



## Theoretical Foundations: Conflict and the Role of Information Systems

### The Conflict Challenge

**Destructive Conflict** — Costly, destructive conflicts are everywhere -- family disputes, community conflict, sectarian tensions, unsuccessful business negotiations, labor strife, political stalemate, policy paralysis, civil and international war, genocide, terrorism, and, conceivably, catastrophic conflict involving weapons of mass destruction. Destructive conflict dynamics also contribute to our chronic inability to sensibly deal with a broad range of other problems such as crime, poverty, disease, and economic revitalization. In short, they are a major contributor to human misery.

**Constructive Conflict** — Conflict is also inevitable and, in fact, desirable. It is a major driver behind the processes of positive social change. It is through conflict processes that people are able to oppose activities that they believe are unwise and unjust. The challenge, therefore, is to find more effective ways of promoting constructive conflict while limiting its destructiveness.

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*Conflict is inevitable, but its destructiveness is not.*

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**A Role for Everyone** — The destructiveness (or constructiveness) of conflict is determined by the cumulative actions of everyone involved. This includes people at all social levels in the full range of formal and informal conflict roles. While those in leadership positions obviously are important, their actions are constrained by their constituents. If leaders stray too far from the views of their constituents, they are likely to find themselves unable to successfully pursue their agenda. In short, society's ability to meet conflict challenges is dependent upon the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of citizens at all levels.

**Importance of Conflict Learning** — Throughout society, there are people who know a lot about how to address conflict in more constructive ways. This knowledge is not, however, utilized as widely or as often as it needs to be. While there is obviously much more to be learned, we could still go a long way toward limiting destructive conflict and the resulting human suffering if people, institutions, and government would just utilize techniques which are already well developed, understood, and tested. Unfortunately, most people don't know about these options and

hence rely on destructive, conflict-as-usual practices. Or they try to "reinvent the wheel"—sometimes successfully, often not.

While, of course, improved conflict information systems are only part of the solution, the Consortium does believe that providing quality conflict learning opportunities to as many people—in as many sectors of society—as possible is an important step towards more constructively handling society's most vexing conflict problems. Internet-based systems are able to reach many more people at a much lower cost (in terms of both money and time) than other instructional and learning methods. That is why the Consortium has focused its efforts for the last 20 years on developing such systems.

### The Role of Information Systems

**Information Systems** — While it would be nice to fully train everyone in the latest, culturally appropriate, conflict-handling skills, there is simply not enough time or money to do this using conventional education and training programs. We critically need much more efficient learning and information systems that provide people with the information that they need, when they need it, from a source they trust, in a format they can understand, and at a price they can afford.

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*A society's conflict skills are limited by its ability to take advantage of available learning windows.*

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Providing this kind of information is the mission of the Conflict Information Consortium.

**Learning Windows** — Most learning happens during what the Consortium calls "learning windows." These windows don't open when things are going well, because people don't see the need for change. When things are not going well, however, people often look for help. Increasing the availability of conflict education and training programs that fit within these relatively narrow "learning windows" is likely to be the most effective way of improving conflict skills.

**Information System Design:** Learning can also be enhanced by a learning system which meets the following criteria:

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- *Resistant to information overload* – with succinct, "make-a-difference" information easily found,
- *Quickly and easily accessible* by individuals with different types of computer systems and network connections,
- *Trustworthy* – offering conflict advice that really works,
- *Trusted* – offering advice endorsed by sources trusted by users,
- *Affordable* (preferably free),
- *Relevant to user-specific conflict problems* (materials focused on other conflict problems are likely to be of little interest or value),
- *Realistically applicable* in the user's conflict role,
- *Appropriate to user personalities, skills, and learning styles*,
- *Attractively presented* in ways which can reasonably compete with more entertainment-oriented sources of conflict information,
- *Understandable* by users with differing backgrounds and vocabularies (and languages)
- *Comprehensive* – with access to information on all potentially viable options.

## Information Technology Revolution

Prior to the revolution in information technology, it would have been impossible to provide all but an elite few with access to conflict information and learning systems with the above characteristics. At even the best conflict resolution centers and research universities, obtaining this information would have been (except for the most dedicated students) prohibitively time-consuming and expensive.

Today, however, society is in the midst of an historic shift in the nature of the information systems that it relies upon to transfer life skills from generation to generation and upgrade skills within generations. Consortium information systems are riding this technological wave with the goal of exploiting the following key features of Internet-based information and learning systems:

- *Universal coverage* – We are rapidly moving to the point where virtually all significant information will be Web accessible (and, increasingly, free or very low cost). Soon information that is not will, for most purposes, be ignored.
- *Multimedia capabilities* – The Internet's original text and graphics-oriented systems are being supplemented by true multimedia including Internet telephone, teleconferencing and high-quality video,
- *Anytime / anywhere access* – The global reach of Internet-connected computers is now being further extended by new wireless technologies and iPod-type portable multimedia players,
- *Information diversity* – While the dominance of big corporations is still a problem, the Internet still gives small communities a very low-cost ability to connect people worldwide,
- *Search* – Google-class search engines make it possible to find almost anything that's posted on the Web (provided that you know exactly what you are looking for),
- *Ease-of-use* – You no longer need to be a "techie" to use the Internet effectively, and
- *Affordability* – Web-based information systems are now one of the lowest-cost and most accessible sources of information. It is no longer the province of the rich.

## Internet Limitations To Be Overcome

Consortium projects are simultaneously working to overcome a number of serious limitations of Internet-based information systems. These include:

- *Lack of quality control*--the Internet and its principal search engines are extremely limited in their ability to assess the quality of information provided. The Consortium is working to provide much more effective mechanisms for identifying the information that is most likely to be helpful to users.
- *Information overload* – Information is of little value if people can't find what they need, when they need it. For users who know exactly what they're searching for, the Internet search engines can provide true instant information access. However, in cases where people aren't exactly sure where to look, or what they want to find, the search process commonly results in frustrating information overload and no useful answers. To address this, the Consortium is building "suggestion engines" for guiding users to the most useful information for their particular needs.
- *Entertainment bias* – The Internet is, primarily, a voluntary medium in which people only look at what they want to. In this context, instructional materials that are quick and easy to master are more likely to be successful, as are materials which are fun and interesting. This is why the Consortium is working to translate jargon-filled texts into high-interest learning objects ("HILOs").
- *Narrowcasting* – This problem arises when people only seek out information from within their trusted community and avoid "broadcasters" who, because they have to appeal to all sides of a conflict, may say things that people are reluctant to hear. This is why the Consortium is trying to identify "bridge people" who are working to show their communities the benefits of looking at the bigger picture.
- *Emotional learning* – The Web is still, primarily, an electronic publishing system that tends to focus on text-based information and rational/academic learning. While rapidly advancing, the Internet's ability to serve as a vehicle for experiential and emotional learning is much more limited. Since much conflict behavior is determined at the subjective and emotional level, the Consortium is trying to identify and promote constructive emotional learning materials.
- *Hate mongering* – The Internet does, of course, also speed the flow of information that promotes more destructive approaches to conflict. This is why counterbalancing systems like the Consortium's are so badly needed.

In short, overcoming the Net's limitations will require more than continued development of organizational websites (which typically focus on providing electronic access to conventional publications). It will require larger-scale, meta-projects like the Consortium's, which assemble this information in more usable forms. While we're a long way from overcoming the above limitations, the Consortium's past projects have made important progress and its next-generation systems will add important new capabilities that will benefit all who seek to limit the destructive nature of conflict.