

# CREATIVE TOOLS FOR ADDRESSING INTERCULTURAL CONFLICTS

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**Abstract:** *Cultural differences often lead to conflicts because they influence working and communication styles, attitudes and individual values. The symbolic level of the conflict is most difficult to address because, while material interests and power asymmetries can be noticed and acknowledged by the parties, cultural issues, connected to unconscious ways of knowing, are not easily perceived. Therefore, addressing the symbolic dimension of conflicts implies using creative tools, with symbolic significance, such as storytelling, metaphors, rituals and images, able to contribute to the acknowledgement of cultural sensibilities and the creation of common frames of symbols and meanings.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural conflict, symbolic level of conflict, cultural values, cultural frames, creativity*

In different groups and organizations where people collaborate to achieve common goals (study groups, professional organizations, companies, teams, research collaborations or alliances of various kinds), conflicts may arise from the interaction between people with different views, goals, values or perceptions.

Cultural differences often lead to conflict because they determine the working styles, communication, attitudes and individual values. In some cases, they may interfere with competition for resources and / or power within the group.

Generally, there are three levels of conflict: material, relational and symbolic. Conflict can occur at one of these levels or refer to a combination of more of them. In this case, understanding the symbolic dimension, related to the cultural identities and perspectives on the world, is essential to prevent and mitigate escalating a conflict situation. In general, it is considered that the symbolic level of conflict is the most difficult to address because, while material interests and power asymmetries can be seen and recognized by the parties, cultural characteristics, being rooted in the sub-conscious, are more difficult to decipher<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, it is considered that the most notorious international conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the conflicts that accompanied the disintegration of Yugoslavia or the conflict between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, owe their complexity to the fact that they are not only about territorial or political issues, but mainly about irreconcilable differences rooted in representing and legitimising identities and ways of being and understanding the world between nations deeply attached to their cultural traditions.

Cultural meanings are those values and interpretations of the world that seem implicit and self-evident to those who belong to cultural communities, but may appear as false, counter-intuitive or absurd to outsiders. For that reason they are compared with lenses

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Avruch, Black, Peter W. & Scimecca, Joseph A., *Conflict Resolution: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Green Wood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1991

through which we look at the world, determining perceptions and interpretation of things and phenomena around us. They create frameworks and model our value judgments and aspirations.

The link between culture and conflict is particularly strong because the culture in which we formed determines how we frame, interpret and manage conflicts. The very existence of a conflict may or may not be recognized depending on the cultural context. Thus, in a Canadian paper<sup>2</sup> is presented the case of an old Chinese emigrant who claimed to have never experienced any conflicts during the past 40 years, an unusual statement from the point of view of the Canadian researchers, interpreted by them as a result of regarding the world in line with specific Confucian tradition of harmony. Similarly, heated discussions within a community or family may seem like a form of conflict to an external observer, unfamiliar with such events, while for the other group members they may be a natural and desirable form of exchanging views.

For the better understanding of the cultural aspects of conflict, researchers use the tool of cultural frameworks as a form of clustering and comparing cultures and highlighting their main features. The three most used cultural frames distinguish between individualism and collectivism, traditionalism and modernism, high and low context.

The individualist/collectivist distinction refers to how different cultures perceive the relationship between individual and group interests. Individualistic cultures, prevalent in the West, tend to privilege individual interests, valuing freedom of choice, reward according to merit, consumption, equity and horizontal open social relations. Collectivist cultures subordinate individual interest to group interests, valuing harmony, modesty, social homogeneity, savings, respect to family and traditional social hierarchies.

The traditional/modern distinction refers to the existence of a set of features that only some societies have acquired under the influence of economic and social changes associated with industrialization, thus distinguishing from societies less influenced by those developments. They manifest through different perspectives on goals, procedures, deadlines, personal relationships, openness to technological processes and innovation.

For communication and addressing intercultural conflict, particularly important is the distinction between high and low cultural contextualization of the meanings transmitted. In cultures with low degree of contextualization, communication is direct, one says what is thinking, leaving little room for interpretation. This has the advantage of preventing misunderstandings, but, on the other hand, there is the risk of generating confrontation and escalation of conflict. In contrast, in cultures where communication is highly contextualized, the message is not explicit and understanding it requires a high degree of attention paid to signals sent by expression, style, tone, allusions and implications, to the non-verbal communication. Disseminating factual information is a secondary objective of communication while preserving appearances (saving face) is paramount. Although this indirect form of communication avoids the risk of a frontal confrontation, the potential to cause problems, especially in dealing with people from other backgrounds, may underlie smouldering and lasting conflicts.

Cultural classification is not limited to these dimensions. According to other authors, many other distinguishing features are to be taken into account, as they are underlying

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<sup>2</sup> Michelle, Le Baron, *Bridging Troubled Waters: Conflict Resolution from the Heart*, Jossey Bass, 2002

cultural meanings: universalism (attention to rules, laws, generalizations) or particularism (focus on exceptions and assessments on a case by case basis); specificity (preference for explicit definitions, measurements, results) or diffusion (preference for overview and understanding of the meaning); inner direction (prioritizing values related to human behaviour and thinking) or outer direction (valorisation of natural rhythms, harmony, universe); perception of time as linear and unidirectional or cyclic and spiral, etc.

It should be noted that the cultural frames mentioned above are just tools to highlight differences in values and approaches among cultures. It would be wrong to force inclusion of diverse groups and cultural backgrounds in these highly generalized frames or to attempt to deduce from them rules of conduct for interacting with people from different cultures. Such generalizations do not take into account the depth of a culture and that cultures are dynamic and constantly changing phenomena. Therefore, they can not replace, under no circumstances, building relationships and sharing experiences, processes that take time but are essential for becoming familiar with other cultures.

Since symbolic inter-cultural conflicts are intimately related to fundamental aspects of identity, knowledge and values, logical approach and communication skills may be insufficient to overcome them. Moreover, uncoordinated attempts of the involved parties to alleviate misunderstandings may be misunderstood due to different systems of perceptions and cultural meanings, potentially leading to escalation.

Therefore, addressing the symbolic dimension of the conflict requires creative means, with symbolic contents, such as stories, metaphors, rituals and images that contribute to the understanding of cultural sensitivities and to the setting up of common frameworks of symbols and meanings. Participants from different cultures must seek opportunities to look in the others' world by sharing information with cultural meaning. This requires an integrated approach, combining objective assessment and subjective intuition, verbal and non-verbal communication, emotional intelligence and improvisation, open thinking, creativity and determination not to give up.

Sharing cultural meanings through storytelling is considered one of the most effective tools in overcoming inter-cultural barriers to the communication between people from different backgrounds. Telling significant life experiences and hearing stories told by the interlocutor are unique opportunities to open one's cultural perspective, contributing, at the same time, to the deepening of self-knowledge. A Siberian saying is relevant in this regard: *If you do not know the trees you can get lost in the woods. But if you do not know the story, you can get lost in life.*

Stories are symbolic vehicles that can transport the interlocutor in context, building, at the same time, an atmosphere of trust and empathy, by revealing personal motives, intentions, assessments and judgments. As the storytelling of a life experience communicates the narrator's perspective on his behaviour in a specific situation, it does not generate a rejection reaction from the other party, even if the cultural perspective may be different.

Whether we come from a culture with rich oral tradition or not, personal stories provide valuable clues on experience, identity and values. Through them communication connects with the soul, as personal notes are easier to remember, along with embedded values, than abstract theories.

Thus, through sharing stories, substantial symbolic messages can be exchanged without degenerating into an argument.

A similar role may play the incursions in the history and culture of the country of origin, or showing reproductions of works of art, photo collages, films or plays. They are rich in cultural meaning and as the sense of beauty is universal, they are facilitating connections between different cultures.

Metaphors are creative ways of connecting an idea with another. They are rich in information about the perceptions and subjective impressions related to a situation, being at the same time, revealing for the systems of meanings that come into contact. Through metaphors, we may evaluate how intense the differences of meaning are in a cross-cultural dialogue and find new ways of relating. Thus, metaphors can be extremely useful in conflict transformation, as indirect means of communication and connection at the symbolic level between cultural value systems.

Rituals are routine activities, formal or informal, traditional or improvised. Celebrating together common religious holidays or attending public events or more or less formal meetings may be ways of using rituals in conflict transformation. They draw our attention to what we have in common and allow shaping of a common identity, marking key moments and facilitating participation.

Creative tools are indirect ways of addressing the symbolic level of conflicts. Their results are remarkable, but they only occur on long term, through gradual approximation of identities and value systems. Therefore, they should not replace but complement established conflict management tools such as negotiation and mediation. For that reason, training creativity, cultural sensitivity and intuition must be essential in the formation of a negotiator or mediator, as well as in the formation of all those aiming to pursue careers in cross-cultural environments.

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