

# Put on the Hats for Conflict Management

## A Training Session of the Trainers Pool of the European Youth Forum

by Karolina Vrethem

If you hear the word "conflict" - what do you think about then? Quarrels, disagreements, blockage of roads, people throwing stones, war...? One of the challenges in discussing conflict management is the range of issues the term "conflict" covers. The term is also used to cover both the cause (e.g. a disagreement) and the outcome (e.g. fight). Moreover conflict management is a rich subject to look into, since it is inseparable from subjects such as communication, emotions, power, relations etc, all of which are worth exploring on their own.

Is conflict management not part and parcel of managing a society or any group of people? It is also a personal issue that most people easily relate to. Few of us, if any, have gone through life without being involved in personal or societal conflicts. As soon as there is social interaction, there is potential conflict. Some have even said that conflict is the essence of social relations and that all our communication behaviour is aimed at preventing or solving conflict. If, which I believe, had communication is the norm and good communication is a skill, this idea is reinforced. Conflict management is increasingly asked for in training. Whether this reflects an increased awareness of the potential central role of conflicts in any relation or is a response to the state of the world and our societies would be interesting to know.

### Doing the hat-trick

The pool of trainers of the European Youth Forum addressed the issue and focused its first training event specifically for the Pool on Conflict Management. The trainers pool is a group of active youth trainers open to member organisations of the European Youth Forum. Member organisations are invited to contact the pool if they want additional skills in seminars or trainings. As members of the pool we come from different realities and have different experiences. The training was therefore designed as a 'laboratory' where we would try out and experiment with methods as well as discuss theories. Afterwards we would then evaluate how

useful we thought this was and in which circumstances the methods could be used. This meta-reflection was done through a hat-trick. Every participant put on a (self-made) hat to step into the role of reflector after each session. As a tool it was very useful. I have put on my hat to do some reflection for this article.

### What is conflict?

To start with we looked at different causes of conflict. Mentioned as causes of conflict were a range of issues such as misunderstandings, suppression, different values or needs. We then identified steps of escalation and of constructive management. Looking at the steps of conflict evolution it was evident that within the group we more than often saw conflict as leading to a destructive confrontation rather than to increased learning. Maybe this way of thinking is related to the disastrous effects conflicts can have if ill-managed and so we see them as a cause of problems. Is this the reality or are we just used to recognising conflicts when they turn into flames? Working with conflict management we need to ask ourselves how we regard conflicts. How often do we acknowledge or see the scope of the potential learning with which conflicts provide us? Are more conflicts managed poorly rather than constructively? In conflict management training the Chinese sign for conflict is often introduced. It stands for risk and opportunity and it is worth thinking about. What would happen with our conflicts if we could see them as learning opportunities and as possibilities for finding new and creative ways forward?

### Trainers as facilitators in conflict

One way of changing the chain of events and to see alternatives to "discomfort" leading to "crisis" is to look at where and how you can intervene. Mediation and facilitation were chosen as a focus of the training. Different skills were identified as well as the importance of looking at needs. Needs which in the first instance seem incompatible might very well not be. Expressing what we *want* might not be expressing what we *need*. If we look at underlying



needs and the reasons for them, we are a big step closer to managing the conflict. When talking of mediation or facilitation, the learning process should be encouraged rather than seeing mediation and facilitation just as methods of prevention and avoidance of conflict. Both mediation and facilitation emphasise the process, but a mediator would take on a more prominent role than a facilitator, engaging her/himself also in the content, providing alternative solutions or expert influence.

We concluded that as trainers we probably find ourselves more often in the role of facilitators than as mediators. By letting everyone express themselves, create safe environments and propose a process, facilitators can play a major role in managing or resolving conflicts. A facilitator can help to balance power in unequal situations, encourage people to break the dead-lock and look at things from different perspectives. A key to successful conflict management is to explore what the conflict is really about.

### Importance of qualities rather than skills

Trainers can have many roles which relate to conflict management. We train to prevent crisis situations and on how to work in conflict. We end up in conflictual situations between ourselves and others, we encounter conflicts between individuals or groups with whom we work. Some of us work with young people who live in or come from a conflict or post conflict society and who suffer the consequences of destructive conflict management. To tackle some of these issues we set up a few workshops during the week-end. We realised for example that knowing how to train conflict management skills and theories was not enough when working with people directly involved in conflicts. A workshop was therefore arranged on how to work with young people who are directly bruised and/or angered by tensions between groups in a society or by geopolitical conflicts. The main outcome was the importance of the personal qualities of trainers. To understand oneself was chosen as the most important competence of trainers working with people in conflict, followed by qualities such as creativity, care and an open mind.

### How interesting are conflicts?

Other issues which were highlighted through the workshops were the role of emotions and of active listening. We also discussed negotiation

and win-win solutions. A lot of interesting theory surrounds negotiation. The win-win solutions are generally seen as the most favourable outcome of a negotiation and relate to situations in which both parties get what they want. In a conflict (of different interests or of wanting the same) it is easy to think that one party needs to lose in order to make the other win. In simple words the win-win approach says "I want to win but I want you to win too".

There is much more to be said about our training course and about conflicts. For example: would you agree that as much as we might avoid our own conflicts, we are attracted by the conflicts of others? (Would gossip magazines be as popular without conflicts to indulge in? How interesting would Kosovo be to us if there had not been a conflict?) If this is so, what does that say about conflicts and what does it say about ourselves?

Many questions pop up. I need to take off my hat but I would like to invite everyone who has thoughts or experiences to share on the topic to do so. After all - if you excuse the cliché - living is not about winning or losing - it's about learning.

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# 危机

Sign  
Conflict in Chinese



Picture  
Trainers Pool meeting on  
conflict management

