Opinion

Constructing conflict

By Kent Arnold

In conflict resolution situations, concerns about issues of culture are particularly perplexing. How much does culture matter? What aspects of culture matter most? In many conference and training settings, discussions of culture frequently gravitate towards the traditional mechanisms used to manage conflict. Yet discussions remain limited if they fail to address conflict behaviours and assumptions about conflict and its resolution which give rise to these mechanisms. If our aim is to create processes which assist parties to communicate and problem solve more effectively, then these behaviours and assumptions must be identified and interpreted.

For practitioners, then, "culture" matters a great deal. Whether intervening in a conflict which involves adolescents, military figures, government officials, business people or identifiable community groups, understanding how parties construct conflict consumes a significant portion of our time. The practitioner's tools are designed to help us understand the meaning parties attach to symbols, actions and events; how they evaluate options for managing or coping with conflict; and what values they attach to certain settlement options. These techniques are particularly important when the practitioner seeks to construct the local meaning of conflict in an unfamiliar setting. Still, how do we do this in an appropriate and effective manner?

Last year I was involved in a three-phased training of trainers programme in Burundi. At the end of the first phase, a Burundian senior conflict resolution trainer presented the following scenario to participants. A Minister of Education received the go-ahead to build a new university. The minister selected two advisors, one academic and the other technical, to oversee the project. Both advisors had a strong relationship with the minister; however, they did not trust each other. This was primarily due to the actions of another party, a political advisor, who had been sowing seeds of mistrust between them. The advisors were told that there was no prior dispute between the two of them.

At the start of the simulation, the minister brought the technical and academic advisors together to discuss this new project. The news that the advisors would work together on the project was met with a palpable lack of enthusiasm. The minister sensed something was amiss and decided to meet separately with the advisors. In both meetings, the response was similar. Neither party spoke about a problem in working with the other, although non-verbal signals suggested that it would not be easy. When the minister asked each party if any prior interaction between the two of them had been difficult, neither advisor acknowledged any previous problem.

We stopped the simulation at this point to discuss what had taken place and to help...
the minister problem solve. The question was: In a situation where there seems to be a conflict, how do you get parties to confront it? The content of the ensuing discussion helped me understand that this was not an unusual problem in Burundi and that communication patterns often stymied attempts to address conflict. A question, simple enough, was directed at me: What would you do to address this situation in your country? Their reaction to my response about confronting conflict signalled that this would be an unlikely option, given the scenario.

At the end of the workshop, we generated a list of topics to be included in the second phase of the training. "Communication" was at the top of the list. Upon returning to Cape Town, I thought about the scenario and wondered how the topic of communication should be addressed in a country which has experienced severe forms of episodic violence. I was concerned that what my common-sense knowledge told me about communication in a conflict setting was of little use to the participants, and worse, that it put them in potentially dangerous situations.

The challenge that this workshop scenario poses is one that arises frequently for practitioners working in intercultural environments. What can we do when participants acknowledge that what their culture tells them about approaches to conflict has proven to be ineffective? How do we appropriately transfer techniques or locate universal concepts of conflict resolution which may help parties gain a new perspective on conflict? How do we dissect traditional mechanisms to better understand patterns of communication and problem solving? Finally, how do we get at these questions when the answers are based on knowledge which parties take for granted? For practitioners working in intercultural environments, finding answers to these questions is fundamental.

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