

peace pledge union

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT - UNDERSTANDING PEACE

INTRODUCTION

The statistics of war are so appalling that they raise a question everyone ought to ask: are such levels of suffering, imposed by human beings on each other, really necessary? Aren't there better ways of managing and resolving the differences between people, and groups of people, which bring about war and violent conflict?

Conflict is a characteristic of human existence. It is part of the dynamic of life that drives us into the future. But it needs to be managed constructively. When associated with violence, destruction and killing, it is no longer a healthy part of living. Violent conflict solves few problems, creates many, and breeds more unhealthy conflict to come.

Conflict has characteristics of its own, and it is possible to analyse its structure and behaviour. When conflict is understood, it's easier to find ways to predict it, prevent it, transform it, and resolve it.

Starting to understand conflict

What is conflict? It is the expression of disagreement over something important to both (or all) sides of a dispute. The first important thing to grasp is that it is entirely dependent on the people involved. It depends on their having a particular point of view, which may or may not have independent facts and evidence to support it, and on how they behave when they encounter an opposing point of view. Violence is only one kind of conflict-behaviour, of course.

Question: What other sorts of conflict-behaviour can you think of?

The structure and process of conflicts are much the same, whether a conflict is between individuals or between groups and nations. The first thing to look for is the immediate cause, the event that triggered it off. Then it's necessary to look for the underlying causes - the state of affairs which makes that explosion likely. It is the underlying causes that are particularly important to understand.

Question: But first, what examples of immediate causes can you think of? When discussing underlying causes afterwards, you'll be able to understand better how the 'triggers' came about.

UNDERLYING CAUSES OF CONFLICT

The way a society is organised can create both the root causes of conflict and the conditions in which it's likely to occur. Any society which is organised so that some people are treated unequally and unjustly is likely to erupt into conflict, especially if its leaders don't represent all the members of that society. If an unequal and unjust society is reformed, then conflicts will be rare.

Discussion/ Question: Talk about the society you know best - your community, your neighbourhood, your school, your college, your workplace - and how it is organised. Can you see likely causes for conflict? Or can you see how the chance of conflict has been lessened by any particular arrangement?

Human beings have basic needs. Everyone needs to be recognised as an individual with a personal identity; everyone needs to be able to feel safe. If these needs aren't met, people protest, and protesting can lead to rebellion and violence. Many people find their identity and security in their cultural group and its particular point of view - so clashes between different cultural groups also lead to disputes that can easily turn violent. If people learn to understand that differing cultures are not inevitably a threat to each other, they will also learn how to manage their differences co-operatively and peacefully.

Discussion/ Question: How does your particular cultural group help you have a sense of self and safety? Does this mean being hostile to people of other cultural groups? When people of one group have friends in another, are they made to feel that their loyalty is divided?

One aspect of culture is particularly important: it can create language and behaviour that excludes people, creating 'us/them', 'insider/outsider' situations and using language of discrimination, intolerance and hate. If people create a society that doesn't see 'difference' and 'diversity' as problems but as valuable for social growth, many causes of conflict disappear.

Discussion: Talk about the language and behaviour that people use to reject and insult others - the language of prejudice. Has your part of society welcomed 'difference and diversity'?

The issues of conflict

NOTE: Because we are concentrating on conflict that is expressed in group violence and war, the issues we mention will mostly be those that arise between peoples and nations. But they can all be translated into local terms, to match the conflicts that you may know about personally.

1. Conflicts arise when people are competing for the same resources (such as territory, jobs and income, housing) when they aren't fairly distributed or when there aren't enough to go round. The same applies to natural resources (cultivable land, fresh water).
2. Conflicts arise when the people are unhappy with how they are governed. The most common conflicts occur when a particular group wants to be independent from a central government, or when their viewpoint isn't represented in the government, or when the government oppresses them and doesn't respect or meet their basic needs.
3. Conflicts arise when people's beliefs clash. Religious and political views are particularly sensitive, because people often depend on these for a sense of identity and belonging. Sometimes the conflict is caused by a religious/political group being attacked; sometimes it is because the group is eager to spread a particular belief and even enforce it on others. Some leaders may aggravate religious and political differences as part of their tactics for keeping or gaining power.
4. In the same way ethnic differences can cause conflict, or be made to cause it. Again, people's ethnicity gives them a sense of identity and belonging, and it is threats to this sense which can cause violent responses, just as individuals may lash out with angry words or gestures when they feel threatened.

Indeed, conflicts of all kinds most frequently arise when people feel threatened - regardless of whether the threat is real. It is harder to soothe and reassure people when they are frightened or angry.

Question: What examples of conflicts, local or national, can you think of which:

- (a) seem to have arisen from issues to do with resources?
- (b) seem to have arisen from issues to do with management/authority/government?
- (c) seem to have arisen from differences of belief?
- (d) seem to have arisen from ethnic differences?

Can you pick out from your list any examples where conflict has arisen because people feel, rather than think, that their identity is threatened? Are there any differences between this sort of conflict and the kind in which people deliberately organise themselves to struggle for resources or independence?

One particular sort of social and cultural conflict needs a paragraph to itself. This takes place within or across the boundaries of a community, nation or state, and is deep-rooted and long-lasting. It is most often the result of poverty, bad management, insecurity, injustice and a failure to meet the people's basic human needs. The groups in conflict see each other as a threat to society and culture, and as their aggression grows so does a cycle of violence that is particularly difficult to stop. Everyone mistrusts everyone else, and crime and lawlessness increase rapidly.

Discussion/ Question: What examples of this kind of conflict can you think of, local and national? (Perhaps you have experienced it yourself, and can tell your own story.) Try to work out the different points of view in one or more conflict that you have found out about or experienced, as fairly and impartially as you can.

THE LIFE-CYCLE OF A CONFLICT

Conflicts are processes, a cluster of events taking time to evolve and reshape. They are always complicated - after all, they are part of the complex lives of human beings. But there are distinct stages which conflicts have in common, through which they pass, sometimes over and over again.

Life-cycle 1. Beginning

A conflict begins to take shape as the differences between the conflicting parties become clearly defined and people begin to take sides openly. The language of 'us and them' starts being widely used, and the idea of a 'cause' to support emerges on both sides. There is no violence at this point.

If a society is strong and its leaders enlightened, a conflict can be dealt with in a constructive and positive way at this stage, and violence and a worsening situation can be avoided.

Life-cycle 2. Early growth

But if there are no existing ways of dealing with social tensions and divisions, the conflict grows worse. The two sides express open hostility, so that 'us and them' now become 'the enemy' to each other. Each side increases its demands, and its sense of grievance swells. Each side looks for allies from outside the conflict area, for moral and physical support.

Acts of violence begin. If violence is not repressed, the opposing sides hit back at one another and a destructive and deadly spiral begins.

If one of the sides has greater forces (as governments backed by armies do, for example, when suppressing civilian opposition) it may at this stage suppress its opponents, but the underlying causes of conflict remain to break out another day.

Life-cycle 3. Deadlock

Now the two sides are openly at war. Each side perceives the other as the aggressor on whom blame for the conflict falls. Each side regards itself as having the just cause. The lawlessness of war takes over, as inhibitions and restraints on violence are abandoned. Three possible situations can now be reached: (a) a stalemate with each side matching the other in violence; (b) a surge of violence on one side; (c) exhaustion of strength and resources on both sides (this has been called 'a mutually-hurting stalemate').

Situation (a) continues the spiral of violence, or may halt it at a particular level which both sides keep up.

Situation (b) can make a change: for example, one side's increased power may cause the other side to change its tactics. The conflict may return to earlier stages and repeat them. If a side now decides to withdraw, the conflict remains unresolved and is likely to begin again later.

Situation (c) is the position from which the conflict can most readily move to its next stage.

Life-cycle 4. Looking for a way out

If and when the conflict reaches a stage where both sides are unhappy with the state of things - many losses, dwindling resources, no achievable 'result' - they may enter into ceasefire agreements. These provide a pause, which is often used for resting and regrouping before embarking on the earlier stages again. Sooner or later, however, both sides decide that ending the conflict is a problem they must both solve, though it has to be done without loss of face. At this point a third party can be introduced to mediate and negotiate. This can be done, at first, without the leaders of the two sides having to meet each other.

Life-cycle 5. Settling the dispute or resolving the conflict?

Settlements involve compromise, often with bitter arguments over what the compromises will be. They seldom lead to a solution in which the two sides can collaborate to establish a firm peace. Settlements establish ways in which either side is prepared to end conflict at least for the time being.

Conflict resolution, however, looks at the underlying causes which started the conflict and deals with them, so that the risks of future conflict are removed, or initially reduced. Both sides join together to achieve this outcome.

Complete resolution of a conflict is difficult after such great hostility, but may be reached after the passage of healing time if everyone has this aim.

Life-cycle 6. Working together

Now the agreement has to be put into effect. Both sides need to create a new order together, rebuilding homes, restoring jobs and education, establishing enlightened management/government, disarming fighters and allowing refugees to return home. Even

more important, the two sides have to face up to the past, share their griefs, and reconcile their differences. This needs sensitivity, courage, and, above all, immense patience.

Discussion: Choose a conflict that interests you and collect information so that you can map its life-history. If possible, choose two - one national or international, the other local to you (perhaps it's a part of your neighbourhood's history). Perhaps the conflicts you are discussing haven't yet ended. If they seem to have done so, have the risks of renewed conflict been dealt with, do you think?

UNDERSTANDING PEACE

'Peace' is an inconveniently vague word. For some people it is easily associated with 'nothing happening', an unwelcome 'silence', or straight-up boredom. The problem is that to different people and in different ways of life 'peace' has different meanings. If we want to transform a conflict situation so that it stops being violent, we need to know what we mean by the 'peace' we want to achieve.

Discussion/ Question: What does the word 'peace' mean to you? It may have several meanings, according to what you are thinking of. ('Peace and quiet'? 'Law and order'? The end of a quarrel?...)

Peace is also the word for the end of a period of war or violent conflict, and a peace agreement may be signed to indicate that the period is at least officially over. In this sense, 'peace' means 'the absence of war or armed conflict'.

Discussion/ Question: We began by saying that war or armed conflict 'solves few problems, creates many, and breeds more unhealthy conflict to come'. Is there any doubt that this is true? And if it is true, can peace as 'the absence of violence' be a real and positive peace?

Certainly most people want to live in societies in which there is healthy conflict leading to change and progress - we are an evolving species - but in which this is achieved without fighting and killing. Most people would like it to be possible for individuals, groups and cultures to live together without violent conflict, though not resisting progress and constructive changes. Most of us would prefer our systems of law and order to be reasonable and open to reform and change, and certainly not imposed on us by force. Most of us would like a world in which human rights are respected, cultural differences are seen as enriching any society, and co-operative efforts are made to deal with problems of poverty, deprivation, injustice, and abuse of power.

'Change', 'progress', 'reform': all these things need time. They are processes. Conflict is a process. The movement towards peace is a process. Peace itself is a process. in which nonviolent solutions to healthy conflict are repeatedly explored and developed in a co-operative and collaborative way.

Discussion/ Question: How, do you think, does the existence of the preparations for war (setting up and training armies, inventing and manufacturing armaments - all of which use up money that could be spent on improving civilian life) prevent the evolution of societies to true (and therefore lasting) peace?

HANDLING CONFLICT

A great deal of research has been and is being done to find the best ways of dealing non-violently with conflicts in all their stages, whether they are interpersonal, local, national or international. All kinds of techniques and practices have been developed and are being tried out. The aim is to transform conflicts from destructive forces into violence-free, constructive ones. This approach is new. It focuses on the underlying, deep-rooted causes of conflict, and looks for solutions to them.

Most techniques for handling conflict involve the intervention of individuals or teams of individuals who aren't involved in the dispute themselves. How they intervene depends on the stage that the conflict has reached, and on their particular skills.

It also depends on who they are. Locally, you may already know people who have intervened in domestic and group disputes: they are likely to be people respected by all sides whose job it is to help sort out such problems. In community and international conflict, some interveners are voluntary peace workers or members of aid agencies. Some are from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and support agencies. In international conflicts, some interveners are diplomats from other countries, or representatives of international organisations such as the European Union (EU) or the United Nations (UN). Neutral members of the region in conflict also have a part to play.

Handling conflict 1. Prevention

Some peace-makers and teams concentrate on spotting areas in which conflict looks likely to break out, and then monitoring them closely. At the same time they help the conflicting sides to work out their disputes without use of violence.

Although this work may well prevent the outbreak of violence and the spiral into all-out war that can follow, it cannot resolve the conflict until the underlying causes have been dealt with. This requires long-term projects to identify the causes correctly and provide the sort of support needed to put things right. The right kind of support also needs to be imaginatively perceived and given. (One kind of support, of course, is training in peaceful problem-solving.)

At the moment, there simply aren't enough skilled and committed people available to do this kind of work world wide. It's also difficult, at present, for those who are at work on conflict prevention to make themselves heard where it counts. Better links between teams, and more effective ways of acting quickly to prevent violence, have yet to be devised.

Discussion/ Question/ Action: Talk about the kind of intervention that you think might be welcome to defuse conflicts that you know of, both from your own experience and from what you've heard. What sort of support would be most helpful - money? aid? training? reforms? In your study of either current affairs and/or your own community and neighbourhood, do some detective work yourself to spot possible causes of conflict, and their underlying reasons.

Handling conflict 2: crisis management

If violence is imminent but hasn't yet broken out, an intervener acceptable to both sides has a chance to remind them of the destructive risks they are running, and to express anxiety that nobody gets hurt. Again, this approach may halt the drift towards violence, but the issues disputed have not been dealt with: violence may still break out at a later date.

If violence has already taken hold, then the interveners' work is primarily an effort to keep it to a minimum and to deal with the damage it is causing. But interveners can also make sure that news of the conflict, and information about it, is spread.

In the past, outside intervention at this stage has often been military, which may sometimes seem effective in the short-term. In fact military intervention causes long-term (and sometimes irreparable) damage and makes the conflict much harder to resolve. The introduction of armed intervention simply adds another combatant to the conflict and reinforces the mistaken idea that violence can resolve it. A conflict halted by violence retains all its problems and causes, now added to and made worse by death and destruction.

Discussion/ Question: Talk about why people turn so readily to military forces to deal with disputes. Why can this never be lastingly effective? Find examples from past events, local or national or international, to show how military intervention fails to resolve the causes of a conflict, and sows seeds of future conflict as well.

Handling conflict 3: short-term settlements

When a conflict has reached the stage of deadlock, the task of interveners is to establish trust with the leaders of both sides and to gain their confidence. Leaders are encouraged to talk to neutral consultants in conflict management, freely, frankly and in private. As a result they may be prepared to consider mediation.

The task of mediators is to set up a situation in which a settlement can be discussed. Perhaps surprisingly, it's been found that non-neutral mediators can be as effective as neutral ones; what matters is that they are skilled.

Official representatives of national or global powers may also intervene. They may offer inducements to both sides, such as financial aid, to persuade them to abandon violence; or they may make threats, such as economic sanctions, to get the same result.

Some conflicts 'go to arbitration'. This means that the dispute is studied by an independent individual or group, who act like a judge in a law court: they decide how the conflict can be fairly and justly settled, and the conflicting sides may be bound by law to accept the terms. Once again, however, although the underlying causes of the conflict may have been defined, they haven't been dealt with. Settlements and ceasefires may be achieved, but they are quite likely to collapse. Ceasefires in particular give all the sides a chance to rest and re-arm to fight another day. But they can also provide a period in which more long-term solutions can be discussed.

Discussion/ Question/ Action: What kind of skills do you think mediators and arbitrators ought to have? What do you think might be needed to win the confidence of the warring leaders? Choose a conflict and try to find out how it was settled - were problems dealt with, or were more outbreaks stored up for the future?

Handling conflict 4: long-term solutions

When the conflict has reached the stage when the disputants are ready to look at other options than violence, real negotiations can begin. They need to be carefully prepared for. The confidence of both sides must be gained, so that they not only come to the negotiation

table but are willing to co-operate when they get there. Another step is making sure that skilled interveners are in place throughout the war zone, to help locally in bringing the violence to an end. Links between the people involved in the peace process and the people in power must be made firm and steady. This period is a tense one: there are always risks that violence will escalate again. The problems that caused the conflict have not gone away, and now they are aggravated by feelings of vengeance and anger created by the destructiveness of the war.

Once negotiations are under way, what do they need to achieve?

Discussion/ Question: What is your answer to that question?

There are indeed many answers, all valuable contributions to peace-building. There are perhaps four that ought to appear in any list:

1. The root causes of the conflict must be understood and plans made to do something about them.
2. Leaders and people on all sides must be sure that the peace process is 'theirs', not other people's ideas and wishes imposed on them.
3. A realistic and practical timetable for winding down the conflict needs to be agreed by everyone involved.
4. Everyone must be committed to making the peace process work.

The interveners' work isn't over yet. Where there are difficulties, they can talk to the leaders, clarifying important issues and acting as a link between them (and between them and local leaders) if communications break down. Other experts can, and increasingly do, set up organised 'problem-solving workshops' to help all sides to understand the conflict, the various points of view, and consider a whole raft of possible solutions. Advanced problem-solving means looking at the conflict and its solutions in the light of human needs - a perspective that helps the combatants to come together in a joint effort to put things right. This begins with patiently establishing the aims that they can share.

Culture can be defined as 'the total range of beliefs, values, ideas and activities of a group of people with shared traditions'. The importance of culture is enormous. Culture conditions people's understanding and perception of language, behaviour and events - which means that cultural differences can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. In some parts of the world, a cultural approach to conflict resolution is often more successful than any other. In these cases, interveners and peace-builders look for cultural lines of communication that already exist and send messages of problem-solving, nonviolence and hope along them. In other parts of the world, conflict solving is best helped by mediators from within the conflict, who already have the trust of their own group and understanding of the prevailing culture. The aim is never to suppress cultural differences, but to build on them towards a nonviolent future that benefits everyone.

Discussion: Time to look again at a conflict of which you know personally. Talk about how the search for long-term solutions, rather than short-term settlements, can bring combatants together with a common interest in basic needs. If you were a mediator, what would you do?

Handling conflict 5: guidelines

1. Creating peace (like conflict, like life) is a process. It takes time. Building trust between people at war with each other takes time, and it may need to be very gradual indeed. Every small step towards trust-building is of value for future peace.
2. When people start talking to each other about ending the conflict, this too is the start of a process. Nothing can be solved overnight. So first it's a good idea to talk about talking: Where shall we talk? What about? In what order? Ideas from all sides should be promised a hearing.
3. Destructive conflicts make destructive changes. The destructive changes made to a society in conflict need to be understood, acknowledged and mended before the process towards a lasting peace can advance.
4. If a conflict is to be lastingly resolved, constructive social changes may be needed to make sure that everyone is treated fairly and justly.

Discussion/ Question: You may have guidelines of your own to suggest, arising from your own study of conflict. Let us know what they are, and we will make sure they are shared.

Handling conflict 6: looking ahead

We've already said that there aren't yet enough skilled interveners, mediators, negotiators, peace-builders at work to help groups at war to solve their problems. There's another problem: those who are already at work are not yet a fully co-ordinated organisation. There are many different peace-building groups, many different approaches, and many different timescales. Variety is a good thing, but the experience and knowledge needs to be shared. A coherent overall network with good communications is needed so that everyone knows what everyone else is doing and the work isn't duplicated unnecessarily.

This is where the idea of coalition comes in. A coalition is an alliance of people or groups working together for a shared purpose. Political coalitions quickly encounter problems, because every member wants to lead. But social coalitions aren't interested in power: they work for the common good of everyone.

If the different groups, institutions and individuals already working for the peaceful resolution of conflict form coalitions, then a peace-building network begins to take shape. Where there is a strong network of strong relationships, war is less likely to recur. It means a coalition of interveners too: members of this young and exciting profession have a lot to communicate and a lot to learn from each other, all round the world. As they do, a 'culture of peace' can begin to grow and spread, crossing all boundaries and enriching all lives.

About Peace Pledge Union:

The Peace Pledge Union is the oldest secular pacifist organisation in Britain. Since 1934 it has been campaigning for a warless world. For more information see: www.ppu.org.uk