



Conflict Resolution

– working with conflicts

THE DANISH CENTRE
FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION



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INTRODUCTION

Conflicts are a part of everyday life – they form in our close relations, at a societal level and on an international level. All too often we see conflicts leading to aggression, hostility and war. But conflicts can also be a steppingstone leading to change and wisdom; if we learn to handle them constructively.

In this booklet we have written about our way of working with and within conflicts. We want to share our experiences, cross cultural borders, explore differences, understand other discourses and learn from conflict resolution in other societal contexts. As is evident from the following pages, we have already been inspired by theories and methods from around the world. Most of our experience in the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution is from a Danish context; but we have also had collaborations with Tibetan exiles in India and the Romanian police force, to name two very different examples from our international experiences.

We would very much like to hear of your experiences with peaceful conflict resolution – If our ways has inspired you, or you wish to share theories, methods or tools within the field of conflict resolution, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Aase Rieck Sørensen
Director, the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution

ANALYZING CONFLICTS

In the following pages we will present several methods that we use in our work with conflicts. They are all centered around analyzing conflicts, but from different perspectives.

To accept that one is a part of a conflict goes a long way towards resolving the conflict. But in order to do so one needs a clear definition of conflict. This will be the first part of the following section.

Secondly it is important to understand the way that conflicts tend to evolve. This leads us to the conflict escalation illustration (fig 2), which demonstrates the various steps a conflict goes through as it escalates.

The last analytical tool that we will present here is the dimensions of conflicts. It is our understanding that a conflict can be divided into five different dimensions. To understand in which dimension, or dimensions, a conflict is centered, is a very helpful tool in regards to resolving it.

Definition of Conflict

We believe that it is important to distinguish between disagreements and conflicts. Most people are familiar with the experience of having been part of a lively debate on a subject where the differences of opinion were large. It is quite possible to leave such a debate with a heightened sense of being supported in one's original position, or having received new insight and perhaps changed or reevaluated one's original position. The big difference between disagreements and conflicts is that, when two people are having a disagreement they remain good friends or colleagues, the relation is intact and contact is upheld. The relation is sometimes even strengthened by such encounters. In conflicts, the relations often turn sour and dialogue ends.

CONFLICTS ARE DISAGREEMENTS THAT LEAD TO TENSION WITHIN, AND BETWEEN, PEOPLE

This is the short definition that we use at the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution. This, single sentence, definition is of course a simplified truth, covering a complex reality.

The disagreement concerns the issue, whereas the tension affects the relation. Thus, as portrayed in fig. 1, a conflict always has the duality of dealing with both an issue and a relation. Effective conflict resolution must address both issue and relation.

WORLD IN CONFLICT BLACKFOOT INDIANS

Bjarne Vestergaard, the former co-director of the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution, speaks of his visit with the Blackfoot Indians of the Bloodtribe: *Morris Crow told of how, when someone from their tribe was in conflict everybody would gather; both those who are central to the conflict and those who are somewhat removed or not a part of the conflict at all. The air is often laden with strong emotions; murder, vengeance and blood. The group forms a circle and begins to give thanks for the air, the water, nature... all the things that are common necessities for life for everyone. This process can take days. Once this is concluded the parties in conflict talk. The atmosphere, or spirit of interconnectedness, generated by identifying all the things that they are both thankful for during the thanking ceremony, is the power that heals the conflict.*



FIG. 1: WHAT IS CONFLICT WORK?

The issue that we are dealing with is often very concrete and tangible and it is often fairly easy to identify what the core of the issue is.

The relation between people who are in conflict is often the most complex element in a conflict. To navigate in this area is comparable to navigating without a map or compass. To examine the relation it is sometimes helpful to replace or translate the word relation with permissions. Not everyone has the privilege to comment on our personal life, borrow our things without our explicit consent or comment on our abilities, be they work related or personal. Most of us have a sort of intuition regarding

what we are and what we are not allowed to do, but these things are rarely spoken out loud or specified explicitly. It is perhaps exactly because of this lack of specification that these things play a vital part when conflicts are raging. As an added complication it is obvious that these boundaries change, almost at the whim of our state of mind. We all have days where anything is possible and one is full of understanding regarding the actions of others. However, there are also days where almost nothing is possible and where everybody's actions are interpreted as a hostile act.

As illustrated in the above text, and figure 1, it is equally important to deal with both the issue and the relation. Any solution that only deals with one is bound to be short-lived.

How Conflicts Escalate

When conflicts are allowed to develop unhindered without intervention or when the parties involved fuel the conflict, it often happens that the conflict evolves in a negative way. As the conflict escalates one resorts to personifications, accusations, destructive actions or worse. The issue that started the conflict becomes more and more fogged, and what is important is how wrong the other person is. Communication ends; one speaks *of* not *to* the other person. Only the negative relation remains. This escalation is portrayed in the conflict escalation illustration. This is not the only possible escalation pattern, but our experience shows that it is the most common. Some conflicts follow the path step by step; others again skip one or several steps. Often, conflicts move up and down this staircase as it evolves and the parties are not necessarily on the same step at the same time.

In the following paragraphs we will describe the various steps, which lead up the conflict staircase and the possible outcomes of these escalating steps. It is important to note the two grey 'dividers' on the illustration. These 'borders' represent important shifts in the dynamic of the conflict.



FIG. 2: CONFLICT ESCALATION

DISAGREEMENT

At this point there is no conflict. Both parties attempt, reasonably to deal with the disagreement and seek solution to the problem at hand. It does happen, however, that things are not resolved and that the relation becomes muddled. Someone crosses a professional or personal boundary, the other party reacts and the situation escalates.

THE BORDER BETWEEN 'DISAGREEMENT' AND 'PERSONIFICATION'

This is an important and vital border. Once this border has been passed, one often sees reluctance to cooperate and tensions becomes tangible. It often happens that one of the parties begins to blame, threaten and insult the other. It is rare that the other party doesn't follow suit. It may be verbally but can also merely be gestures and body language.

PERSONIFICATION

If one gets carried away the conflicts escalates, and focus shifts from the issue to the person and that person's lacks and faults. The original issue is no longer the main issue; the issue has become the person. Negative emotions such as fear and confusion begin to interfere with the communication between the parties. One starts to doubt the intentions of the other party and it is difficult to think clearly about the issue due to the chaos created by these negative emotions.

THE PROBLEM EXPANDS

"This is not the first time he/she has done this!" Old discrepancies are brought into the conflict, things you thought you had forgotten is suddenly remembered.

THE BORDER BETWEEN 'THE PROBLEM EXPANDS' AND 'DIALOGUE STOPS'

This border represents another important crossroad. It is difficult to foresee the consequences of giving up communications. When dialogue stops and the relation is severed anything can happen. Without contact between the parties it is difficult to resolve anything. Therefore it is of paramount importance to maintain some kind of relation regardless of how difficult it may be. We recognize the need for a break or 'time-out' in order to clear one's head and reflect. Dialogue stops does not mean a temporary state but a complete end to communication.

DIALOGUE STOPS

Negative feelings and emotions narrow thought patterns. Communication becomes imprecise and both parties distort what the other person is saying. Selective hearing is prevalent. Often times one seeks out allies, who can confirm one's position and the errors of the other's ways. It feels like any communication is futile and everything is misinterpreted.

ENEMY IMAGES

As contact and communication with the other party ends, one becomes more and more entrenched in the thought patterns that are prevalent of the other. One's outlook becomes so unnuanced that it can be difficult to find any redeeming qualities in the other party. In very serious conflicts, those that result in violence, massacres and genocide, a dehumanization process is often found prior to the atrocities. This dehumanization is perpetrated in order to facilitate the future atrocities.

OPEN HOSTILITY

The other party is no longer viewed as a human being. Unlike you, he or she is not a sensible person who is suffering because of the ongoing conflict. The person is unreasonable, evil and without redeeming qualities. This differentiation allows open hostility such as psychological and physical violence. At this point, sentiments like "the ends justify the means" appear. Moderate voices of reason who are not a direct part of the conflict are seen as traitors, turncoats or as naïve or unreliable and are therefore shunned. As one progresses along this path, the acts of open hostility become more and more frequent, severe and acceptable.

POLARIZATION

Co-existence is no longer possible.



FIG. 3: FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CONFLICT

The Five Dimensions of Conflict

Yet another way of analyzing conflicts is to determine what dimension the conflict is a part of. When people are in conflict it usually means that they have a need that has not been met. This need is usually linked to one or more of five different dimensions; structural, instrumental, interest, value or personal. The different dimensions present different challenges. It should be noted that conflicts are not necessarily dealing with only one dimension. Most conflicts are embedded within two or more dimensions.

THE STRUCTURAL DIMENSION

The structural dimension, as seen in fig. 3, surrounds or encompasses the other dimensions. This is done to illustrate that the structural dimension is the external framework that we live and work under. This includes legislation, ownership and organizational structure. The structural dimension is not alterable directly by conflict resolution between conflicting parties, but the work done dealing with a specific conflict may illuminate areas of the structural dimension that needs attention in order to prevent future conflicts. The courses of action available when dealing with conflicts weighted in the structural dimension are for example **to influence decision makers through grass root movements or the use of other such democratic rights.**

THE INSTRUMENTAL DIMENSION

If the center of gravity of the conflict is in the instrumental dimension they are often quite concrete. Two parties are in disagreement as to how a given task is to be dealt with. Most of the times, people remain focused on the issue when dealing with instrumental conflicts. People often have these disagreements without escalation. Only if the disagreements are rooted in other dimensions or if great animosity is present do they escalate. The most reasonable way to approach problems of an instrumental nature is through **argumentation** and **finding solutions** that are acceptable to both parties.

THE DIMENSION OF INTEREST

This dimension is centered on resources. These resources can be of many different types; money, time and space for instance. Power and influence can also be resources that are fought over. In large scale conflicts resources can include territories, water supply and natural resources. When dealing with the dimension of interest, a reasonable approach is to **negotiate** in order to **reach an agreement** on the division of the resources.

THE DIMENSION OF VALUE

By values we mean personal and cultural values. These include; ideology, religion, moral, aesthetic and political values. These values are something that you are willing to fight for. They define what is right and wrong, what one can or cannot do. Conflicts that escalate are often embedded in either the dimension of value or the personal dimension as these dimensions are non-negotiable. The goal is to reach a greater understanding of the other party's position. When one understands the reasons and background for another person's values they are much easier to accept or tolerate. The way to deal with conflicts of a value-oriented nature is through **open dialogue, appreciative inquiry** and **non-violent communication.**

THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

This dimension is at the root of many conflicts. This is where people are driven by strong emotions and fears. "Do people recognize my worth?", "am I being left out?" The personal dimension includes such notions as identity, loyalties, rejection and self-esteem. **Open dialogue, appreciative inquiry** and **non-violent communication** are, as was the case with the dimension of value, the best approach when dealing with the personal dimension.

In reality, these dimensions are always intertwined. When two colleagues are in conflict over an office space it may seem like an instrumental conflict, but at the same time it may be rooted in interests and a fight for what one party considers justice, power or the need to be recognized.

An analysis of the dimensions of a conflict can provide knowledge on where to begin or where to focus one's energy when attempting to deal with the conflict.

HOW WE MEET CONFLICTS

Conflicts do not have a life of their own. Conflicts are the result of how people interact and the issues they disagree on. There are various ways or methods for meeting or engaging conflicts. These methods and ways are influenced, among other things by your understanding of conflicts in general.

Flight-Fight-Openness

In general one can identify three strategies when dealing with conflicts:

1. **Flight** – this strategy can manifest itself in many ways among which are to be evasive, ignore the issue, denial or to belittle the problem. One can physically or emotionally run away and terminate contact with the person one is in conflict with.
2. **Fight** – manifestation of this strategy includes; retaliation, sarcasm, physical or psychological violence, condescending or patronizing behavior.
3. **Openness** – recognizing that there is a conflict and that you are a part of it, being inquisitive, have the courage to maintain contact and being curious and engaging in dialogue.

These different reactions are not comparable to moral guidelines where one is more correct than the other. There are undoubtedly situations where each of the options or reactions is sensible and relevant. Experience, however, has shown that, when possible, openness is preferable.

Groups in Conflict

When dealing with conflicts in a group setting it can be valuable to perform a flow-analysis. The flow-analysis views the group being analyzed as an organism, where each individual is interconnected to the next. The result of the analysis is not directed at any one individual but at the group as a whole. To perform a flow-analysis seat the group you wish to analyze in a circle and ask each member of the group, one by one, three questions:

1. **How do you disrupt the flow of this group?**
2. **Why do you do this?**
3. **What do you need in order to be willing to change your strategy?**

The various answers to these questions are written on a piece of paper and checked for accuracy with the respondent. After everyone has responded to the first question, the next round commences and so forth. After the three rounds the group is divided into three, one group per question. Each group must then condense the answers to their particular question into as few sentences as possible, without loss of meaning. The result of this process is how, the group as an organism, believes flow is stopped, why it is stopped and what needs to be done in order to prevent it from being stopped. The process is conducted in complete openness.

WORKING TOWARDS CONFLICT RESOLUTION – METHODOLOGY

We utilize several methods when dealing and working with conflicts. In the following we will give a brief introduction to two different ways of dealing with conflicts. The methods range from investigating a conflict by means of mapping the conflict to active mediation between parties in a conflict.

Mapping the Conflict

When dealing with a conflict involving many people one way of engaging the conflict is to map it out. Sometimes conflicts involve large populations, even entire villages. At such times it is sensible to identify the different parties and their unique role in the conflict and the relationship between them. In order to create a map of the conflict, you need to examine and uncover:

- Who are the people directly involved in the conflict?
- Who among these are influential or in a position of power?
- Who are most radical and who are more open and accessible?
- What persons, not involved in the conflict, have the ability to influence those in conflict?
- What do community people know and think of the conflict?
- Identify key people who are respected by both sides of the conflict for example a teacher, a nurse, a priest or a doctor.
- Are there people who can help and support those directly involved?
- Are there people who, for various reasons, do not wish the conflict to be solved?

Based on the information you have gathered you will be able to draw a map of the conflict. The map consists of all those individuals who in one way or another are important in regards to resolving the conflict and include the people in conflict but very much so also those who influence the parties and the conflict directly and indirectly. Once the 'players' are in place one must map out in what way they are interrelated. Do so by linking the various 'players' to each other and distinguish between positive and negative relations. When this is done one has a far clearer perspective of the situation and knows to a much larger degree what assets are at one's disposal, and also what challenges needs to be addressed.

With this information in mind, begins the massive work of getting individuals and groupings to communicate. With the assistance of the individuals who are respected by both sides, one starts with the most moderate individuals in the conflict. When the tensions between these more moderate parties in the conflict are loosening, one can begin to include the more radical individuals in the process. The process involved consists among other things of numerous meetings, which must be conducted under strict order. Gradually more and more people from the conflicting parties are included in these meetings. There will always remain some that retain their position and attitudes towards the opposing side, however after the long process of conflict resolution they will be a minority and soon lose their influence.

ROMANIA

A large part of our experience with conflict mapping was amassed during an extended period of time working with the Romanian police force, providing training in conflict resolution, and also actively engaging in conflict resolving activities, at times involving entire villages. A special focus of the training was concerned with the Romanian majority population's relation to the minority Roma population.



Mediation

Mediation can take many forms ranging from a complex academic endeavor to something simple that even young school children can perform.

Mediation is a voluntary and confidential method of solving conflicts. An impartial third party (the mediator) is brought in to help the two conflicting parties reach a solution that both find satisfactory. The parties are not obliged to reach an agreement

or solution and everyone involved, including the mediator, have the option to terminate the process if they wish to. The goal of the process is for both parties to claim ownership of the conflict. Those in conflict have a chance to speak their truth and having that truth heard and are required in turn to listen and hear the other side's truth as well. Hopefully this results in a restoration of the dignity of both parties and the relation between them, as well as lasting agreements concerning future interaction.

We present here some general guidelines for the mediation process:

Steps in mediation

- 1. Opening**
(For a detailed description of how to open a mediation, see Fig. 5)
- 2. The parties' account of the issue and open dialogue**
(Facts, feelings, interests and needs)
- 3. Consensus regarding the problem at hand**
(The parties agree on what problems to deal with)
- 4. Possible solutions**
(brainstorming)
- 5. Negotiation**
- 6. Reach an agreement and approve**

FIG. 4: STEPS IN MEDIATION

In mediation the mediator is responsible for the process alone; it is the conflicting parties who are responsible for the solutions.

There are several important points one needs to remember to mention in the opening of any mediation. They are presented here in bullet points (fig. 5):

Opening

- Presentation
- Briefly on the process itself and the different roles
- The mediator's impartiality
- Confidentiality
- Voluntary
- The purpose of this mediation
- Agreement on the ground rules – for instance to allow each other to speak without interruption
- Practical matters: The allocated timeframe, possible follow-up
- Acceptance to proceed based on the before mentioned

Whenever possible include both parties. Make continuous checks with them to ensure they agree on the things discussed and mentioned.

WORLD IN CONFLICT SOUTH AFRICA

The, perhaps, most famous example of peaceful conflict resolution, comes from South Africa. In the aftermath of apartheid, the country created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bear witness to, record and in some cases grant amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes relating to human rights violations, reparation and rehabilitation.



FIG. 5: OPENING

NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION – FACTS, FEELINGS, NEEDS AND POSSIBLE ACTIONS

In order to reach the heart of a conflict it is sensible to approach the conflict from the perspective of facts, feelings, needs and possible action.

Facts

This is what has happened, or to be more precise; this is the interpretation of one party regarding what happened. When in an escalated conflict one tends to confuse facts, opinions, prejudices and feelings. When working with conflicts it is important to separate these in order to gain some perspective. It is a difficult exercise but of outmost importance. Ask the parties to, as precisely as possible, recount:

- What happened?
- Who did what and when?

Feelings

To express, acknowledge and accept the feelings the incident or issue prompted can give valuable insight into the needs that have not been met. Feelings are important because of their existence; everyone has feelings. Feelings play a vital role in conflicts and if they are not dealt with appropriately they can obstruct the process of conflict resolution.

Needs

Needs are pivotal to any conflict resolving work. The needs that have not been met or have been violated are the cause of the feelings one is having. These needs include the need to be accepted, to be trusted, the need for respect, recognition and many more. When one knows what needs have been violated it is possible to examine what needs to be done to recognize or fulfill those needs, and thus resolve the conflict.

Possible Actions

When the relevant needs have been identified it is time for positive actions. These actions can be concrete suggestions for future interaction between parties in a conflict, but can also be one party in a conflict's strategy for ensuring that his or her needs are met in the future.



FIG. 6: NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

WORLD IN CONFLICT

HO'OPONOPONO – A GIFT FROM HAWAII

Ho'Oponopono is an ancient custom for dealing with conflicts. The purpose of Ho'Oponopono is to restore the community in face of conflict. During the process everybody who has a part in the conflict forms a circle and a facilitator, usually a wise member of society, takes charge. The process consists of five rounds conducted by the facilitator.

- Everyone tells how they experienced what happened.
- Everyone tells of their contribution to the conflict.
- Everyone tells what they could have done but didn't.
- Everyone shares their grief of what happened and apologizes for his or her part.
- Everyone tells what they will do in the future to prevent it from repeating.

During the rounds the facilitator keeps a protocol which he or she reads out loud and asks permission from everyone to check that what they have committed to is being kept. After this the protocol is burned – sacrificed to the fire, the smoke carrying the conflict away. Finally a celebratory dinner is shared with contributions from everyone.



ADDITIONAL READING:

"Mediation a Non-model" by Vibeke Vindeløv,
DJØF Publishing, Copenhagen 2006

For a more in-depth description of the way we work in various setting, please visit the English portion of our web-site which can be found at:

<http://konfliktloesning.dk/artikel/17/presentation>

“Conflict Resolution – working with conflicts” provides a short introduction to conflict resolution as viewed by the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution. When are we dealing with conflicts? How do conflicts evolve or escalate? How can one work with conflicts in a constructive manner?

The Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution (Est. 1994) is a non-profit and nongovernmental organization (NGO). Our purpose is to promote knowledge of peaceful conflict resolution through courses in conflict resolution and mediation. We also help businesses, organizations and educational institutions deal more constructively with conflicts through tailor-made courses. In addition we offer open counseling in Copenhagen, where volunteer conflict-counselors provide free and anonymous counseling for anyone who wants help dealing with a specific conflict.

The Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution has a large and very diverse member base consisting of employees in the private and public sector, people who are self-employed, former students, various organizations, municipalities and institutions. We have approximately 20 associated educators and mediators who work with conflict resolution professionally connected to the center. Furthermore we have a group of volunteers who each in their own way is engaged in the promotion of peaceful conflict resolution as an alternative to violence and aggression.

The explicit purpose of the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution is:

- To promote knowledge of peaceful conflict resolution nationally and internationally
- To provide education in conflict resolution for individuals and organizations
- To assist organizations and groups in solving collaborative difficulties
- To develop and disseminate theories on and methods of conflict resolution