



Conflict-Solving: Simple and Difficult

***Conflicts may make us wiser, if we manage to halt
the conflict's lopsided slide and reach an understanding***

By Else Hammerich

An international trend

When we founded the Centre for Conflict Resolution in May 1994, we realised that centres like ours are mushrooming in many countries across the six inhabited continents. It is encouraging to learn that we are part of an international trend. It surprised us when we found out that these centres even build upon related hopes, assumptions, theories and approaches: that they form part of a new paradigm.

The centres view conflicts as being life's challenge to us: inevitable and dynamic. They go hand-in-hand with any kind of change. They may lead to social development, more honesty and understanding among human beings, they may also bring about enmity, emotional crippling and stagnation. It all depends on how they are treated and handled.

Although we live in cultures which encode reactions of aggression and timidity from early childhood, we are far from pre-programmed - neither to enmity nor submission. We need not be conflict illiterates, but may in time learn to deal with disagreements, transforming them into constructive energy. The tools of conflict-solving can become cultural skills much like reading and writing.

Behind this view of conflict obviously lies a view of humane nature: deep down, human beings wish to live in community. Trust is, according to the Danish philosopher K.E.Løgstrup, a fundamental human relation. Personally, I am inclined to agree with the Dalai Lama when he says: "my philosophical starting-point is that basic human nature is to be gentle". This assumption does not spring from a naïve illusion, but encapsulates knowledge of the endless suffering we inflict on each other; simply that, deep down, this is not what we wish to do.

Empowerment

Like the centres in other countries, the Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution is involved in information, courses, workshops and direct mediation between contending parties: locally as well as internationally, with children as well as grown-ups. But regardless of whether we are teaching, steering processes or mediating, we never solve other people's problems. They do that themselves.

We may help others to attain a general view, tranquility, structure and methods so that they may advance further. We may steer a process to make them aware of their personal conflict pattern in their workplace and in their family. But they are the ones who must decide if they want to change these patterns, they gain new insights, practice and change their own everyday life.

If, for instance, we hold a course in staff development, the employees themselves must identify the true knots and resources at the workplace, deciding on new ways to relate to each other. If we mediate between two parties in a dispute, they must find sustainable solutions themselves. A good solution strengthens all parties, making them more independent and creating an understanding with a real future. This is what we call empowerment.

Grassroots mediation

One example of such thinking is grassroots mediation, a form developed to good effect in Britain which we are currently introducing in Denmark. It aims to improve daily life in residential areas characterised by neighbour disputes, and perhaps even violence with all the anxiety and loneliness it entails. The conflicts could, for instance, pitch different generations or ethnic groups against each other.

Rather than coming from the outside and trying to solve the problems of the area, we teach - if the desire exists - a group of local mediators through a 40-hour course. They are the ones who have close knowledge of the people and conditions in the area, and when they learn the methods, too, they may really start to get things moving.

Each conflict is different and similar

There are no two identical conflicts, in the same way as there are no two identical fingerprints. Each person, each conflict and each area follows its own path and course of events. Nevertheless, it appears that there are common and recognisable patterns in different conflicts. This applies when the conflicts are deadlocked in hostility as well as when they are relaxed and opened.

These patterns are reproduced in rather similar modes used by many centres. They can be applied to various target groups and cultures as long as the participants' experiences, backgrounds and wishes are respected and addressed in the course contents. Our work is to guide a process, which should ideally be reassuring as well as dynamic, and to introduce the methods, theory and structure matching the situation.

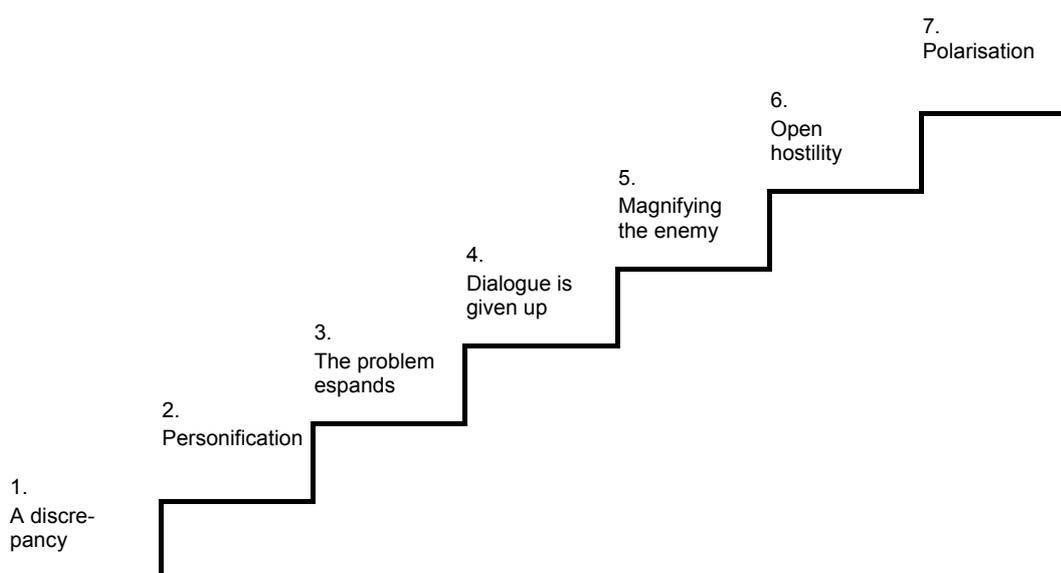
In other words, the same tools and theory of conflict can be adapted, whether it be applied to a staff room at a Danish school, social workers in former Yugoslavia, or a group of Bosnian refugees. That is, it should be stressed, after careful research, respecting and listening to the parties involved.

In the following, some patterns of escalation and relaxation are outlined. They are quite basic, not hard to understand, indeed they may even seem obvious. The consequences of

exercising conflict-solving skills are far from trivial. They may bring about a noticeable personal development and better cooperative relations, with regard to both large and small matters.

When the conflict overpowers us: a pattern

This is a standard script of a conflict running off track, showing our reactions when it moves beyond our control:



1. A discrepancy. In this phase, we simply do not agree: we try to solve a problem together, as the conflict still has not been polluted.

2. Personification. Now negative feelings come in: the actual disagreement is no longer the problem, the other side is. We reproach, attack, defend ourselves, feel hurt, misunderstand the other party and distort. We distrust the other side's motives and character. It starts to become unpleasant.

3. The problem expands. We recall other flaws and mistakes of the other side. Old unsettled conflicts and injustices reappear.

4. Dialogue is given up. The negative feelings blur our reasoning, we communicate without precision, repeat ourselves, do not listen. This is the dialogue of the deaf. We stop talking to each other, but talk about each other, looking for allies. We leave behind language and communicate with hostile action.

5. Magnifying the enemy. We no longer see the other side with clarity and nuance, picturing only the negative elements. We observe in the other side those features which we despise in ourselves. The original problem fades out of sight; now the aim is to be proven right, to win against the other party. The conflict becomes a magnet to

us, attracting our energy, draining us and taking over large parts of our consciousness.

6. Open hostility. Now we are hardened, the other is the enemy. In group conflicts we weld ourselves together, weeding out the "traitors". The contact is undertaken by extremists, the end justifies the means, We are the good guys, the other side are bad.

7. Polarisation. Geographical separation ensues. The parties involved are no longer able to be at the same place. This is the time of rupture, divorce, dismissal, resignation, escape and ghetto formation.

This model of conflict-escalation does not explain the origin of wars, but it shows some psychological reactions used in war propaganda.

And if we know this script, we may choose if we want to act according to it or prefer to intervene in the plot. The point is: there is something better we can do at each stage.

The pattern is repeated at micro as well as macro level. Try, for instance, to apply it to a personal or social conflict you know.



Meeting the conflict

The countless ways in which we respond to attacks may be resumed in three overall patterns:

- *evasion*: escaping, ignoring, putting on a mask, giving in
- *revenge*: attacking, threatening with psychological or physical violence
- *examination*: recognising disagreement, asking, being clear, listening

All of these three ways may be reasonable, but if a person/group consistently sweeps conflicts under the carpet or responds with aggression, there is a need for change. Conflict-solving does not mean to be “nice”, but to examine what goes on and act more consciously, rather than on adrenalin, emotions and old patterns, i.e. to express one’s own wishes clearly and to be attentive to those of the other side.

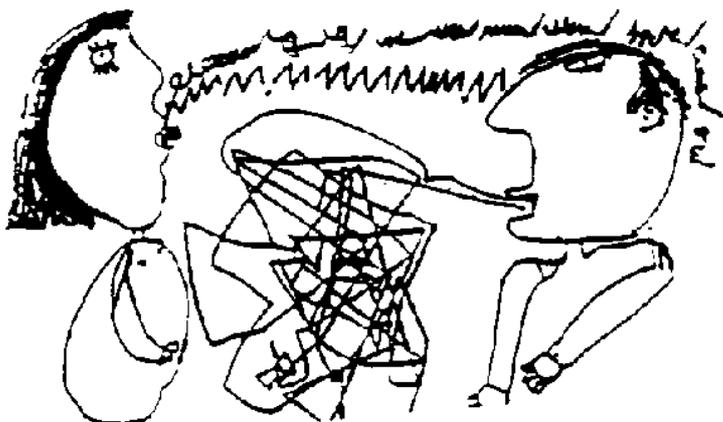
Try to reflect upon your own pattern of reaction, that of the groups you mix with, or the conflicts prevailing in your country.

Languages of escalation and relaxation

Our attitude to conflicts is manifested in verbal as well as body language. When one becomes aware of the escalating and relaxing language, it is easier to choose which path to tread.

- using the language of escalation, one encroaches on the other side’s boundaries, reproaching, interpreting, manipulating, making abstract and harping on the sins of the past, attacking the person rather than the problem.
- using the language of relaxation, one does not cross the halfway line, examining, listening till the other party has finished, making it clear to the other what one feels and wishes, being specific, focusing on present and future, separating person from matter.

The training in these languages is important. As a beginning, attention can be paid to one’s own and other people’s language in critical situations.



*A five year old child in Reggio Emilia
made this drawing about conversation*

Conflict-solving and reconciliation

There are ways in which the lopsided slide of a conflict can be halted to reach an understanding instead. There are both simple and difficult ways which can be practised and in due course become part of our natural habits.

However, there is something beyond reason, training, learning and mediation. This is the reconciliation itself: the moment we understand the other and let go of the ego's demand to be proven right.

We may prepare to forgive, create a framework for it and wish to do so. But the moment we forgive appears to us like a gift which cannot be preempted, demanded or moralised about. In the words of Løgstrup: *a spontaneous manifestation of life.*

Seen in this light, the work of solving conflicts becomes something to be approached with a certain humility.

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