

Title

The Conflict Web

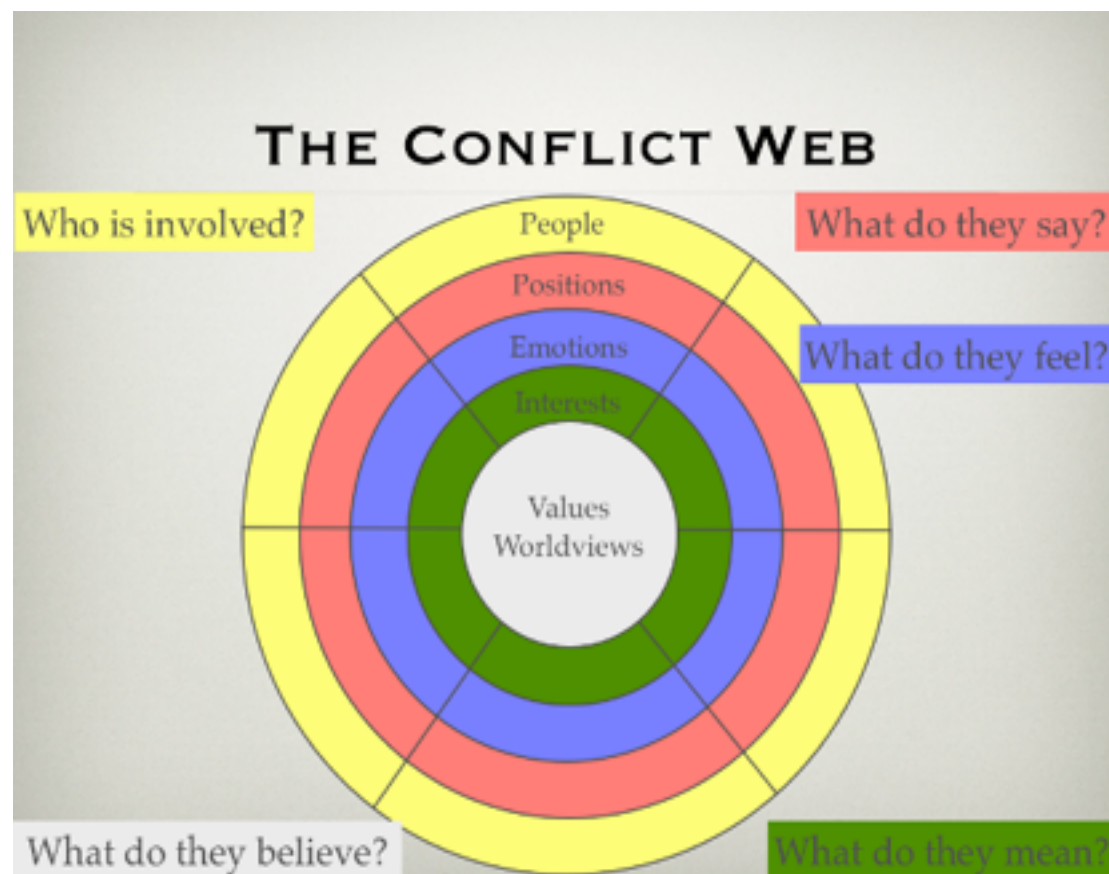
Subtitle

A tool for groups and individuals to understand the impact of conflict and to visualise the underlying needs of conflict parties

Purpose

One way to understand and analyse conflict is to see it as a web of relationships, positions, interests and worldviews. When relationships collapse groups and communities can fall apart. To be able to rebuild relationships it is important for conflict parties and groups to understand how conflict impacts on them and to visualise commonalities and differences. The conflict web allows interveners and conflict parties to visualise these aspects of the conflict and to generate discussion on how to deal with the situation.

Tool



Description

The conflict web is a useful tool to make the often invisible strands that connect us visible and to help individuals, groups and organisations understand the conflict web that they are part of. The tool is most useful for intra-group conflict with a limited number of participants. The people who use the web do not necessarily have to be the people involved in the conflict. The tool may also be useful for inter-group conflict situations to map the conflict

and to highlight commonalities and differences, although it needs to be acknowledged that inter-group conflicts involve many latent and proximate sources of conflict, as well as complex relationships and issues of identity which may be too complex to visualise in the web.

Step A: Tell the conflict story.

Ask the people involved in the conflict web analysis to tell the conflict story that they want to analyse. Who is involved, what do they say, what emotions are involved?

Step B: Present the conflict web.

Draw an empty web similar to the one above on a whiteboard or on flipchart paper. The web needs to be big enough to allow a space in the outer circle for every person or group involved in the conflict and enough space to write their statements into the spaces for positions.

Step C: Fill in the empty spaces.

Facilitate a group discussion on who is involved and write the names or descriptions of all stakeholders or stakeholder groups into the spaces in the outer circle of the web.

Ask for statements from each stakeholder or group. These should be as close to verbatim as possible. Write these statements into the positions circle. If used for intergroup conflict you might need to write a number of statements into each space in the positions circle.

Ask for the emotions that underlie the statements. Are the people angry, sad, calm etc.? Write the relevant emotions into the spaces in the emotions circle.

Step D: Look for commonalities and differences.

Ask the people involved in the analysis to point out commonalities and differences? How are people from all sides of the conflict being affected? Does the conflict cause stress, fear, anger and other uncomfortable emotions in most or all stakeholders or groups? Does that mean that no one is really enjoying the situation? Visualising the common negative impacts of conflict often helps conflicting parties to understand the need for new ways of thinking and for breaking up the cycle of attack and retaliation.

Step E: Deduct underlying human needs and interests.

Now it is time to discuss what lies beneath a position. What are the underlying needs of the person or group which stated a particular position? Why do they feel a certain way? If the stakeholders are involved in the analysis process this is the point where they should be questioned very carefully and gently to disclose why they said something. Write the underlying "interest" into the circle for interests.

Step F: Encourage discussion of values and world views

The circle in the middle allows for discussion of values and worldviews that underlie the identified interests and needs. The following example might help to guide the discussion: let's assume that "respect" is the need or interest that caused a community group to reject and oppose the settlement of a new refugee community in the area. You should then ask the community group to explain what "respect" means for them. Which protocols of communication symbolise respect, and which are disrespectful? What expectations did the community group have of the newcomers? Were they fulfilled or disappointed? Where do these expectations come from? Are they connected to religious beliefs, to upbringing, to common social practice? If that's the way we do things around here, where does that way come from? Then the other group is asked to explain their expectations and communication protocols? Which ways of showing respect did they bring to the community, how did they want to be welcomed? How do they welcome others in their own community?

Step G: (Optional) Ask the group on how to move forward from these insights.

If the web is used as a conflict resolution tool to guide discussion, ask participants on whether they have gained insights they did not have before. Ask them how they want to address the commonalities and differences and how they can find options that satisfy the interests of all stakeholders involved.

Context

The conflict web has been used in conflict resolution workshops with culturally diverse communities in Australia and also for conflict resolution workshops with chiefs and leaders in Vanuatu. We have used the web to analyse conflict stories that were told by participants and to move people away from inflammatory statements and competitive conflict behaviour. The idea of the web was drawn from John Paul Lederach's work¹ and his realisation that human relationships are at the centre of social change initiatives. The web helps to visualise these relationships and what is important to people and groups. By visualising the discussion in the form of a spider web, commonalities and differences become visible and the outer circle symbolises that all conflicting parties or groups belong to the same social system. The concept of positions, needs and world views refers to the work of John Burton, to interest-based negotiation theory and to work on culture and conflict resolution by Michelle LeBaron.

Case Study

When we use the conflict web we often find out that people on different sides of the conflict have very similar needs and interests. For example, in a heated intergenerational conflict in which a 15 year old girl runs away from home because her father forbids her to be together with her boyfriend the daughter and the father may look like they have completely opposing views. When looking at the underlying interests it comes out that both feel a strong need to be respected. The father demands respect from his daughter and would like

¹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, p. 76.

her to obey his wishes, the daughter demands respect from her father in letting her make her own choices and trusting her to do the right thing. When we investigate this example a little bit deeper we find out that the father's need for respect stems from the traditional education of the father in which he was always told to respect his elders without questions. The daughter on the other hand is growing up in an environment that tells her that respect is earned and that young people should be trusted to make their own mistakes and to make their own choices. While this analysis may not necessarily resolve the conflict, talking about their different starting points and views may help both father and daughter to better understand the situation and to realise that both have similar needs and anxieties.