Conflict can be built into our organizations

The elder made clear his opposition to the motion.

"When a girl had her moon she was no longer a child", he said. "When a young man had children he was no longer a youth, he was fully a man with all the rights and responsibilities of being a man."

Prior to the industrial revolution a child became an adult soon after puberty in every culture. By the time a child was thirteen or fourteen he or she had all the basic skills needed to function in society. Society became more complex. The period of time needed for education before one was considered ready to raise a family was extended. Europeans invented "youth" to be that time when a person was no longer a child but not yet ready to be fully adult. Initially a youth was someone aged 14 to 17 or 18.

The National Association of Friendship Centers established a youth wing, age 14 - 24, to train future leaders in the friendship center movement. Now that core of youth leaders, nearing 25, wanted the age extended to 29.

These youth said they still had a role to play in training younger youth. They said the federal government's definition of youth included 29 year olds for job creation programs and this constitutional amendment would just make friendship centers consistent with that definition.

A group of 18 and 19 year olds joined the elder in speaking against the motion. Their sense was that if a group of 25 to 29 year olds held leadership positions in the youth organization there would be fewer positions for them. For them, training was in the doing, not in the hearing about it.

I also agreed with the elder. A 20 year old is fully an adult, physically and mentally. The only reason for calling that person a "youth" is if that person is going thru a training period preparing for leadership in the "adult" organization. Once the training is complete, the vision of that new leader expands. Competition arises between younger leaders and older ones over aims and resources. The younger organization becomes impatient and militant. The organization of "oldsters" becomes self-righteous and defensive. Extending the youth age to 29 has resulted in eventual civil war in numerous organizations in Europe and Canada. It is better to resolve differences in vision in other ways.

Organizations that divide themselves by gender, race, age or geography are setting themselves up for such conflict. Some conflict is inevitable, indeed, if handled well, can be healthy. Too much conflict can be destructive. Organizations would do well to structure themselves to maximize ways of working together cooperatively. There is now a whole branch of psychology dealing with conflict prevention and resolution within organizations.

In healthy organizations younger leaders are encouraged to occupy leadership positions when they have the skills to do so. This means that older, established leaders have to be prepared to

move on. In some cases the leadership base can be expanded. In other cases older leaders can find new roles mentoring the younger. Eventually some of them may become elders.

The elder at the microphone was finishing his remarks. "If this motion passes then next year I will return with another constitutional amendment", he said. "That amendment will be to increase the age of the youth to 72".

I guess the delegates did not want the elder leading their youth organization. The amendment was overwhelmingly defeated.