

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

Linda L. Barkacs, University of San Diego

Craig B. Barkacs, University of San Diego

TEACHING NOTES

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 in an attempt 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHING APPROACHES

This conflict diagnosis and dispute resolution exercise takes place in a fictional universe, recreating the tension and conflict arising during the Cold War, specifically, the Cuban Missile Crisis. The exercise provides numerous valuable experiences and takeaways applicable to real-world scenarios. First, participants practice negotiation, mediation, and conflict resolution skills within a time-sensitive, emotionally charged, and high-risk context. Second, participants must navigate the delicate balance between their own party’s “interests, rights, and power,” as well as those of the other parties involved. These three fundamental dimensions—interests, rights, and power—are the essence of most disputes. In fact, nearly every argument made during a dispute falls into one of these three categories or “moves” (Barkacs, 2022). Finally, the exercise enables participants to observe and engage with the diverse leadership approaches exhibited by their counterparts.

The Story Behind Some of The Names

Vuhs poochee: In the magical realm of Transcendia, the superpower faction known as Vuhs poochee corresponds to the United States, often called “America,” which derives from the Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. Now you know.

Tovarish: In the magical realm of Transcendia, the superpower faction known as Tovarish corresponds to the Soviet Union. “Tovarish” is a Russian word that translates to “comrade,” a term that was commonly used during the Soviet era to address fellow comrades.

Stogies: “Stogies” (i.e., cigars) is the name given to the inhabitants of Swamphaven, which is Cuba. Enough said.

Brief Factual Overview Of The Cuban Missile Crisis

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 quietly remove U.S. missiles from Turkey at a later date. (Saradzhyan & Saradzhyan, 2012).

Analysis Of Interests, Rights, And Power Model

The Interest, Rights, and Power Model (or I-R-P Model) is a recognized three-part model that explains how statements in these three categories may be effectively utilized, especially in a contentious dispute situation. It's a method for resolving disputes that emphasizes the importance of understanding the underlying interests of each party involved, rather than focusing solely on their stated positions or demands (Lytle et al., 1999). Interests are the needs and wants behind a person's demands. When parties negotiate, they typically start by stating their positions. Mary Parker Follett, often called the "Mother of Modern Management," used to tell a story about two sisters who were fighting over an orange (Wikipedia contributors, 2024).

Sister One: "I want the orange."

Sister Two: "I want the orange."

Sister One: "No, really, I want the orange."

Sister Two: "So do I!"

The "Orange Sisters" is a well-known and classic example. Both sisters are stating their positions or demands, and so they cut the orange in half—an unnecessary compromise and wasteful resolution to the dispute. But what if the sisters had discovered each other's interests? As it turns out, one sister wanted the flesh of the orange to make orange juice and the other sister wanted the rind for her scone recipe. If they had each revealed the interest behind their position, both would have received all of what they wanted, instead of just half (Barkacs, 2022).

Rights based moves occur when people appeal to the rules, guidelines, or laws that govern an organization or society (Barkacs, 2022). They may also occur when a party to a dispute attempts to invoke precedent during the conflict, such as referring to cultural or societal norms of the society or smaller community in which the conflict is taking place. Rights-based moves lose validity when the two parties in conflict align with different norms or principles. This may be affected by each party's ability to interpret others' nonverbal emotions. Nonverbal reactions, such as eye contact, can portray different emotions in Eastern and Western cultures (*Communication and conflict resolution skills*, 2020).

Power moves are statements that attempt to force another person to do something they would otherwise not do. Power moves are not strictly limited to statements and include one-

upmanship and hurling insults. (*The Truth About Negotiation*, 2013). In a dispute, an example of a power move would be threatening to reveal an unrelated secret or withholding resources.

The Story Of Abdul & Interests, Rights, and Power

This is a true story about a student named “Abdul” (not his real name). He was enrolled at the University of San Diego in their Peace Studies program. Students from around the world join this program to explore alternative methods of conflict management beyond violence and warfare. Abdul’s story vividly demonstrates the effective use of the I-R-P Model (Barkacs).

One day Abdul received an urgent phone call from his father, who was in a state of extreme anger. Abdul’s family hails from a region where warring tribes and violent conflicts have persisted for generations. His father informed him that in a recent local skirmish, Abdul’s uncle had been gravely wounded and that the family was seeking to violently retaliate. As a student of the Peace Studies program, this was an opportunity to put his peace studies into practice. Accordingly, Abdul passionately implored his father to reconsider violence. He argued that while the desire for revenge was understandable, there had to be a more constructive interest-based approach that would avoid yet more bloodshed and escalation.

When Abdul’s father scoffed at his suggestion, Abdul asserted that, “as the oldest son, I have a right to be heard.” In this moment, he was making a rights-based argument. His father was unmoved and reminded Abdul that this was his uncle and his father’s brother they were talking about. Abdul realized that his approach was not working, so he changed tactics yet again.

“Father,” he began, speaking quietly. “I’m coming home.”

“What?”

“I’m quitting the program and returning home.”

“You can’t do that!” his father protested. “It’s a great honor to be there! This would bring shame upon the family!”

Abdul paused, then replied, “You’re right. It is an honor to study conflict resolution through peace rather than violence. But if I can’t even convince my own father of its value, why am I here?”

Abdul’s father was left speechless. Eventually, he relented, and Abdul seized the opportunity to engage in a genuine dialogue with him. They discussed how reflexive violence perpetuated an endless cycle of revenge. Abdul’s threat to quit his studies and return home was a power-based move—one he was prepared to back up with action, if necessary, with real consequences. What’s even more remarkable is how Abdul transitioned to using the argument that his father found most persuasive: his own perspective. While power moves should be used judiciously (as they can backfire), in critical moments, they can be highly effective.

Mastering the I-R-P Model takes time, but even becoming more aware of it can make a difference. When in a dispute, consider whether arguments (both yours and those of your counterpart) fall into the categories of interests, rights, or power moves. If one type isn’t

working, try a different approach. This alone, even without mastery, puts you ahead of most and just might lead to a win-win outcome – an “entire orange” for both sides.

Ethical Considerations Of The I-R-P Model

Ethically, the I-R-P Model suggests that conflicts should ideally be resolved by addressing interests first, as this often leads to more creative and cooperative solutions. If interests cannot be resolved, rights enforcement may be necessary, especially when one party has systematically oppressed another. Power should be used as a last resort and only when necessary to ensure safety and security. Ethical considerations involve ensuring that the resolution process respects the dignity and autonomy of all parties involved. It emphasizes fairness, justice, and the avoidance of coercion or manipulation. [The goal is to find a balance where the interests of all parties are considered and respected, rights are upheld, and power is used responsibly](#) (Stanford University [Valentino Chai] et al., 2024).

Analysis Of The I-R-P Model Applied To The Case

The I-R-P Model presents a fascinating lens to analyze negotiations, such as the Paris Climate Accord (2015), the Cold War (1989), or even further back to the Treaty of Versailles (1919). The importance of the exercise is to allow participants to better understand the dynamics behind a significant historical conflict. In 1959, Cuba underwent a revolution driven by Communist Fidel Castro, aligning Cuba with the Soviet Union. In the United States’ mission to revitalize democracy, they attempted to invade Cuba and overthrow Castro in 1961, but ultimately, they failed. The United States did succeed in threatening the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Soviet Union placed missiles in Cuba to counterbalance the United States’ missiles in Turkey and Italy. The conflict began in October of 1962, when the U.S. military spy planes spotted the missiles in Cuba. President John F. Kennedy (“Kennedy”) called to order his previously dismantled committee, the Executive Committee of National Security Council (ExComm) to deliberate on their response to the crisis.

Kennedy and his council opted to implement a naval blockade around Cuba, preventing any import of resources from the Soviet Union, applying a heavy threat to coerce a response. The naval blockade implemented by Kennedy embodies a power move, due to its threatening nature and withholding of resources. When the U.S. intercepted a shipment of missiles, the conflict began to escalate extremely quickly, placing a clock on the release of nuclear weapons that could cause an unprecedented tragedy. The uniqueness of the Cold War meant that most of the negotiation was behind the scenes between Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev (“Khrushchev”). Ultimately, Khrushchev presented a deal to Kennedy: if the United States agreed to not invade Cuba and remove their missiles from Turkey, then the Soviet Union would in return remove their missiles from Cuba.

After long days of contentious negotiation, Kennedy publicly announced that the U.S. would not invade Cuba, then secretly removed the missiles from Turkey. Thankfully, the conflict

was resolved without military confrontation due to the political leaders' ability to participate in a trilingual approach to negotiation as seen in the I-R-P Model.

How The Trilingual Approach To Resolving Disputes Works

The participants in the exercise, “Trouble in Transcendia,” face an intense, high-risk scenario. Their success relies on their adept application of trilingual negotiation tactics. In essence, those involved in the conflict must understand when and how to apply different approaches—whether emphasizing interests, asserting rights, or leveraging power. For instance, consider a workplace dispute over resource allocation: one party may advocate for additional resources to meet project deadlines (interests), another may assert their entitlement based on company policy (rights), and yet another may use their position or influence to negotiate for more resources (power). By understanding the dynamic at play and skillfully navigating through these dimensions, a resolution that satisfies all parties may be achievable.

Application Of The Trilingual Approach To The Case

The Transcendental realm consists of various factions, among which Vuhspoochee and Tovarish find themselves embroiled in a contentious conflict. As the two superpowers of Transcendia, these lands have yet to directly engage in hostilities. Nevertheless, their efforts to exert influence over smaller factions, such as Swampland and Gnomewood, jeopardize the enduring peace that Transcendia values. Representatives from three of the factions convene to discuss how the development and stockpiling of highly destructive weapons could lead to the most catastrophic tragedy ever witnessed and potentially result in the complete extinction of Transcendia.

Leadership Issues In The Cuban Missile Crisis

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 is a significant event in history that showcased various leadership styles, particularly those of President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev. President Kennedy’s approach during the Cuban Missile Crisis is often cited as an example of *transformational leadership*. He demonstrated charisma and the ability to inspire and empower people, especially through troubled times (Gmf, 2020). Kennedy’s leadership was characterized by the following factors:

1. Idealized Influence: Kennedy served as a strong role model with high morals and ethics, guiding the nation with a clear vision for a peaceful resolution.
2. Inspirational Motivation: He inspired the nation to come together and emphasized the importance of patience and strength during challenging times.
3. Intellectual Stimulation: Kennedy encouraged critical thinking and problem-solving among his advisors and the public, fostering an environment where innovative solutions were sought.
4. Individualized Consideration: He listened to the needs of the people and provided support, ensuring that everyone felt valued and understood.

5. Pragmatic Decision-Making: Kennedy's decision-making process during the crisis was pragmatic and deliberate. He weighed multiple alternatives and considered the potential consequences of each action. (Gmf, 2020).
6. Diplomatic Negotiation: Both Kennedy and Khrushchev engaged in back-channel communications to find a peaceful resolution. They were both willing to compromise to avoid a military confrontation. (Gmf, 2020).

Khrushchev's leadership style during the Cuban Missile Crisis was complex and multifaceted. He was known for his bold and often unpredictable decisions, which were a mix of authoritarianism and flexibility (Gibney, 1998). He pursued a policy of peaceful coexistence with the West and initiated a process known as "de-Stalinization" that made Soviet society less repressive (History, 2019). Khrushchev was known to give colorful speeches and had a keen ability to engage in personal diplomacy (Gibney, 1998).

Conversely, Khrushchev made the decision to place Soviet missiles in Cuba secretly, a bold move which significantly escalated tensions with the United States. (Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, n.d.). He maintained a hard line and expected Kennedy to back down.

Ultimately, Khrushchev showed flexibility by agreeing to remove the missiles from Cuba in exchange for a U.S. commitment not to invade Cuba and the secret removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey. His leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated a willingness to take risks and a desire to strengthen the Soviet Union's position on the global stage, while also navigating the complexities of international diplomacy.

Leadership Issues In Trouble In Transcendia

Students take on the leadership roles of Vuhspoochee (representing the United States), Tovarish (representing the Soviet Union), and Swamphaven (representing Cuba). Each role is designed to capture at least some of the leadership characteristics and style of the actual historical figures. During the debrief, discussion of the differences (and similarities) among the three leaders may be dissected. This leads to a more pragmatic understanding of the importance of leadership skills.

How To Run The Exercise

The exercise allows for each group to have a minimum of three people (one person assigned to each role) and a maximum of six people (two people assigned as a team to play each role). There are three roles: Zephyr of Vuhspoochee, The Overseer of Tovarish, and Empirac of Swamphaven. Zephyr represents President Kennedy of the United States, who will spearhead the negotiation. With such a powerful empire, Zephyr can choose between power moves to bend the other groups to their will or a trilingual negotiation approach, to lead to a result with all three groups interests in mind. The Overseer represents the dominant nature of the Soviet Union and their leader, Nikita Khrushchev. They truly believe they have the right to have more power and land than the other factions, therefore their decisions will be a major factor in determining if

Transcendia will find peace or face destruction. Empirac represents the outspoken Fidel Castro of Cuba. Although Empirac does not hold as much power as the leaders of either Vuhspoochee or Tovarish, Empirac must nevertheless advocate for Swamphaven at all costs because that is where the heart of the danger lies.

The characters are to be randomly assigned, and each member will receive 15 to 20 minutes to privately review the material before they are to meet in their groups. Each group will consist of at least one person playing each of the roles: Zephyr, Empirac, and The Overseer. If numbers require, Zephyr or The Overseer will have an advisor on their team (If there are teams, they will be able to meet to prepare together during the private review time). The instructor running the exercise should announce the following to all the participants: At any point during the negotiation, Zephyr and The Overseer may request to speak to another member privately, however, Empirac does not have the power to initiate a private conversation. Any member may deny the request to speak privately if they believe it is beneficial to their own interests or the interests of the group.

During the negotiation, approximately 15 minutes in, the instructor will introduce a critical piece of time-sensitive evidence (referred to as Exhibit 4). This evidence consists of an announcement that Vuhspoochee's beloved dragon, Penelope, has been shot down by Tovarish forces. The revelation of this information may significantly heighten emotions among the participants. To maintain peace in Transcendia, all group members must overcome their emotional turmoil. Subsequently, the instructor will extend negotiation time by an additional 15 minutes (ideally projected on a screen for all to see), creating a sense of urgency akin the Cuban Missile Crisis.

When the clock runs out the groups will be asked to write their decisions on the whiteboard for all to see. If they failed to reach a decision, Transcendia would cease to exist because that means mass destruction will have occurred. Only after the groups reveal their decision will they receive a handout detailing the specifics of the Cuban Missile Crisis (See Exhibit 5). You may also wish to show the class a brief (under 5 minutes) video on the Cuban Missile Crisis (*The History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2017).

Subsequently, the class will engage in a discussion comparing the negotiation and dispute resolution tactics employed during the Cuban Missile Crisis with those utilized in the case exercise. The key takeaways from this activity are of utmost importance: when addressing future conflicts, it is essential to examine historical precedents (as George Santayana would certainly agree). For instance, The Treaty of Versailles, crafted in response to World War I, arguably contributed to the start of World War II. The vengeful and exclusionary nature of the treaty underscored humanity's inclination toward retribution, ultimately leading to a more devastating conflict and the use of the atomic bomb in World War II.

POST-EXERCISE QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

The answers to these questions will be likely to vary widely. There are no black and white answers, as they call for student opinion. The questions are mainly designed to instigate

thoughtful discussion and self-reflection by the students and to assist in guiding the instructors debrief.

Questions for Zephyr (President Kennedy):

- How and when did this conflict start?
- What do you think would be **Tovarish's** (Soviet Union) answer to how and when the conflict started?
- If the parties disagreed over how and when the conflict started, would that change the way you approached it?
- Would you consider striking first with the Pixie Dust Cannons to deter Tovarish?

Questions for The Overseer (Fidel Castro):

- How and when did this conflict start?
- What do you think would be **Vuhspoochee's** (U.S.) answer to how and when the conflict started?
- If the parties disagreed over how and when the conflict started, would that change the way you approached it?
- What is your ideal outcome for this scenario?
- How can you keep **Vuhspoochee** (U.S.) from launching a Pixie Dust Cannon attack on you?

Questions for Empirac (Khrushchev):

- How and when did this conflict start?
- What do you think would be **Vuhspoochee's** (U.S.) answer to that same question?
- What do you think would be the **Swamphaven's** (Cuba) answer to how and when the conflict started?
- Do you want to ensure your safety by helping to enact revenge on those who have wronged you in the past (Vuhspoochee)?
- If no violence arises from this conflict, how can you ensure your safety, now being an ally of Tovarish (and thus enemy of the nearby Vuhspoochee)?

It is true that the *answers* to how and when the conflict started may vary, but it is nevertheless important to establish each party's view of how and when a conflict started. Why? In a conflict situation, it is important to take a step back and imagine things from the other parties' perspectives to understand why they take certain actions. In conflict diagnosis analysis, this is known as "punctuation" (Dues & The Great Courses, 2010).

In his lecture series, Professor Dues elucidates the conception of "punctuation" within the realm of communication. Analogous to the role of punctuation marks in structuring sentences in grammar, individuals "punctuate" events distinctively during conflicts. This punctuation is essentially our interpretation of the sequence of events, upon which we construct cause-and-effect relationships. For instance, what Person A perceives as the cause of a conflict, Person B might view merely as a reaction to a preceding action. Comprehending these divergent punctuations is pivotal for efficaciously navigating through conflicts. (Dues & The Great Courses, 2010).

As an example, Vuhspoochee (U.S.) may believe the conflict started only when they discovered a destructive weapon in Swamphaven (Cuba), but Tovarish obviously felt threatened enough to build this weapon, indicating the conflict likely began much sooner for them. The

power dynamics of Transcendia are similar to real world power dynamics, where smaller countries are coerced into doing things such as storing nuclear weapons in exchange for protection. Each group must set aside their emotions and say things that are effective. If the parties involved in conflict have rash reactions, they can cause a (literally) explosive tragedy.

Imagine what would happen if we all acted on the following mantra: “don’t say or do what you feel like saying or doing, say or do what's effective.” (Barkacs). This mantra requires individuals to go against their natural subconscious reactions and thoroughly think through their responses. In highly emotional times, revenge may seem most important. It is only later, after the anger is diffused, that we realize revenge does not typically give the result you desired. The heuristic, then, is to say what you believe will be effective in getting the outcome you want. Of course, that also means behaving ethically (for example, a lie might get the outcome you want, but only in the short term).

CONCLUSION

The Cuban Missile Crisis remains a potent reminder of the dangers of nuclear proliferation and the imperative of diplomatic solutions to global conflicts. It serves as a testament to the power of leadership, communication, and negotiation skills in averting catastrophic outcomes. Trouble in Transcendia gives students an opportunity to practice, in a safe and enjoyable environment, the skills they will need to deal with conflict. As we tell our students, conflict is inevitable. How you handle it, however, is up to you.

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