

## CAVER CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Evelyn Bradshaw

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Caver conflict has inevitably arisen within the caving community. Because of the nature of this activity, its appeal is limited as compared with popular environmental movements or other non-governmental organizations that serve a broad spectrum of interests. Many of those who choose caving as a major hobby value its eclectic nature which makes them one of an elite few able to function well in the caving environment. Sometimes they have held membership in larger organizations where they perceived the path to leadership is very selective and provides no place for their talents, whatever those are. For them caving offers a unique chance for self-fulfillment. Often they may not admit even to themselves how jealous they are of their position in the caving community and how desirous they are of preserving that position. It becomes a hidden agenda which underlies their professed goals of study, conservation, and enjoyment of caves.

In one book written on human behavior (Cornelis B. Bakker and Marianne K. Bakker-Rabdau, *No Trespassing! Explorations in Human Territoriality*, San Francisco, Chandler & Sharp, 1973), the authors suggest that we all establish our own personal territories (our private domain) and seek to defend them against usurpation by others. Such a territory is an area where the individual "has special expertise, shows initiative, and takes responsibility; in other words, where one has control." (Bakker) This is a fact of life. Understanding this can help us to deal with others so as to respect each other's territorial needs. Only rarely does the situation involve a person with pathological problems who is unable to adjust.

Another relevant book (Roger Fisher and William Ury of the Harvard Negotiation Project, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, New York, Penguin Books, 1983) discusses some of the processes by which conflict situations may be resolved. We are told to separate the people involved from the problem and to identify our basic goals. We can recognize people problems and deal with them separately (a person may have financial pressures or feel insecure due to educational deficiencies). But which of our goals are negotiable? Which are not and we may entertain revising them for the sake of conflict resolution?

Are our non-negotiable goals incompatible with one another? Can we analyze these goals to discover where there is a commonality of interest, and work from that base to develop conflict resolution?

Somewhat similar processes were described by John Wilson at the 1990 NSS Convention presentation and workshop on Caver Conflict Resolution. He suggested one first define one's highest values and then work through four stages in an attempt to resolve the conflict. Each stage requires slightly more effort. The levels are: going by

established rules, seeking agreements, using objective comparisons to develop a resolution, or if none of these is successful, making both objective and subjective comparisons. While his outline is replete with 64 words from the social science field, the approach, once interpreted in lay language, is a valid one. It is similar to that of the Fisher Ury book.

The specific conflict with which the NSS Internal Organizations Committee has had to deal over the years involves factionalism within grottos. (It may sometimes occur within any caving unit, be it a conservation task force, a region, a section, etc., but the history on which we will draw here comes from grottos in the NSS.) At one point the conflict was so bitter that the Board of Governors added specific prohibition of more than one grotto in a given area to its official policy on internal organizations. This approach was an attempt to establish rules to handle conflict (John Wilson's first level). This technique only exacerbated the underlying problems and was later revised so as to discourage but not prohibit multiple grottos in an area.

We cannot prove it (after all, how can you determine what an individual's hidden agenda are), but we believe that underlying most factionalism within grottos are personality conflicts. These may spring from the territoriality of some strong individuals in the grotto. One caver who is associated with the founding of the grotto and who has shaped its activities along lines which utilize his or her talents and proclivities is threatened by an equally dynamic newcomer who wants to initiate some new directions for the group. If each digs in and fights for his or her program without thought of compromise, the likely result is either the emergence of a new rival grotto or the departure from the organized caving community of some if not all of the faction which loses out.

In a fairly large metropolitan area, the emergence of a new rival grotto may not be catastrophic for NSS. The caving population may be able to support more than one grotto and individuals enjoy the option of different meeting locations and times. If the fight for leadership is not too bitter nor too lengthy the two (or more) grottos may within a reasonable period of time co-exist happily and join together for many events. Meanwhile, they are able to pursue those activities dear to each independently.

Especially in smaller communities, the end result of a grotto split and chartering of second grotto may be one of several scenarios. All reflect the fact that there are not enough cavers in the area to support more than one strong grotto. Sometimes one of the two grottos becomes defunct within a short period of time, or maintains only a phantom existence on paper. A happier result is when the two grottos reunite after a while. In this case they often choose a new, third name for the merged entity, to avoid giving the impression that either grotto is the "winner" in the conflict.

During the period of separate existence, there may be a number of minor unpleasantnesses. If one grotto schedules an event of general interest on the night when the other grotto regularly meets, it will be seen as a deliberate affront. There may be rivalries in membership recruiting, in conservation efforts, in public relations. The public does not see why two caving clubs should be squabbling in this way, and the net public relations for NSS will be negative.

An obvious question is how a difference between factions in a grotto can be resolved before it leads to separation. The smaller the local caving population, the more important it is to nip the bud before it bursts. The process for conflict resolution, however, is likely to be the same regardless of the size of the caving community.

Where there is a large caving community, the dominant grotto may be well advised to consider establishing satellite meeting groups with one executive committee, rather than allowing a formal split into two or more independent grottos. This will insure coordination of major efforts from the beginning. At the same time, ambitious cavers may be able to gain the satisfaction they need as leaders within a satellite group. In this scenario, leaders may be able to develop more appreciation for one another's talents.

One cannot overemphasize the importance of recognizing one another's talents. People all tend to perform better when they know that their performance is appreciated. The utter klutz when it comes to the underground scene (forgets essential gear, is forever overestimating what s/he can do on ropes or climbing over breakdown, constantly makes tactless comments) may possibly have some redeeming features (is generous with equipment, gets on well with local board of supervisors and/or landowners, could help put out a newsletter, or MC the annual banquet). Remember it was a common interest that brought everyone in the first place: a love of the underground.

While we value highly our own personal territory, can't we give up some of what we perceive as our territory and actually gain as much as we lose? Our circle of caving friends may actually increase when we relinquish a specific responsibility to a challenger eager to participate and capable of handling that particular responsibility. Can we develop opportunities for challengers to get the training they need (e.g., rescue techniques, workshops on photography underground, etc. so that they can share leadership responsibilities?

Involvement of grotto members in regional and national events may also help to avoid factionalism. (A notable exception to this is where the same split on principle is drawn at all levels.) Usually getting to know other cavers from different areas gives one a less parochial view of activities and goals. You realize that we all share the same problems and concerns. When you discuss a particular situation in your grotto that bothers you, you may find another grotto has discovered a way to deal with it (or may have tried a solution that didn't work).

One benefit of a caving trip is the opportunity for fellowship underground. When you are crawling in mud, you are all brothers and sisters. It doesn't matter that one has a Ph.D. in chemistry and teaches at the university while another graduated from the college of hard knocks and mends Volkswagens. In the face of danger and discomfort, you really get to know one another and to appreciate the real person.

Before any grotto member considers starting a rival grotto, the Internal Organizations Committee strongly recommends that attempts be made to reconcile differences, based on the commonality of interest in speleology.