

A Brief Overview of Conflict Resolution Principles

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Analysts of conflict start with the belief that, in most situations, people do the best they can with the skills and resources they have available. A major purpose of conflict resolution as a discipline is to enable people to develop new skills and resources so the cycle of cause-and-effect which so often lies at the heart of destructive conflict may be broken. The starting point is an understanding of conflict and conflict resolution that goes beyond traditional approaches taken in the past toward international relations and state security.

The following summary of principles is adapted from an address by the late James H. Laue to a conference on "dialogues on Conflict Resolution: Bridging Theory and Practice", held in July 1992 in Washington, D.C. Dr. Laue was then President of the Centre for International Understanding in St. Louis, Missouri, as well as Lynch Professor of Conflict Resolution at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.A. Andrew Acland, who assisted in the adaptation of these remarks, is a Centre Fellow and director of Acland and Associates, an independent organization in the U.K. working in conflict resolution training and mediation.

(1) **Conflict Defined** Conflict can be defined as escalated competition between two or more parties, each of whom aims to gain advantage — in power, resources, interests, values, or fulfillment of needs — over the other party or parties. At least one of the parties believes that the conflict is over a set of mutually incompatible goals.

Conflict is natural and inevitable. It is, in fact, a symptom of the need for change, and it can be a creative means by which societies and communities evolve. So, conflict itself is not the problem; the problem is destructive conflict which inflates the costs of evolutionary change and obscures its benefits.

(2) **Conflict Resolution through Joint Problem-Solving.** True and full resolution of a conflict occurs only through negotiation or some other form of joint problem-solving process involving the parties to the conflict — and, not, in any lasting or ultimate form, through military action, control, coercion, "blue ribbon" panels, or expert advice. Some of those approaches may lead to conflict termination, but not to resolution in the sense that underlying issues are addressed and a sustainable agreement capable of self-implementation is reached.

Negotiation in the broadest - and best - sense is a patterned exchange of facts, ideas, and promises between two or more parties with the aim of developing a mutually satisfactory outcome to a problem or conflict.

(3) **Negotiation as a Political Act** Negotiation itself is a political act set within a series of ongoing political relations between the parties. It does not occur away from political influences — and it does not necessarily mean that a conflict has ended or is about to end, only that the parties have at least tacitly agreed to change the venue and pattern of their disputing behavior for a period.

A constructive process of negotiation becomes much more than haggling in the bazaar or horse trading in the market place. At its best it can be a process of value in itself which educates those concerned and increases their capacity to deal with each other in the future.

(4) Variations in Conflict Resolution Processes. There are many variations of and processes surrounding negotiated problem-solving. One such variation is that between positional bargaining and interest-based bargaining.

There also is a major distinction between a competitive approach and a problem-solving approach. A competitive approach to negotiation or bargaining assumes the parties have different needs and are basically independent of one another, and it also assumes the usefulness of adversarial or debating processes. In contrast, a problem-solving approach proceeds from a belief that a cooperative process is more likely to produce good outcomes than a competitive process — and it strives to uncover the basic non-negotiable needs of the parties and to remove the obstacles to finding a mutually acceptable outcome.

(5) Conflict Outcomes: Resolution/Management/Settlement. True conflict resolution is significantly different from conflict management or conflict settlement. Conflict management refers to processes that regulate conflict behavior, including violence, and can be a necessary stage along the path to resolution. Conflict settlement involves developing arrangements or procedures for dealing with specific problems or issues so life can go on — that is “settling things”, at least temporarily.

Full resolution, by joint agreement, satisfies the underlying needs and interests of the conflicting parties, and does not sacrifice any of their genuinely important values. And it is not really resolution unless the agreement is self-implementing. If agreements have to be enforced, they may be managed, settled, planned, or controlled, but these differ from resolution. The ideal outcome of a successful conflict resolution process — all too rarely achieved - is that the agreement will remain sustainable regardless of how the power conditions may change around it.

(6) Roles in Conflict Resolution. There are many and varied roles in the conflict resolution process. Mediating is not the only one, although the distinction between an advocate or negotiator and that of a mediator is one of the most critical and often most difficult to understand in our field.

A negotiator is a representative of a party in conflict who engages in a patterned exchange of facts, ideas, and promises with the other party or parties with the aim of creating a mutually satisfactory outcome to the conflict.

A mediator is a “third-party who assists the disputing parties in their negotiations through a range of facilitative activities. The classic mediator does not have a direct stake in the outcome and has no power to impose or enforce an outcome. (One who does would be known technically as an arbitrator. These roles can be fluid in their application and the relevance of each often varies with the stage of the conflict.

A typical international mediator, however, is often a party with muscle — a powerful nation with an interest in the conflict — who may, at one and the same time, facilitate the process of interaction between the parties while also being in a position to guarantee or scuttle an agreement. A distinction has been made by some analysts between a principal and a neutral mediator — a principal mediator being one whose focus is on promoting direct interaction and a neutral mediator being one whose focus is on making an agreement more attractive to the parties.

A distinction which may be more appropriate would be to define a principal mediator as a mediator with muscle, one who is also a principal in the dispute — and a neutral mediator as a truly uninvolved third party, with little or no actual or implied power over the disputants, and surely not a superpower.

(7) Stages of Conflict There is no standardized conflict resolution process that is the same in every situation. Conflicts proceed in varying sequences or stages. There are different dynamics, incentives, and appropriate intervener moves, depending on the stage of the conflict and situation surrounding the parties and the issues. Every conflict is different and needs a process specifically designed to meet the needs and concerns of that conflict at that time.

(8) The Unit of Analysis: Beyond the Nation-State. It is important to identify the appropriate unit of analysis when seeking to understand and intervene in a given conflict. Some conflicts are between nation-states; others, especially many of the world's most deep-rooted and protracted conflicts, involve interest or identity groups such as religious, tribal, or ethnic aggregates. Many of today's major conflicts offer testimony as inter-communal, intra-national disputes: South Africa, Northern Ireland, Israel, Cyprus, Sri Lanka, Bosnia. These conflicts are about identities and the fulfillment of such basic human needs as recognition and security. Their resolution requires a clear analysis of these identities and needs as rooted in entities other than the nation-state, and, accordingly, processes that go beyond the canons of state-to-state diplomacy.

(9) The Conflict 'Resolutionary's' World View: Beyond Power Politics. Conflict resolution approaches operate from a worldview that is quite different from a power politic or "realist" framework. The realist framework has dominated thinking about protracted political conflicts within and between nations for years. The logical goal of policy in this framework has been security in a dangerous world of adversaries, with a strategic focus on control, enforcement, and deterrence. Winning is the objective.

In the conflict resolution framework, on the other hand, the objectives are resolution (or at least settlement or management) and party satisfaction rather than winning. The strategic focus is on analysis, problem-solving, and negotiation rather than intelligence, deterrence, and security. Finding a productive interchange between these two world views is a major challenge for the international relations specialist or diplomat.

(10) Getting to the Table. Creating a forum conducive to negotiated problem-solving is the most critical, difficult task that faces those working to resolve deep-rooted conflicts. We call it the getting-to-the-table problem. Simply finding a way to talk — to begin a new and productive relationship — may be very difficult due to historical animosities, constituent pressures, or world opinion. The who? where? when? how? how often? how long? and what? questions need to be addressed and, ultimately, successfully negotiated before the substantive negotiation on the issues can succeed. The careful creation of such a forum is usually required to encourage the formation of new understandings and from them develop new approaches to the conflict.

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