

TROUBLE IN TRANSCENDIA: AN EXERCISE IN CONFLICT DIAGNOSIS AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION

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CASE DESCRIPTION

The central focus of this exercise involves “conflict diagnosis and dispute resolution.” It is relevant for courses with the same title or, more broadly, in management classes that address negotiation, critical thinking, organizational behavior, and various leadership issues. The exercise provides valuable learning opportunities for students across different levels, from freshman to doctoral candidates, insofar as our society at large excels at generating conflict but struggles to resolve it effectively. Accordingly, the ability to diagnose and successfully resolve conflicts is crucial for achieving harmony and productivity. The exercise can be conducted within a 90-minute to 3-hour timeframe, depending on the level of detail required. While students don’t need to prepare beforehand, instructors may choose to include a thorough post-exercise assessment and assignment.

CASE SYNOPSIS

George Santayana, the Spanish-American philosopher, is often credited with the insightful observation that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This quote emphasizes the importance of learning from historical events to avoid making the same mistakes. Perhaps, however, the quote should be recast as “too often humans refuse to learn from history.” Indeed, history often reveals patterns of behavior that persist across generations, despite our access to information and knowledge. Remember, history isn’t just a collection of facts—it’s a dynamic narrative that shapes our present and future.

The Cuban Missile Crisis serves as a powerful historical event replete with teachable lessons. By recasting it in the mythical land of Transcendia, an engaging context is created that draws in today’s students, much like their fascination with video games. This whimsical approach allows them to learn while having fun, bridging the gap between historical facts and their sometimes-limited attention spans.

In this experiential and highly interactive exercise, students take on the leadership roles of Vuhspoochee (the United States), Tovarish (the Soviet Union), and Swamphaven (Cuba). Tovarish has deployed its menacing “Rainbow of Destruction” on the island of Swamphaven, which is a close neighbor of Vuhspoochee. Alarmed by this threat, Vuhspoochee is determined to strategically maintain its own weapon of mass destruction—the Pixiedust Cannon—in Gnomewood, a small territory bordering Tovarish. As the clock ticks, the parties engage in intense negotiations to resolve the conflict peacefully and prevent the destruction of

Transcendia. Interestingly, regardless of whether the parallel to the Cuban Missile Crisis is recognized, all students enthusiastically immerse themselves in the tense dynamic at play. The exercise encompasses the diagnostic analysis of interest, rights, and power, along with negotiation and dispute resolution skills, and the many leadership lessons associated with the historical crisis.

CASE BODY

Background (Provided To All Participants)

In the magical realm of Transcendia, factions abound, yet violent conflicts have eluded them for centuries. Even the ancient disputes were rudimentary in nature. This prolonged era of peace owes much to Transcendia's geography: The two largest and most ideologically distinct factions, Vuhspoochee and Tovarish, find themselves separated by the vast Lochness Loch—a body of water so immense that it creates an almost alternate reality for each faction. As a result, Tovarish governs one half of Transcendia, while Vuhspoochee governs the other half.

Despite this enduring peace between ideological foes, a foreboding threat now looms. Although geographically distant, Vuhspoochee and Tovarish are embroiled in a bitter dispute. Vuhspoochee, self-proclaimed as a force of light and harmony, has stumbled upon evidence of a near-mythical ancient artifact—the ominous Rainbow of Destruction! Rumors suggest this artifact possesses unparalleled power, capable of bringing ruin not only to their own land but to the entire realm.

In recent months, Tovarish and its leader, The Overseer, have covertly transported materials across Lochness Loch to assemble the Rainbow of Destruction on Swamphaven, a small island near Vuhspoochee. Although not fully complete, the Rainbow of Destruction is already operational. The Overseer has cunningly positioned it close to Vuhspoochee, potentially for use against their rival. Tovarish's clandestine plans were proceeding smoothly until Vuhspoochee decided to investigate the rumors. They dispatched a dragon high above Swamphaven, ensuring stealth. To their horror, the dragon confirmed the near completion of the Rainbow of Destruction! Immediately, Vuhspoochee's royal leader, Zephyr, was alerted. Fearing the impending threat of the Rainbow of Destruction, Zephyr understood the need for decisive action to protect Vuhspoochee and perhaps the entire realm of Transcendia. Consequently, Zephyr swiftly ordered a blockade of further material transportation from Tovarish to Swamphaven using specially equipped "Dreamweavers"—boats that cast forcefield-like spells over the island of Swamphaven.

As tensions escalate, Swamphaven's leader, Empirac, and the citizens of Swamphaven find themselves caught in a crossfire. Some within Swamphaven, sympathetic to Vuhspoochee's ideals, are enticed by promises of aid and protection against Tovarish's presence in Swamphaven. Meanwhile, others, including Empirac, harbor distrust toward Vuhspoochee and align themselves with the enigmatic figures of Tovarish, drawn by the allure of power and mysterious knowledge. With events surrounding Swamphaven teetering on the edge, Transcendia is holding its breath, fearing that even the smallest spark could ignite a conflict

engulfing the entire realm. The fate of Transcendia hangs in the balance as Vuhspoochee and Tovarich stand on the brink of war.

Parties Involved:

Vuhspoochee: Zephyr and the population of Vuhspoochee want the Rainbow of Destruction gone from Swamphaven.

Tovarish: The Overseer wants to keep the Rainbow of Destruction as a perceived source of ultimate power.

Swamphaven: Empirac desires to keep the Rainbow of Destruction for safety from Vuhspoochee's power.

Crucial Knowledge for ALL PARTIES: The clock is ticking *closer and closer* to the completion of the most destructive weapon the land has ever seen. Everyone must play their cards perfectly, or Transcendia's first-ever violent conflict is guaranteed to be their last. **TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE! IF THIS CONFLICT IS NOT RESOLVED, THE DESTRUCTION OF TRANSCENDIA IS INEVITABLE!**

The Three Roles For The Exercise

Role Of The Overseer (Confidential Information – Provide Only to Person Playing Role of Overseer)

As The Overseer, your unwavering ambition drives you to claim dominance over Transcendia. Zephyr and Vuhspoochee consistently undermine your efforts, but you see an opportunity: The Rainbow of Destruction. By installing this formidable weapon, you hope to elevate your land's power and perhaps shift the balance in your favor. This dispute with Vuhspoochee isn't your first, but its stakes are unprecedented—the very fate of the realm hangs in the balance, poised on the edge of cataclysmic destruction should either of you unleash your deadly arsenal.

It's crucial to maintain the Rainbow of Destruction as a reliable deterrent against Vuhspoochee. Zephyr's self-perception as a "protector" is misguided, especially considering Vuhspoochee's questionable past actions. Zephyr tends to overstep boundaries.

You're concerned about Vuhspoochee possessing their ominous Pixiedust Cannon, located in nearby Gnomewood, against you. To reach an agreement, it's crucial that Zephyr remove the Pixiedust Cannon from Gnomewood. Your lack of trust in Zephyr stems from the fear that Zephyr might use it to devastate your kingdom. Accordingly, treading carefully remains essential.

With respect to Swamphaven and its leader Empirac, you perceive Empirac as overly aggressive and lacking negotiation skills. Despite sharing purportedly similar ideologies, you personally view Empirac as a volatile dictator. While you appreciate using Swamphaven for positioning the Rainbow of Destruction, your decisions ultimately prioritize your own best interests over any concerns Empirac may have

Behavioral Profile for The Overseer (Do the best you can!)

For purposes of this situation, you should exhibit a direct, powerful, and even angry demeanor. You refuse to be cornered into actions you're unwilling to take. Your expression should remain stern and focused, and you should assert your dominance by expressing your opinions firmly and not hesitating to interrupt others when they try to speak—in fact, shout them down if you must! Try to maintain a straight posture with folded hands, which will convey discipline and resolve. While you would rather avoid harm and achieve a peaceful resolution, your ideal outcome is nevertheless a win-lose scenario with you coming out on top. Future relations with Zephyr hold little importance, and if necessary, you'll be utterly dismissive of Empirac. Don't forget that you have the power to launch the Rainbow of Destruction on Vuhspoochee at any time by simply pushing the red button.

ROLE of Zephyr (Confidential Information - Provide Only to Person Playing Role of Zephyr)

As Zephyr, the royal leader of Vuhspoochee—the most dominant power in Transcendia—you find yourself deeply threatened by the encroaching presence of Tovarish near your homeland. As guardians and protectors of this realm, Vuhspoochee has clashed with Tovarish before, but this conflict is pivotal due to the catastrophic consequences that await should either side unleash their formidable weapons.

As a leader deeply connected to the people of Vuhspoochee, safeguarding their well-being is paramount. Reputation matters, and you understand the delicate balance between appearing resolute and acting in their best interest. When faced with danger, even if it necessitates deception, you'll do what it takes to protect them—especially when the specter of death looms large.

Your own devastatingly lethal Pixiedust Cannon located in Gnomewood, which borders on Tovarish, serves as a crucial deterrent against Tovarish's frequent transgressions. While your intention is never to deploy it, should the safety of the realm—particularly Vuhspoochee—be jeopardized, you won't hesitate to fire first. Moreover, you cannot imagine removing the Pixiedust Cannon from its strategic deployment in Gnomewood.

As the Tovarish's Rainbow of Destruction looms over Swamphaven, its removal becomes paramount—a necessary step to cleanse your realm. The alliance between The Overseer and Empirac must cease; their collusion threatens the very existence of Vuhspoochee. While you remain distrustful of The Overseer, pragmatic negotiation remains as your primary hope going forward.

Regarding Swamphaven and its leader Empirac, you harbor strong feelings of disrespect due to their clandestine alliance with Tovarish. Empirac, in your view, lacks the qualities of a good leader, and you particularly disagree with the strategies he employs to govern the small kingdom of Swamphaven, often questioning them. You perceive Empirac as easily influenced, and any statement made by Empirac should be promptly dismissed as irrelevant.

Behavioral Profile for Zephyr (Do the best you can!)

Furious, you are FURIOUS! So, for purposes of this situation, you should exhibit a direct and assertive approach. You dislike feeling cornered or coerced into actions you're unwilling to take. And even though you are...FURIOUS, your demeanor is nevertheless characterized by decorum, and you seldom raise your voice. In turn, you expect the same courtesy from others—they should refrain from shouting as well. When you speak, it is with an air of wisdom and extensive knowledge. You consistently maintain a dominant posture, positioning yourself as the most powerful presence at the table. Be commanding in the conversation, and make sure your views are heard first.

Your ultimate goal is to achieve a peaceful resolution without causing harm to anyone or anything. You do not care about any future relationship with The Overseer and hope to dismantle Empiric's kingdom in the future. Remember, you have a red button to push at any time to blast the Pixiedust Cannon at Tovarish.

ROLE of Empiric (Confidential Information - Provide Only to Person Playing Role of Empiric)

As the supreme leader of the small kingdom of Swamphaven, you've recently ascended to power with a vision of creating an ideal civilization. Given your vulnerable position near Vuhspoochee, you recognize the need for protection, and thus initially welcomed the idea of having the powerful state of Tovarish come to your aid. What you did not anticipate and approve of, however, is having Tovarish assemble the formidable "Rainbow of Destruction" within Swamphaven. Despite your position of authority, your input frequently faces disrespect and neglect during crucial consultations, and Tovarish made Swamphaven more of a target by assembling the Rainbow of Destruction on your land. Accordingly, you find yourself marginalized in the decision-making process, yearning for a chance to truly be heard!

So, despite your fervent desire to maintain an alliance with Tovarish for the sake of protection, they rarely afford you a voice. Doubting your leadership abilities, they dismiss your input. Yet, who can deny the love your people have for you? You've guided them to their current state and Swamphaven deserves the safeguarding you seek. How dare Tovarish—your supposed ally—treat you with such disdain.

Correspondingly, your adversary, Vuhspoochee, would like to remove you from power and bring about your demise. This arrogant and menacing neighbor, along with their leader Zephyr, represents the epitome of opposition. From the outset, they questioned and even defied your authority. In a desperate and reckless attempt, Zephyr—the leader of Vuhspoochee—sought to sway some of your loyal citizens against you, but those efforts were in vain. You emerged victorious, yet your forgiveness remains elusive for such a betrayal.

As the newly triumphant ruler of Swamphaven, your top priority is staying in power for the safety and well-being of your citizens. The escalating conflict between Tovarish and Vuhspoochee represents a critical juncture in your leadership. Your singular focus lies in safeguarding your people from any Vuhspoochee hostile encroachment or attempted coup. Lesser matters hold little significance for you.

Behavioral Profile for Empirac (Do the best you can!)

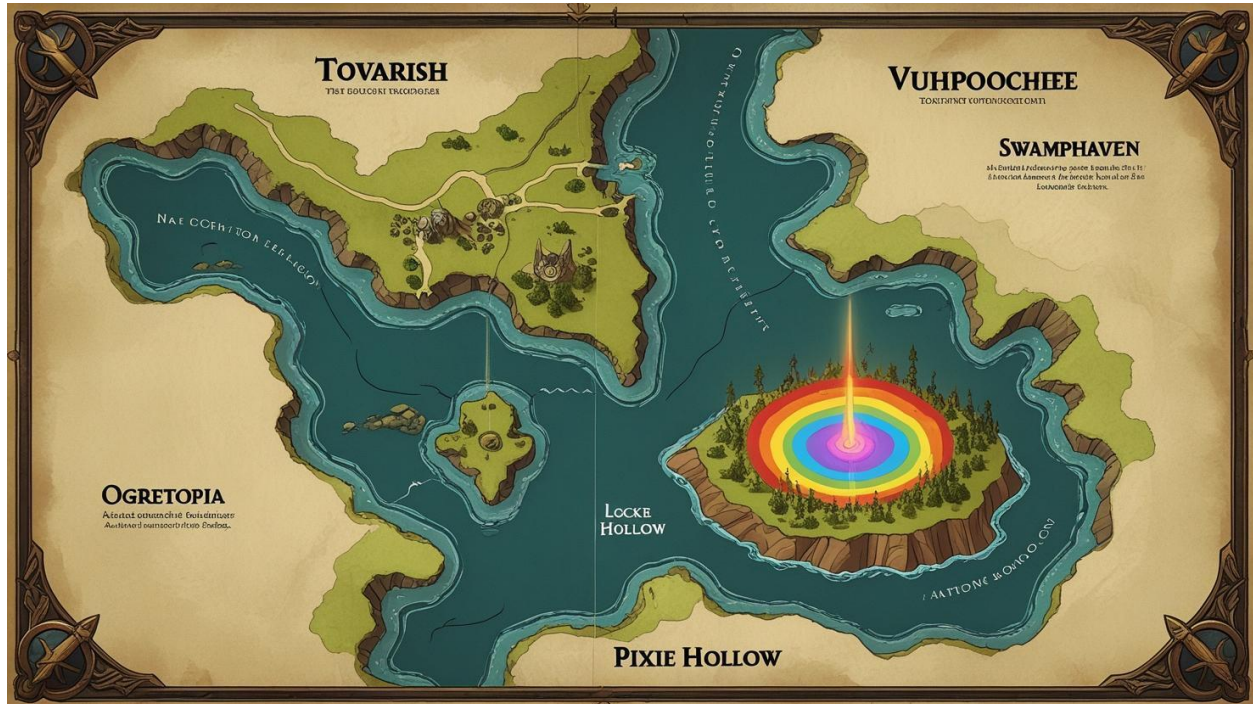
You exhibit assertive behavior in the company of others, often becoming loud and obnoxious. Your sense of time is lax, and you frequently veer off-topic. Irrelevant and frivolous stories pepper your conversations. You value small talk and thus are distracted from giving sufficient attention to the current situation. When unheard or ignored, you dramatically exclaim, “I WANT TO BE HEARD!” in a whiny tone. Your self-centeredness and egotism color your beliefs and desires, though you try, sometimes unsuccessfully, to avoid outright aggression. You are focused solely on self-promotion and proclamations of how you must protect Swamphaven above all else. You are very defensive if someone questions your leadership tactics. You do not respect others who do not have similar beliefs to you, often calling them childish names. When you are sitting at the table, you slouch or lounge about and find it ridiculous when others are not relaxed. You retreat to a “*such-is-life*” attitude when win-win solutions seem unattainable.

EXHIBITS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Every participant in the case exercise will receive the identical four pages of exhibits at the same time they are receiving their individual role sheet. Those exhibits are as follows: Exhibit 1 – Map of the Realm of Transcendia; Exhibit 2 – BREAKING NEWS: May 4, Year XXXX – Gnomewood Denounces Ties with Tovarish!!; Exhibit 3 – Evidence – Pixiedust Cannon; and Exhibit 4 – Rainbow of Destruction.

Two additional exhibits will be distributed as follows: Exhibit 5 – Time Sensitive – Vuhspoochee Dragon – to be distributed near the end of the first 15 minutes of negotiation; and Exhibit 6 – Brief Factual Overview of the CMC – to be distributed at the beginning of the instructors debrief.

Exhibit 1 - Map of the Realm of Transcendia



Between the two primary factions of Tovarish and Vuhspoochee exists Swamphaven, a swampy island that remained unclaimed for much of Transcendia's history. With the land up for grabs, the inhabitants of the Loch—the Stogies—claimed it for themselves. Despite Swamphaven's humble origins, Empiric's recent ascent to power coincided with Swamphaven gaining respect as a faction.

Exhibit 2
BREAKING NEWS: May 4, Year XXXX
Gnomewood Denounces Ties With Tovarish!!



Despite its smaller size and population compared to Tovarish, which has wielded undue influence and dominance over Gnomewood, the citizens of Gnomewood have successfully pressured their government to sever ties with Tovarish. This pressure arises from their discontent with their quality of life over the past several years. Considering the potential conflict between Tovarish and Gnomewood, Vuhspoochee has publicly announced its intention to enhance security measures to Gnomewood. Since this announcement, additional military support has been observed flowing into Gnomewood, further deterring any potential Tovarish invasion. The Tovarish Overseer responded: *“Vuhspoochee has arrogantly exceeded its authority by deploying resources in our region. We do not tolerate challenges to our power and will take steps to address such acts of aggression.”*

**EXHIBIT 3
PIXIEDUST CANNON**



May 5, Year XXXX

General Tinkerbell: *The Pixiedust Cannon in GnomeWood is prepared and ready to fire at any moment.*

Zephyr: *Perfect, the cannon is essential to the safety of all Transcendia. It is essential for GnomeWood and keeping Tovarish at bay.*

General Tinkerbell: *Do you think that Tovarish will retaliate?*

Zephyr: *We are the greatest faction in all Transcendia. Protectors of all! They should know better than not to lash back. It is for everyone's safety.*

General Tinkerbell: *And if they do?*

Zephyr: *We will see.*

*Conversation between Zephyr and the Vuhspoochee General after assured protection of GnomeWood

EXHIBIT 4 - RAINBOW OF DESTRUCTION



October 31, Year XXXX

The Overseer: *Is the Rainbow of Destruction ready?*

Engineer: *Yes, it is, and it's exceeding our expectations.*

Empiric: *I will make sure my security forces are guarding it safely around the clock. Thank you for the protection.*

Engineer: *I must warn you, however, this artifact must be handled with extreme care. While it's fantastic for defensive purposes, using it offensively could lead to unimaginable destruction.*

The Overseer: *Good. That's precisely what I want!*

Engineer: *Well then; the fate of all of Transcendia is now in your hands.*

*Recorded conversation between The Overseer, Empiric, and engineer of the Rainbow of Destruction

EXHIBIT 5 (TIME SENSITIVE)
BELOVED VUHSPOOCHEE DRAGON, PENELOPE, SHOT DOWN!
BY: ROSABELLA EVERDREAM, SENIOR EDITOR AT VUHSPOOCHEE NEWS



Photo Taken By: Clara Starshimmer, Reporting from Swamphaven

BREAKING NEWS:

Reports have indicated that Tovarish warriors are to blame for the death of a beloved dragon, Penelope, flying over Lochness Loch. The Overseer has stated, *“I did not tell my security forces to shoot down anything.”* The real question now is, what will Zephyr do?!

We, the people of Vuhspoochee, cannot let this go unanswered! In the name of Penelope, Zephyr must do what is necessary to immediately deal with the threat posed by the Rainbow of Destruction!

Exhibit 6 - Brief Factual Overview Of The Cuban Missile Crisis

*Distribute to students after results are posted, i.e., at the beginning of the debrief.

Trouble in Transcendia is loosely based on the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is therefore helpful to understand the events that occurred at that moment in history to put the debrief of the case in context.

During the summer of 1962, a clandestine agreement was struck between the Soviet Union and Cuba to station Soviet nuclear missiles on Cuban soil, capable of striking the United States. This move came after a failed U.S. operation in 1961 to overthrow Cuban leader Fidel Castro, which included the placement of U.S. nuclear missiles in Turkey. The existence of Soviet missile sites in Cuba was confirmed by U.S. aerial reconnaissance on October 14, 1962. President John F. Kennedy was informed of this on October 16, initiating a tense 13-day period known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. (Saradzhyan & Saradzhyan, 2012).

Initially, Kennedy believed military action was necessary to remove the missiles from Cuba. His administration debated between an air strike or a ground invasion. Ultimately, Kennedy opted for a naval blockade of Cuba, which commenced on October 22. Initially denying the missile deployment, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev reversed course six days later. On October 28, Khrushchev declared the Soviet withdrawal of missiles from Cuba in return for a U.S. public commitment not to invade Cuba and a private agreement to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey. (Saradzhyan & Saradzhyan, 2012).