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 2: Core Conflict Problems

Click Here to go to Problem List 1: Complicating Factors

TYPES OF CORE ISSUES

Although intractable conflicts can involve almost any issue, some kinds of issues are particularly likely to cause conflicts to become intractable. Among these are the following:

The Denial of Identity
> **The denial of a person's sense of self or the legitimacy of his or her group identity**

The Denial of Other Human Needs
> **In addition to identity (which is a fundamental need), the denial of other fundamental needs such as security, or the ability to pursue one's own goals often leads to intractable conflicts.**

Domination Conflicts
> **Conflicts about who is on top of whom in the social, political, and economic structure tend to be intractable.**

High Stakes Distributional Conflicts
> **High stakes win-lose conflicts over who gets what and how much can often become intractable.**

FORCE PROBLEMS

Problems which arise when one party forces another party to do something that they do not want to do.

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

Failure to Recognize Available Force-Based Options

Disputants often fail to recognize that they usually have a large number of force-based options, each with their own advantages and disadvantages. This lack of awareness of available options can cause people to pursue ineffective confrontation strategies. For example, people may pursue violent resistance strategies, when non-violent action might be more effective. Or, people might pursue hopeless election campaigns when legal action would be more likely to protect their rights.

Assuming Force is the Only Source of Power

Faced with a difficult conflict, disputants sometimes overlook the possibility of using negotiation or persuasion to improve the situation, relying instead on force. This is especially likely to occur when force has already been used by the other side. In this case, the most common reaction is to respond with equal or even greater force. However, this type of response is likely to escalate the conflict, while other options might protect one's interests just as well or better, without making matters worse.

Absence of Violence Limiting Mechanisms

Force based options differ dramatically depending upon whether or not force is being used in a situation where effective violence limiting mechanisms are in place. Failure to understand these differences can lead to the selection of inappropriate and ineffective strategies.

Failure to Anticipate Opponent Reactions and the Backlash Effect

People or groups who use forced-based strategies often assume that their opponents will quickly submit to their demands, thereby providing a quick route to victory. However, most people hate to be forced to do things against their will, so they can be expected to use any means available to resist the use of force. This can make it difficult to predict how opponents will respond to one's force-based initiatives. Even if they appear to submit, they often will try to build up their power so that they can retaliate or reverse the decision at a later time. (This is what we call the "backlash effect.")

Misunderstanding the Relationship Between Threat and Force

While threatening to use force is quite inexpensive, carrying out the threats and actually using force can be costly and dangerous. Often, parties who fail to understand this use threat-based strategies too frequently and in ways which limit their ability to advance their interests.

Illegitimate or Excessive Use of Force

Resentment and retaliation is especially likely when victims of force believe that the use of force was illegitimate. In this situation, the losing party is likely to try to build up their own forcing power in hopes of challenging the victor at the earliest possible opportunity. The result is likely to be a long-term intensification of the conflict, rather than resolution.

Pursuing Force to the Bitter End

Disputants often incorrectly assume that there is no alternative to pursuing force-based strategies to the point of ultimate victory or defeat--in spite of the enormous costs involved.

Note: the following seven items can be considered either problems or solutions, depending on one's point of view. They therefore appear on both the problem and the solution lists, and the write-ups reflect both perspectives.

Submission

In cases where people are subjected to overwhelming force which they do not have the power to resist, it may be most appropriate to simply accept defeat and try (at least over the short term) to make the best of a bad situation.

Subversion

Often, people who are being subjected to force pretend that they are submitting to the demands of the forcing or threatening party, when in reality they are pursuing a deceptive strategy which allows them to avoid complying with those demands.

Defiance

The cost of using force-based threats increases dramatically when the opponent responds to a threat with defiance rather than submission. This forces the threatening party to carry out the threat or admit that it was only a bluff. Carrying out a threat is likely to result in an expensive, destructive, and rapidly escalating confrontation, while withdrawing the threat is likely to undermine a party's ability to use threat and force-based strategies in the future.

Defense

Defense is a strategy which allows people to prevent others from successfully using force against them. Successful defense strategies do not, however, give the defending party the ability to successfully use force against their opponents.

Coalition Building

People can build their power base and their ability to pursue (or resist) force-based strategies by building coalitions with people with complementary interests. Members of these coalitions promise to help each other advance their interests and defend themselves from force-based strategies of their opponents.

Deterrence, Counter-Threats (and Arms Races)

Often disputants respond to force-based threats with counter-threats rather than submission. Such threats and counter-threats can result in rapid escalation of a conflict. In military situations, this is called an "arms race." Similar dynamics can arise with legal, political, or other types of force as well.

Flight (Refugees)

Another possible response to overwhelming force is flight, in which the parties simply flee the area. It is this strategy which is responsible for the large numbers of refugees who flee the world's trouble spots.

Assuming Monolithic, Worst Case Opponents

Disputants often take the worst possible view of their opponents' intentions and strategies. Usually, such worst-case scenarios are inaccurate. Using them as a basis for making strategic decisions is usually unwise, as it is likely to antagonize moderate members of the opposing group and lead to unnecessary escalation.

Neglecting Costs and Risks of Using Force

Parties often decide to pursue force-based strategies based on optimistic assumptions about the likely costs and probability of success. Leaders often encourage their supporters to make optimistic assumptions as a way of building support for a particular strategy. However, this process may lead the disputants to greatly underestimate the costs and risks of force, resulting in a poor choice of confrontation strategies.

Human Rights/War Crime Problem

In extremely polarized and escalated conflicts one group may violate another's fundamental human rights (through murder, torture, or kidnapping, for example). Although forbidden by international law, such human rights abuses are, unfortunately, rather common, and are very difficult to deal with without considerable outside intervention.

Lack of Viable Military Options

In situations in which effective violence-limiting mechanisms are absent, disputants often conclude that military options provide the best mechanism for protecting their interests. This is not always true, however, as military victory is often difficult to obtain.

Tyranny of the Powerful/Disempowerment

While there are many effective strategies for helping the disempowered better defend their interests and resist injustice, these strategies will not work in all situations. There are times when the more powerful parties are going to win (at least over the short term), even though their cause is not legitimate.

Ostracizing Losers

Often, the losing parties are ostracized by the society to which they belong. In addition to failing to achieve their objectives, they also often find themselves treated as second-class citizens who are the subject of scorn and discrimination. This can lead to continuing hostility and further conflict.

INTEGRATIVE PROBLEMS

The integrative system is the system of social, economic, and political bonds that hold people, communities, and societies together. Integrative problems are situations that weaken these bonds or fail to take advantage of the power they can provide for constructive conflict confrontation.

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

Neglecting Opportunities for Persuasion

Often disputants fail to take advantage of opportunities for persuasion because they do not consider this to be a significant source of power.

Ineffective Persuasion

Often the parties' attempts at "persuasion" are little more than selfishly-motivated demands for their opponents to comply with their wishes. This is likely to arouse further opposition, not compliance.

*** TOUR *** Differences in Values

Efforts to persuade people to do "the right thing" are complicated by differing value systems. Religious and cultural groups have different and often contradictory images of what is right and wrong, or good and evil--which can make it very difficult to agree on what is the "right thing" to do.

Lack of Legitimacy

In order to be effective, persuasive appeals must be viewed as legitimate. This requires that the individual or group making the appeal must, itself, be viewed as legitimate.

Distrust

While not essential to conflict resolution, when parties to a conflict trust each other, their ability to resolve the conflict successfully is greatly increased. The opposite is also true, however. When parties distrust each other--as they often do after a protracted conflict--it can be very hard to come to any agreements, because both sides will fear that the other side cannot be relied upon to keep its promises.

Prejudice / Discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination are very common problems in societies with different racial, ethnic, or national groups. Such problems undermine the sense of commonality and community among the citizens, making conflict more likely and constructive confrontation more difficult.

Erosion of Traditional Conflict Management Institutions (Extended families, churches, or judicial systems for example)

Most societies have existing institutions or social structures which are used (and accepted) as legitimate

means of resolving conflicts. When these structures or processes are damaged, the ability of the society to manage its conflicts successfully is reduced.

Integrative System Does Not Exist or Is Very Weak

All societies and groups are held together, at least to some extent, by social bonds. When these bonds are strong, the people involved in the society (or group or family unit) identify as part of that unit and feel allegiance to it. Severe conflict, however, can break down these bonds to the point that all sense of community or belonging is lost. In this case the ability to use integrative power to alter the course of the conflict is very limited.

Upheaval Conflicts

Upheaval conflicts are conflicts that result from deep cleavages in society that develop into massive, uncontrolled, and usually violent conflict. Revolutions are one common example.

EXCHANGE PROBLEMS

Trading or exchange is the second fundamental form of power (the other two being force and the integrative system).

Exchange problems are problems which prevent the negotiation of voluntary agreements.

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

Limits to Agreement: Better Alternatives

Opportunities for a resolving a dispute by voluntary agreement are limited by the parties' alternatives to that agreement. This is because disputants will usually not accept any agreement that is worse for them than the outcome which they think they can obtain in another way. For example, if a negotiated agreement requires compromises that they think they can avoid with a show of force, force will likely be used instead of negotiation. Sometimes, however, parties have unreasonable expectations of what they stand to achieve from negotiation or the continuation of the conflict. If they think they can win more by continuing the conflict than is possible in any circumstance, they may continue to pursue the conflict, even when it will actually do them more harm than good.

Poor Timing

Parties sometimes attempt to negotiate an agreement when one or more key parties is not ready. Usually this is because one or more disputants believe that they have some other (usually force-based) option which will yield a better outcome than anything they could get from negotiation. While this disputant may come to negotiations (just in case they are wrong), they will probably not pursue the negotiations in earnest, and will still rely on their alternative force-based strategy to get what they want.

Overlooking Ripe Moments for Negotiation

The opposite problem occurs when disputants do not recognize that a conflict is "ripe" for negotiation. They may be so entrenched in their confrontational strategy that they may ignore situations where negotiation would likely be successful.

Refusal to Negotiate

Another important obstacle to successful negotiation is the common refusal of the parties to come to the negotiating table. In some cases this refusal to negotiate results from the parties' fear that they will be forced to accept unwanted compromises. In other cases the parties believe that negotiations are a waste of time since they will require substantial resource commitments and are doomed to failure. Parties to a protracted, escalated conflict may be so angry with each other that they will not pursue or accept a mutually beneficial agreement, because they do not want to do anything that will help their opponent.

Attempting to Negotiate Non-negotiable Issues

When people try to negotiate non-negotiable issues--and fail--they often lose faith in the negotiation process completely. This sometimes makes them unwilling to try negotiation for anything, even when it is likely to work.

No Legitimate Party to Negotiate With

Sometimes one side wants to negotiate, but there is no legitimate representative of the other side to negotiate with. If an attempt is made to negotiate with someone who does not legitimately represent the opponent, the effort is likely to fail.

Wrong (or Missing) Parties at the Table

If negotiation or mediation is undertaken with the wrong parties at the negotiating table, the results will not be successful. Typical problems are that the people at the table do not really represent the constituencies or groups that they are supposed to represent, or they do not have decision-making authority, or even links to it. Another problem is that critical parties are missing from the table--either because they were not invited, or because they chose not to come. Either way, this is likely to cause problems later on when a decision is reached which does not represent the interests of all the concerned or affected groups.

Lack of a Negotiating Forum

Sometimes disputants might be willing to negotiate, but there is no forum in which negotiation can be pursued.

Distrust

When parties distrust each other--as they often do after a protracted conflict--it can be very hard to come to any agreements, because both sides will fear that the other side cannot be trusted to keep its promises.

Requests to Abandon Power Options as a Precondition to Negotiation

In many cases potential participants in agreement-based dispute resolution processes (such as negotiation) are asked to abandon their forced-based options as a pre-condition for participation. While this is something that less powerful parties are likely to favor, more powerful parties are likely to refuse to participate under such conditions.

Attempts to Unfairly Distribute the Benefits of Agreement

Opportunities for mutually beneficial agreement are sometimes lost because the parties feel that the other side would win too much and that they would not win enough.

All or Nothing Approach

Sometimes disputants will refuse to consider any type of mutually beneficial agreement or relationship until the core intractable issues have been resolved. Usually, they hope that withholding normal relations will pressure an opponent into making concessions. While this strategy may be effective at times, it also blocks the relationship-building activities which can provide a basis for constructively addressing the core issues. A similar problem is that disputants may be unwilling to pursue a short-term agreement and partial victory, because they fear that such an approach would undermine their long- term prospects of pursuing their goals.

Scale-Up Problem

Typically efforts to transform intractable relationships and negotiate dispute settlements take place in

carefully facilitated small-group settings. However, these conflicts generally involve large segments of the population-- far more people than could ever be involved in such small group processes. This means that participants in small group processes must be able to "scale-up" their experiences or risk being rejected by their constituents.

Inexperienced Parties

Negotiation is a social process in which training and experience increases effectiveness. This places less experienced parties at a considerable disadvantage when they negotiate with more experienced parties.

Poor Process or Structure

Sometimes negotiation is attempted, but the procedures used are so flawed that it cannot succeed, even when the potential for a win-win outcome exists.

Power Imbalances

Mediators often argue that in mediation, the parties all have equal power. However, this is seldom true. If one disputant has much more power than another in the outside world, this will be true at the negotiating table as well. Although an agreement may still be reached, it is likely to mirror the outside power distribution of the parties. This is true outside of negotiation as well, as higher-power parties tend to prevail in most decision-making systems.

Third Party Not Effective or Credible

Sometimes negotiation will be started with a third-party mediator, but that mediator lacks the ability or credibility to work effectively with all of the parties. If parties do not trust the mediator's fairness, they are likely to withdraw from the negotiation.

Failed Mediation

If mediation is tried and fails because of poor timing, poor process, or a poor mediator, disputants may be unwilling to try it again, even when conditions are better.

Click Here to go to Problem List 1:   Complicating Factors