

OTPIC Officially Retired

As of December 2, 2005, the Online Training Program on Intractable Conflict (OTPIC) has been officially retired, and is *no longer open to new registrations*.

The successor to OTPIC is a course called [Dealing Constructively with Intractable Conflicts \(DCIC\)](#). The new curriculum is built around one of our major projects, [Beyond Intractability](#), and offers a much more extensive and informative set of learning materials than that available through OTPIC.



International Online Training Program On Intractable Conflict

Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, USA

Problem List 1: Complicating Factors

For more information about any of these topics, click on the title.

[Click Here to go to Problem List 2: Core Conflict Problems](#)

FRAMING PROBLEMS

Problems defining what the conflict is about and how it is being addressed

Confusing Interests with Positions

Often parties are so committed to a single position (what they say they want) that they fail to consider why they are holding that position, and whether it really is likely to achieve their interests (what they really want). Framing conflicts in terms of positions often obscures win-win solutions that become apparent when the conflict is framed on the basis of interests.

Confusing Material Interests With Fundamental Human Needs

Many intractable conflicts involve the inability of one or more groups to meet their fundamental human needs--needs for such things as identity, security, dignity, or control. Often, however, the importance of these needs is overlooked, and conflicts are defined in material terms only.

Incompatible Frames

Often, one party will define a conflict in terms of negotiable interests (that is, material things that can be traded, such as wealth or land), while another defines the conflict in terms of rights, values, or needs (all of which are intangible things that are not usually considered negotiable). While such disagreements do not make resolution completely impossible, they do make it harder to obtain.

Overly Competitive Approaches to a Conflict

People often approach disputes in a very competitive, win-lose way. They assume that the only way they can win is if the other side loses. Consequently, they behave very competitively, seeking the best possible outcome for themselves, without considering how this will affect people on the other side.

["Into-the-Sea" Framing](#)

Sometimes, disputants seem to want their opponent to disappear forever, as if they could just be pushed "into the sea." This kind of framing can lead to genocide or to efforts to force opponents into exile. In less extreme situations, this problem may lead a party to demand concessions that their opponent cannot possibly accept. When conflicts are approached in this way, protracted confrontation becomes inevitable.

[De-Humanization of Opponents](#)

Violent, catastrophic confrontations seldom occur unless the contending parties have de-humanized one another. Once this de-humanization occurs, opponents are seen as having no legitimate rights and any atrocities are considered justifiable. The Geneva Conventions limit this effect somewhat by setting minimal standards for the treatment of combatants. However, history has shown many examples of horrific treatment of combatants and civilians both within and outside the context of war.

[Conflict Emergence](#)

Conflicts are not really identified as problems until they "emerge" from a latent state to a manifest state. How this occurs is a major determinant of the constructiveness or destructiveness of the conflict as it plays out.

[Not My Problem](#)

Conflicts often arise when one person or group seeks to change the behavior of another, but the other does not acknowledge that a problem exists or maintains that it is not their responsibility. They are, therefore, likely to refuse to participate in any efforts to resolve the issue.

[Framing Conflict Itself as the Problem](#)

Often people assume that any conflict is abnormal and bad. However, conflict is a normal and unavoidable part of all relationships and societies. It is even essential for the healthy functioning of a relationship or social group, because conflict allows people to adapt to new situations and invent new approaches to problems. What is bad (though also not abnormal) is the destructive ways people commonly deal with conflicts.

[Ambiguous Goals](#)

Often people who are confused about what a conflict is really about or what is important to them will have ambiguous (that is, confused) goals. This often results in ineffective actions which confuse or even enrage the other side, often needlessly. The same thing can occur with third parties who enter a conflict to "help." If they do not have clear goals for their activities, they can easily do more harm than good.

[Failing to Identify Available Options for Dealing with the Situation](#)

Often people involved in a conflict will assume that there is only one effective way of dealing with the situation. If they are used to using force to get their own way, they will assume that force is the only available option. If they are lawyers, they may assume legal action is the only option. If they are mediators, they may assume mediation (or negotiation) is the only available approach, without considering the possibility that another approach would be more effective.

[SCOPING PROBLEMS](#)

Problems determining who is involved, what they think, and the context or the environment of the conflict.

For more information about any of these topics, click on the title.

[Failing to Identify All of the Other Parties](#)

In complex conflicts involving multiple people and groups, it is easy to overlook some people who are likely to be affected by the conflict. If a "solution" is reached which ignores these peoples' interests or harms them significantly, these "quiet" or hidden groups are likely to emerge and block the agreement.

Failing to Identify All of the Issues in a Conflict

Disputants often overlook issues which are important to others, but are not important to themselves. People may not realize that there is more than one way to see a situation, or that other people or groups may define the problem in a different way.

Failure to Identify Opponents' Options

Parties often fail to identify all of the options that are available to their opponents. They may assume that their opponents will simply give in because they have no viable options. Or, they may assume that their opponents will fight to the end, unwilling to work out a mutually agreeable settlement, when that approach would actually be desired by the other side.

Differing Definitions of "Justice"

Often conflicts involve different definitions of justice. What seems "just" or "fair" to one group very often seems unjust to an opposing group. Often the prevailing definition of justice is set by the group with the most power, while low-power groups see their inferior position as unjust.

Ignoring the Conflict History or Current Related Disputes

Sometimes people think that the dispute they are involved in is new or unique, when it is actually part of an existing conflict or the reappearance of a long-term conflict. Understanding the importance of the way the conflict was handled in the past is key to being able to confront it effectively in the present. In addition, conflicts do not stand alone, but are often related to on-going political, economic, social, or cultural situations. Disputants must be aware of the importance of related conflicts if they are to be able to confront their own conflict constructively.

Inadequate Information Gathering

When conflicts are complex--involving a large number of disputants and/or issues--parties must be able to gather a great deal of information before they can plan an effective confrontation strategy. Often, time or resource limitations prevent adequate information gathering. In other circumstances, information is collected, but it is interpreted incorrectly. In either case, the result is likely to inhibit effective action.

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

Problems talking with and/or understanding people involved in the conflict (on your side and on other sides).

For more information about any of these topics, click on the title.

Misinterpretation of Communication

Even in ordinary circumstances, people often say things that are not interpreted in the way the statement was intended. When people are angry with each other, the likelihood of misinterpreting communication is greatly increased--to the point where it is almost inevitable.

Failure to Understand an Opponent's Perspective

People often view conflicts from very different perspectives depending upon such things as cultural background, economic position, and religious beliefs. In order for the parties to communicate effectively, they need to understand (though not necessarily agree with) the perspectives of other parties to a conflict.

****TOUR**** Cultural Barriers to Effective Communication

Culture affects both the substance and style of communication. Culture influences how people express themselves, to whom they talk, and how. For example, while some people may feel comfortable talking openly about their feelings with anyone, others will only talk openly and honestly with very close friends, while others may not talk that way at all. Such differences can cause people from different cultures to misinterpret both what is said and what is left unsaid, leading to misunderstandings.

Language Differences

When conflicts involve people who speak different languages (or even different dialects), it is very easy for misunderstandings to arise. Even when skilled translators are used, it is difficult for translators to transmit complex feelings and emotions as clearly as they are originally spoken.

Misinterpreted Motives

Motives can be misinterpreted as easily as statements can be misunderstood. When parties are in conflict, there is a tendency to assume the opponent's motives are malign, even when they are not.

Inaccurate and Overly Hostile Stereotypes

Often, communication difficulties arise because people think they know all they need to know about their opponents and that further communication is unnecessary. Yet images of opponents tend to be overly hostile and exaggerated. Opponents are seen to be more extreme and outrageous than they really are.

Lack of Communication Channels/Avoided Communication

Often disputants do not have reliable methods for communicating with opposing parties. This may be because they do not want to communicate, or it may be because they are afraid to contact their opponents or have no way to do so. Sometimes the parties will break-off communication as a form of protest after a particularly disagreeable incident. However, the lack of communication can significantly increase the risk of future incidents.

Poor Listening Skills

Successful communication requires that the parties listen actively and carefully--asking questions and confirming interpretations to make sure they understand what the other person is meaning. People seldom work this hard at listening, however. Often in conflictual situations, they hardly listen at all. Rather, while their opponent is talking, they are busy planning their own response. This frequently leads to misunderstandings.

Secrecy and Deception

Sometimes information which is critical to the accurate understanding of a situation is not available to all parties. This frequently occurs in business conflicts, when companies try to keep details about products and processes secret. It also occurs in international conflicts when governments keep secrets for "security" reasons. This can happen in interpersonal conflicts as well when people simply choose to keep particular facts to themselves.

Poor communication also can arise when a party attempts to strengthen its position by deliberately providing opponents and other parties with misleading or inaccurate information.

Inflammatory Statements

Sometimes communication can make matters worse rather than better. When communication is threatening, hostile, or inflammatory it can do more to escalate a conflict than it can to defuse it.

Inflammatory Media

Negative and inflammatory publicity is a problem in conflicts--before, during, and after negotiations. Before negotiations, the media can intensify a controversy, making it harder to get people to work together, or even talk. In the early stages of negotiation, parties often advance tentative ideas which could easily backfire if publicized. The resulting outcry and complaints could easily undermine an otherwise

promising negotiation effort. Even after negotiated solutions have been developed, negative publicity can rekindle conflicts, making implementation of agreements more difficult.

Inadequate Information Gathering/Time Constraints

Gathering the information needed to sensibly deal with conflict situations is time-consuming and expensive. In some cases, misunderstandings will arise because of the failure of the parties to invest the time and resources required to obtain important information. Sometimes adequate time is simply not available. When direct communication is cut off, it is easy to rely on unreliable third party sources--rumor and media stories especially. These are notoriously error-prone, and can lead to serious misunderstandings.

Crisis Communication

In crisis situations, normal communication channels are likely to be much less effective. They often operate too slowly to keep up with the rapid pace of events, or they may have been cut off entirely. They may also be unable to resist the increased hostility and distrust which crises are likely to create.

New, Poorly Informed Participants

In protracted conflicts, the people involved continually change. Often those playing leadership roles give up their positions and other individuals take their place. These new leaders frequently have a very limited understanding of the conflict's history and the current situation. This lack of information can cause these people to take actions which they would not have taken, had they been better informed.

Constituent Communication Problems

When dialogue or negotiation occurs among a small group of people, they may develop communication skills and a level of interpersonal understanding that is not shared by others outside the immediate circle. If these small group processes are intended to have a wider effect, it is necessary to transfer the learning that takes place in the small group to the larger constituencies which the group represents. Often, however, communication between the small group members and their constituents is not adequate to expand the learning beyond the immediate circle of participants.

FACT-FINDING PROBLEMS

Problems obtaining information about facts and uncertainties.

For more information about any of these topics, click on the title.

Conflicts of Interest / Lack of Credibility

The believability of fact-finding efforts is sharply reduced when the experts doing the fact-finding work are likely to benefit personally by providing misleading information. In this case, opponents and the general public are likely to doubt the truthfulness or accuracy of the expert's conclusions--even if the expert is acting reasonably.

Contradictory Experts

Conflicts often involve different experts making contradictory statements about important facts. Because the general public lacks technical expertise, it has no way to determine who to believe. As a result, people tend to reject expert analysis and believe what they want to believe. When this happens, the potential benefits of objective fact finding are likely to be lost.

Understanding the Meaning of Facts

Fact-finding efforts often involve complex issues which are difficult for the general public to sensibly interpret. Bad decisions can result when the parties and key decision makers fail to understand what the facts really mean.

Inability to Deal with Uncertainty

Fact-finding efforts are also limited by the skills of the experts. In many cases, the best available technical analyses are unable to eliminate key uncertainties, and decisions must be made in the absence of firm information. Decision makers are often reluctant to act until they have more information, leading to a variety of problems such as "analysis paralysis" and delay-default. (see below)

[Analysis Paralysis/Delay-Default](#)

Often the parties attempt to avoid uncertainty by conducting study after study, in an effort to resolve an issue once and for all. Where irreducible uncertainties are involved, this search for certainty leads to endless delays. This is decision making by default-- deciding to continue the status quo -- which may not be the best choice, even given the uncertainties.

[Complexity Muddle](#)

Technical disputes can become so complex that the parties have trouble implementing a process capable of addressing the essential issues. The result can be a confusing muddle in which the issues are never effectively addressed.

[PROCEDURAL PROBLEMS](#)

Problems with the formal (and informal) processes which the parties use to interact with one another.

For more information about any of these topics, click on the title.

[Excluded Parties](#)

Trust in the fairness of a dispute-resolution or decision-making process can quickly be lost if interested parties believe that their concerns are being ignored, or they are being excluded from the process.

[Strategic Delays](#)

Often democratic decision making processes designed to resolve short-term disputes can be deliberately delayed by parties wishing to avoid a potentially unfavorable decision. The resulting delays can allow people who oppose change to win without ever having to demonstrate the superiority of their position.

[Rushed Decisions](#)

Democratic decision making processes can be rushed by parties wishing to avoid addressing the hard issues. When the process is rushed, decisions are often made before facts are adequately considered or before all the parties have had an opportunity to present their case.

[Lack of Clear Goals](#)

Problems often develop when parties (either disputants or intermediaries) do not have clear goals. This tends to make their actions less effective than they might otherwise be and can lead to misunderstandings on the part of their opponents as well.

[Meaningless Public Involvement](#)

If the parties conclude that available opportunities for participation in dispute resolution processes are meaningless, then they are likely to withdraw their support for the overall process and pursue more confrontational strategies.

[Complexity Muddle](#)

Many conflicts involve so many overlapping issues that it is difficult to develop a process which addresses all of the important issues and allows the parties to participate effectively. The result is often a process which is so confused that it cannot make sensible decisions. This confusion can also result in seemingly endless delays in the dispute resolution process.

Vested Interests

Decision-making and dispute-resolution processes often favor small groups of individuals with an intense interest in the conflict over the much larger population of people with a more limited interest. They can result in decisions which favor individual and small group interests over the collective interests of the larger society.

Dictatorial Process

Especially troublesome are dictatorial processes in which an individual or small group is able to routinely make decisions which favor their interests over the larger interests of society. Often, this situation is perpetuated by the dictator's willingness to use violent force against opponents.

Timing Problems

If timed poorly, good processes will not work. This is especially true for negotiation, mediation, and other consensus based processes which must be undertaken when the parties are all ready to participate.

ESCALATION PROBLEMS

Problems involving the intensification of the conflict

For more information about any of these topics, click on the title.

Contention Dynamics

Contention dynamics are dynamics that encourage the escalation of conflicts, often to the point where excessive force is used on both sides.

Runaway Responses

Runaway responses are dynamics that support escalation. Paul Wehr discusses Coleman's analysis of these processes.

Polarization

In an effort to build their power base, parties often seek alliances with other interest groups, which agree to help each other as they pursue their separate objectives. In order to remain competitive, interest groups tend to form as many alliances as possible. Over time, this process tends to divide communities into two large and opposing alliances--a process called "polarization."

Personal Attacks

Escalation can be intensified when the parties use tactics which personally attack the integrity and character of their opponents. This can change the character of a conflict so that personal hatred and vindictiveness, rather than the pursuit of just solutions, dominate the debate. In making public statements, disputants often try to encourage their supporters by trying to find the most clever way of insulting their opponents and proclaiming their own virtue. This may bring cheers from supporters, but these unnecessary insults can intensify an opponents' hostility and can thereby contribute to the escalation spiral.

Violence

The escalation of a conflict to the point of violent confrontation can change a conflict so that concern over substantive issues and questions of justice is replaced by fear, hatred, and a desire for self-defense and vengeance. These effects are compounded when the use of violence is seen as excessive, illegitimate, or unnecessary.

Sacrifice Trap

Often parties involved in serious conflicts are called upon to make enormous sacrifices including, in violent

conflicts, the loss of human lives. Once such sacrifices have been made, it is extremely difficult for leaders to admit that they have made a mistake and the sacrifices were unnecessary. This reluctance to admit past errors often leads the parties to pursue destructive strategies long after their destructiveness and futility has become apparent.

Tactical Escalation

As conflicts escalate, public interest and willingness to take sides generally increases. This can lead to substantial increases in the level of support enjoyed by some or all of the parties. Knowing this, disputants often deliberately escalate conflicts in order to build support. While this approach can be effective, it usually generates support for the other side as well. The result is often an intensification of the conflict with little change in the relative power of the parties.

Out-Group / Enemy Image

Often groups define their identity by their common opposition to some enemy or "out-group". While this process can be very effective in strengthening the "in-group," it does so by significantly intensifying the intergroup conflict. Nevertheless, this process is often deliberately encouraged by leaders who use it to unify their supporters and overcome internal opposition.

De-Humanization

Violent catastrophic confrontations seldom occur unless the contending parties have de-humanized one another. Once this de-humanization occurs, opponents are treated as if they have no legitimate rights and all manners of atrocities are considered justifiable. The Geneva Conventions limit this effect somewhat by setting minimal standards for the treatment of combatants. However, recent wars have illustrated that there is no limit to what can and has been done to both combatants and civilians.

Extremists

Most interest groups have supporters who take an extreme view of the conflict. These extremists tend to favor more extreme and often violent tactics. They are also likely to be very reluctant to accept any form of compromise. In their pursuit of complete victory, extremists often take aggressive actions which other members of the group oppose. Problems arise when these extremists become viewed as representing the views and tactics of the larger group. This tends to lead opponents to conclude that they must respond with extreme tactics of their own. The provocative actions of extremists can also threaten broadly supported efforts to de-escalate conflicts.

Crisis

In crisis situations, disputants are often forced to make important decisions very quickly with information which is usually incomplete and unreliable. Given such uncertainty, decision makers often feel that they must take a cautious, worst-case approach and assume that their opponents are acting in the most threatening way possible. This often leads the parties to take more forceful actions than necessary, which dramatically intensifies the conflict. For example, in cases where military forces are on a hair-trigger alert, parties are under intense pressure to respond instantly and forcefully for fear that the other party's quick action will allow them to seize the advantage.

Emotions

The escalation process is commonly accompanied by very strong emotions which make it difficult for the parties to calmly assess the situation and determine how best to advance their interests. Since emotions lie at the core of many difficult conflicts, they must be addressed and cannot be simply suppressed.

Stalemate

Escalation can intensify conflicts to the point where the parties will use all available resources to protect their interests. Often, this leads to a standoff in which neither party has the power to win, and neither party is willing to back down or admit defeat. This can be extremely destructive to all sides, as they continue to

pour resources and lives into the struggle, with little or no hope of victory.

Inflammatory Media

The media (newspapers, radio, and television) in many countries make more money when they have a larger audience. Audiences can be expanded, it is commonly believed, by stressing extreme news and ideas, rather than common occurrences. For this reason, the media tends to report on the most outrageous occurrences and the most extreme statements, rather than conciliatory gestures or efforts to compromise or solve problems. This happens with governmentally controlled media as well, if the government wants to use the media to influence public opinion against another group. Thus the media often contributes greatly to the escalation of conflicts.

Procrastination of Response

Often disputants or third parties realize a conflict is getting out of hand, but they delay corrective efforts until the situation is really unmanageable.

[Click Here to go to Problem List 2: Core Conflict Problems](#)

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