

Conflict Information Systems

by

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Information for the Grassroots and the Experts

Conflict resolution is a field where the traditional, technical-expert model of information is inadequate. In this model, which is typical of medicine and engineering, "basic" scientific research leads to "applied" research which, in turn, leads to a tightly defined series of procedures that are taught to expert practitioners in professional schools. These practitioners ultimately sell their services to businesses, government agencies and everyday citizens who never need to really understand what is being done on their behalf or why. While this expert-oriented model can be applied to the training of mediators and other professional intermediaries, it doesn't really penetrate to the level of grassroots disputing behavior.

However, the vast majority of conflict interactions are undertaken by ordinary citizens without formal conflict resolution training and without the help of third-party experts. Professional intermediaries are so expensive, and in such short supply, that they can facilitate only a tiny fraction of conflict interactions. Most conflicts are, therefore, handled exclusively by the disputing parties and their friends and associates – people who are frequently drawn into informal intermediary roles.

Windows of Opportunity

Thus, the success of the field (meaning our ability to decrease the destructiveness of conflicts and to assist in their resolution) is largely dependent upon our ability to teach grassroots citizens improved strategies for dealing with conflict. However, to reach these people, we have to first recognize that, most of the time, people feel little need for expert advice. Virtually everyone encounters conflict situations on a daily basis and, as a result, they develop and gain confidence in their personal conflict styles. This means that opportunities for learning tend to arise only when people are confronted with new and difficult conflict problems that they do not feel prepared to handle. In these situations, short windows of opportunity are created. Since people usually have to commit themselves to specific courses of action within days (or hours) of being presented with a problem, they are likely to revert to business-as-usual behavior unless they can quickly, easily, and inexpensively find credible information about better alternatives.

Traditional education and training programs are generally unable to operate within this window. Typical three-hour college courses or forty-hour professional training programs tend to be offered at irregular times and in inconvenient places. These general courses, which try to address everyone's needs, are unlikely to focus upon a person's immediate problem. In addition, traditional programs tend to be expensive and time consuming. People are likely to be so over committed that they don't have the time to learn how to solve someone else's problem – they barely have time to look for better ways of dealing with their own problems. Traditional training programs also tend to provide participants with information on just one approach, even though

there are many approaches available, each suited to different situations. In a limited training program or class, there isn't time to compare and contrast such options.

Internet Opportunities

The Web, at least theoretically, offers a mechanism for getting around these limitations. First of all, it is possible to build [as CRInfo (www.crinfo.org) and Beyond Intractability (www.beyondintractability.org) is doing] a comprehensive catalog of information resources. The Web can then provide users with free and instantaneous access to this information in the form of mini-lessons, which outline common conflict problems and alternative strategies for dealing with those problems. The goal is to reduce what we call "information friction" and thereby reduce the number of times that people are forced to try to "reinvent the wheel."