are immediately available. Though Margaret Thatcher famously stated “There is no alternative”, there is almost always at least the alternative of doing something or doing nothing (though perhaps being destroyed thereby) – so the leaf begins with two or more paths. Each of those alternatives in turn has several alternatives, and the possibilities for branching increase with the time horizon.

Moving toward the right-hand side of the leaf, there is perhaps a single overriding objective – if only “to survive well” (as Ackoff, 1974, p61 expresses it) but at least several ways in which this final objective might be reached. Each of those can be reached in several different ways, and so on.

At some point in the future, if the focus remains on the goals towards which the organization is being pulled by its own desires, the branching of specific actions must begin to decrease. However, a moment’s thought will reveal that the “push” and the “pull” are different kinds of concepts: the push is a specific action, while the pull is a desired state. Thus the leaf shape, though a useful metaphor, is a little misleading; a laterally twisted leaf, introducing a third dimensions, might be more realistic.

In the literatures of management, evaluation, and psychology, there are several characterizations of the right-hand side of the leaf. These include the hierarchy of objectives (Granger, 1964; Brews and Hunt 1999) the outcomes hierarchy (Duignan, 2004), means-ends laddering (Reynolds and Gutman, 1988), and process tracing (Crawford and Kearton, 2002). Other techniques traverse the entire leaf, but in a straight line. These include the Logical Framework (McCaul, 2000) and program logic modelling (Funnell, 1997).

As demonstrated in cognitive psychology by the scheme theory of Eckblad (1981) and the hope theory of Snyder (concisely summarized in Snyder 2002), and in social anthropology by Werner and Schoepfle (1987), each action (push) and each goal (pull) can be almost infinitely subdivided. This incorporates Koestler’s (1967) concept of the holon: a unit that can be indefinitely divided or joined – a concept which has proved very useful in both systems theory (Richardson and Courtney, 2004) and futures studies (e.g. Voros, 2005).

In the standard “synoptic model” of planning (according to Brews and Hunt, 1999), planning is a rational process, in which end-goals are determined first, followed by the development of strategies to reach those goals, and tactics to attain those strategies. In contrast, the Leaf of Goals concept shows that one can begin at both ends of the leaf, with the objective being to align possible actions with desired goals. On inspecting the detailed structure of some leaves, it will be seen that the veins are not isolated (in the hierarchical pattern of say, rivers and streams in a catchment area) but form a network – more like a roadmap, with many routes between towns. Translating this metaphor back to praxis, it is a kind of weaving, rather than a hierarchy: various means contribute to various ends. Again, there are (almost always) multiple ways to achieve given ends.

The practical implication of this for conflict management is that, provided the key decision makers can be gathered into a single room, shared goals can be identified, and consensus paths back through the woven network toward the left hand side of the leaf might be found.

It should be emphasized that there is nothing particularly earth-shattering about the Consensus Group Technique and the Leaf of Goals. It is simply that the juxtaposition of the two seems to be a practical method of resolving conflicts between social groups – when those conflicts are not so severe that the two opposing groups have nothing in common, that they are willing to meet, and that they want to resolve the conflict.

Case studies

The method is illustrated by two case studies: one with a group of service clubs, and the other (a partial case study) from the US-Iraq war of 2003. Both were case studies from the author's recently completed doctoral thesis, which involved seven case studies with different types of organization. The purpose of the thesis was to develop an alternative approach to scenario planning, and a wide variety of cases was sought – of organizations, of communities, and of concepts. For the purpose of comparison, two case studies were sought for each of a number of criteria, and one of those criteria was for cases involving a high level of conflict. In the case of the service clubs, the conflict was polite and internal. In the case of the US-Iraq war, the opposite was true.

Case study of service clubs

A category of organization often known as “service clubs” became popular in developed countries, particularly around the 1960s. There are several very well known associations of clubs, as well as a variety of lesser-known clubs. Many of the best-known ones originated in the USA, and were taken up in other western countries, including Australia. Examples include Apex Clubs, Kiwanis, Lions, Probus, Rotary, and Zonta. To some extent, more traditional clubs such as Freemasons and Oddfellows also fall into this category.

The shared model for such clubs is a group of business people (often small business proprietors) in a town or suburb that form a club, typically with 50 to 100 members. The members meet once a week, perform some ceremonial duties (“club tradition”) which have the effect of building a sense of team membership, and work towards projects that serve the local community. The members expect to receive no direct benefits; in fact these clubs can be quite expensive to belong to, with annual fees as well as ongoing costs.

The implicit offset to the cost of membership is the networking – the unstated principle that members of these clubs should deal with other members. To that end, some of the clubs prescribe that each member should be from a different occupation. This not only avoids competition between members, but enables them to exchange services with one another. Thus for many members the business-related advantages of networking outweigh the costs of membership, and working together at weekends on community service projects aids in the creation of informal social networks.

At least, that was how it worked until the 1980s, after which the model began to be less attractive. For many of these groups of clubs, membership peaked around twenty years ago, and has been declining ever since then. However the decline has often been so slow that it is not obvious except on a very long-term graph, particularly when there are random upturns in occasional years. Thus it is possible for members and officials to deny the downward trend by making statements such as “but last year our membership increased.” The turnover of officials is encouraged (e.g. with new presidents annually), so that very few have a data-based view of long-term trends. Though many members remain in the same club for decades, and thus have a qualitative perception of membership decline, the human mind is adept at ignoring unwelcome data (e.g. Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982).

One reason for the membership decline is that with the relative decline of small business in relation to large corporate entities, and the increasing specialization of occupations, members have less to offer one another through networking. In the 1950s a plumber, electrician, and carpenter (for example) might have formed a useful alliance, but in the 1990s a web developer, a podiatrist, and a call centre manager (to name a few recently established occupations) might have little in common in terms of business interests.

One consequence of the slow decline in membership was that the average age of members and duration of membership rose, and they became “hardened” in their traditions, with the result that new members were often mystified or repelled by the traditions, and soon departed. This was a vicious circle that served to decrease membership and increase the average age of members.

Another factor in the decline of service clubs may have been the increase in special-purpose local NGOs. In the 1960s one of the few outlets for people wanting to do volunteer work was a service club, but by the 1990s the explosion of specific NGOs meant that a much wider range was available. These included environmental groups, advocates of more democracy in various forms, and a wide range of health-related groups. Consequently, with more choices available, the pool of potential recruits for local service clubs (most of which are very demanding on members' term, leaving little opportunity to belong to multiple clubs) was diminished.

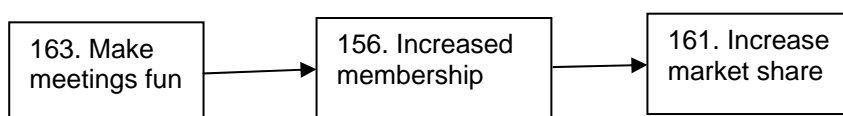
It was in this context that a group of service clubs in South Australia (referred to henceforth as SC) was looking to carry out some scenario planning, to consider its possible future in the light of this slow decline in membership and in perceived relevance. I was asked to work with SC, facilitating some scenario planning sessions for them. Over five workshop sessions, each with 20 to 25 officials from many of the clubs in Adelaide, we developed a set of scenario pathways that the clubs might follow over the next 10 years or so.

In the first workshop, all participants were asked to list the goals that they wanted their clubs to achieve. The 21 participants listed a total of 202 goals. These were then reduced by grouping, using a variant of Kawakita's KJ method (Mizuno, 1988), into a matrix of six scopes by five stages. Scope here referred to the application of that goal (e.g. individual club, group of clubs, entire organization) and thus what level of entity would be able to fulfil that goal. The five stages referred to the interdependency of goals on the leaf, with stage 1 being something that could be accomplished without prerequisites (the stem of the leaf) and stage 5 being a result of all preceding stages (the point of the leaf).

In practical terms, each goal was written on a small adhesive note, and these notes were rearranged on a large sheet of paper until all participants were satisfied that the structure contained no logical errors. Connecting lines were then drawn to illustrate prerequisites and consequences of each goal. This can be illustrated by taking a few goals at random:

- 156. Increased membership.
- 161. Increase market share among local service clubs, e.g. contributing membership for the cover projects and community services to raise effectiveness at club level.
- 163. Making meetings fun to diminish absenteeism.

The logical sequence is:



That is, 163 was a prerequisite for 156, which in turn was a prerequisite for 161. But in fact, nothing is ever as simple as that. Accomplishing each goal in practice would have several prerequisites and several consequences. To avoid an enormous tangle of arrows on the large sheet of paper, only the most important prerequisites and consequences can be shown.

As usual with the Leaf of Goals, most nominated goals fell into the middle range, with few at the left-hand side (satisfiable immediately with a little action) and few at the right-hand side (long-term goals that depended on multiple consequences). This typical structure led to the naming of the process as a "leaf."

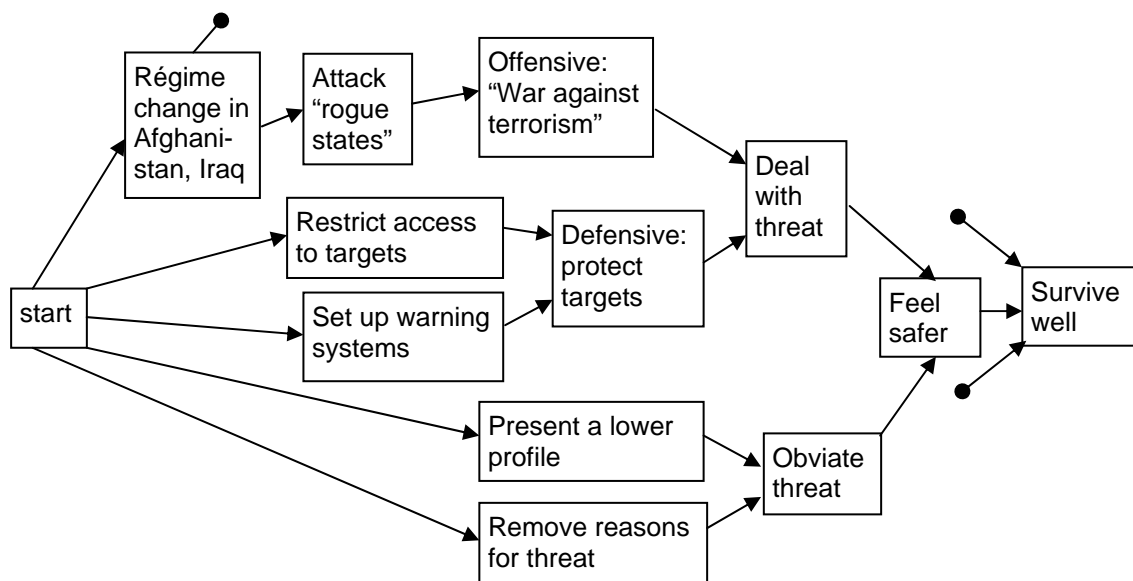
Interlude: Case study of 2003 US-Iraq war

For reasons of confidentiality, SC does not want its Leaf of Goals published. Also, the full diagram would not fit in this report. So here is a simplified Leaf of Goals for the US government in its pursuit of the then-possible war in Iraq, as drawn in February 2002, a month before the invasion began.

Pointed arrows indicate causality, while blobs at the end of short lines indicate “other causes” and “other effects.”

The diagram is more readily understood if read from right to left, with each right-pointing arrow asking “How can this be made to happen?” For example: “How can we survive well?” Answer: “By feeling safer” (plus other factors not relevant here, indicated by the two blob-tailed arrows.)

Just as the diagram moves from right to left – from desired end-state to intermediate state – by asking “How?” one can move from left to right by asking “Why?” For example, “Why should we want to feel safer?” is answered by the effect arrow on the right of that box: the feeling of safety is one component of Ackoff’s “surviving well” which can be used as an all-purpose ultimate goal when no other is specified.



Return to case study of service clubs

However in the SC case, there was no need to adopt the rather fuzzy “survive well” because the participants were present and able to be asked about SC’s ultimate goal. Therefore, an exercise set early in this set of workshops involved defining what “wild success” would be, for SC. The question posed to participants was “What would be the characteristics that would make it successful beyond the wildest dreams of the average member?”

It turned out that there was a very high level of consensus on this issue, so it was able to be used as an ultimate goal. If, for example, there had not been consensus, and two rival camps of “wild success” had developed, the exercise would have had to be repeated to find the ultimate goal. However (as usually seems to occur) consensus existed simply because of the context of the study. Since members had joined SC knowing of its principles, it would have been most unlikely not to reach agreement on SC’s ultimate goal. The “wild success” involved elements such as enthusiastic, growing membership, a feeling of satisfaction that progress was being made in solving social problems, solid outcomes from SC projects, such as improving life expectancies among indigenous Australians, and widespread credit given to SC for helping to achieve such outcomes.

Though there was strong consensus on this “wild success”, there was very little consensus on how it could be attained. Early in the workshop series, though everybody was very polite and restrained, conflict became apparent, between several groups of members. On the one hand there were the conservatives, who wanted to keep things as they had always been (many of these people had been members for several decades), and either denied or were not worried about the decline in membership. At another extreme were the “transformationists” who wanted to move the clubs away from

their traditional role in providing public amenities toward a more international focus, specializing in improving health and education systems in developing countries. Between those two was a third group, labelled the “adaptationists,” focusing more on issues such as introducing corporate membership: they wanted to rejuvenate the clubs, but with a less radical focus than the transformationists.

Originally, four workshops had been scheduled, but by the end of the fourth, there was still no consensus about desirable paths to the future. Accordingly, an additional workshop was added. An important factor about SC is that it is highly decentralized. Though a hierarchy exists for administrative purposes, each local club is quite independent. As long as it complies with a minimal set of operational rules, it is free to do what it likes. Thus it was not possible for the central South Australian body to order the clubs to modernize; even a request would have been counter-productive. We therefore developed a set of options: three clear paths that any club could follow, labelled stability, adaptation, and transformation. Each club was asked simply to choose one of these paths, or a specified variant of one, and to notify the other clubs of its choice. A transition like this was then expected.

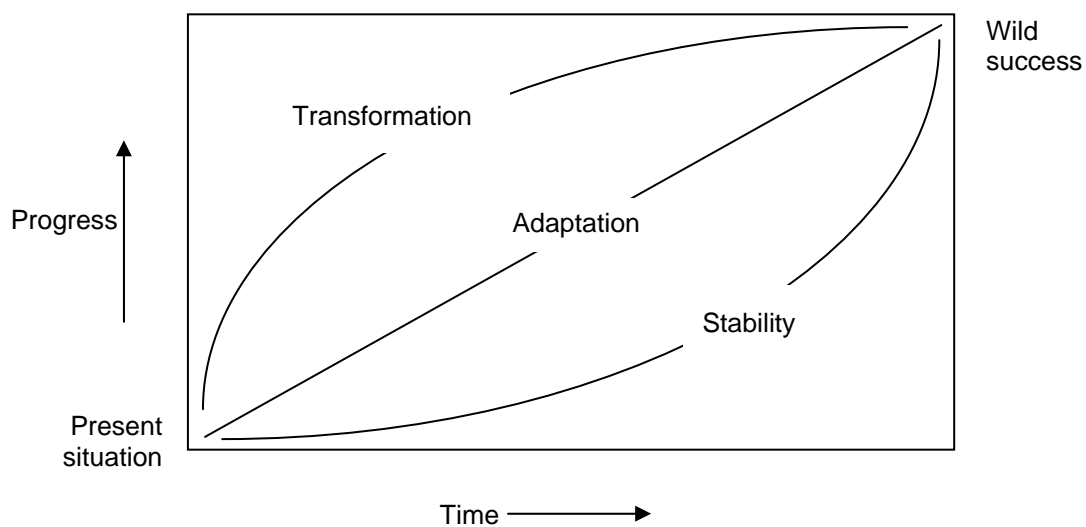


FIGURE 2: THREE ROUTES TO “WILD SUCCESS”

In other words, it was expected that the conservative path, here labelled Stability, would involve little or no change now, but a steeper pace of change in some years’ time. The radical path, labelled Transformation, would see more changes immediately, but less later. The central path, labelled Adaptation would involve a steady rate of change. All those present accepted the above diagram (Figure 2) as reasonable.

Essentially what happened here, in terms of the Leaf of Goals, was that each of the three groups discerned a different set of paths through the leaf to the end-goal that all had agreed on. Though there was some suggestion that if they began to approach that particular form of “wild success,” they might again begin to disagree about its details. No matter which path a club chose, it might eventually reach something approaching “wild success.” (At least, that was the intention of the senior officials in the state office, though privately some conservative participants were disagreeing about the necessity of a steep curve of change in a few years’ time. The conservatives were probably under-represented in the workshops, as those who saw no need for change would have been less likely to attend. Thus this group was outnumbered, and reticent in making public arguments for maintaining their status quo.)

Thus the conflict was resolved through offering multiple solutions. What had originally seemed to be a win-lose situation turned out not to be that, because there existed hypotheses about different routes

to the end goal that participants agreed were plausible, even if they did not themselves believe the other routes would be effective.

This study took place in late 2004. On last checking with SC, a few months ago, some clubs have enthusiastically embraced the transformational path, those seeking adaptation have made a little progress, but in some cases run up against the international SC rules (e.g. about corporate membership), and the conservative clubs have basically done nothing. One of the most conservative clubs of all, and the largest, has reportedly lost 10% of its members since 2004.

Conclusions

In the case of the service clubs, using the Leaf of Goals technique made it clear to participants that a conflict they had at first viewed as a zero-sum exercise – that if some won, others must lose – turned out to have other alternatives. It showed them that a conflict could usefully be diverted into a multiple-futures approach that involved trying different approaches to the attainment of a shared long-term goal, and comparing the effectiveness of those approaches.

In the case of the Iraq war of 2003, a Leaf of Goals was constructed, from the US point of view, purely to illustrate the goal structure. However it seems unlikely that even if the US and Iraqi governments could have been sat down to negotiate, they could have agreed on common goals at a broad enough level to fulfil them separately without conflict.

This observation points to the fact that the Leaf of Goals in conflict management is best suited to dealing with low levels of conflict: situations in which the disputing parties share enough high-level goals and can define space in which they can both operate without conflict. Nevertheless, there are many such situations of minor conflict – particularly within organizations – and the Leaf of Goals in such circumstances can at the very least be an effective method of clarifying differences between parties. Constructing a Leaf of Goals is in itself insufficient: it will not be useful for conflict management unless multiple paths through that leaf can be defined, and those paths do not themselves conflict. The method can normally be worked through in one half-day session, though if the participants are particularly argumentative (as found in another case study, not described here) it can take several sessions. This method cannot be expected to work for zero-sum conflicts; it is likely to apply best within broad-based organizations in which members share key objectives but differ on how those may be attained.

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