

When deep commitment leads to deep conflict – or why cultural fluency is essential in international cooperation

Working in international cooperation, across cultures, implies potential conflict situations. The ability to navigate cultural differences is key in preventing conflicts and essential to effective cooperation.

Heinz was excited to return to Laos to work in a local NGO on education and health initiatives. He planned to draw on his previous experience working with Laotians to foster lasting change. A brilliant and confident man, full of drive and vision, Heinz had acquired significant language skills on his previous mission. He wrote these words as he arrived in Laos for publication in the NGO newsletter:

“In-country expertise can be effectively acquired by development workers through careful study and time on the ground. Once this expertise is acquired, international workers may have even more insight into host culture than locals because they can switch lenses at will. From this expertise and insight come ideas for systems and procedures that may not have occurred to locals. This is my experience as an international development worker.”

But within a month of his arrival, Heinz had upset many co-workers and locals served by the organization through his efforts to change systems to be more efficient and his impatience to fight corruption. His local counterpart, Kahoku, tried to speak with him without hurting him, but Kahoku found that when he was indirect, Heinz missed the message. When Kahoku was more direct, Heinz reacted with incredulity and small apologies, justifying his behavior in terms of results. Meanwhile, not only was the work suffering; the NGO was losing face and reputation, and Heinz's co-workers were getting discouraged.

Situations like this abound in the field of international cooperation. Crossing boundaries is deceptively simple in our globalized world: blink and you arrive in a completely different context. Even when you arrive fully equipped with technical skills, a good briefing, language skills and knowledge of local traditions, you arrive with cultural preconceptions and culturally situated “common sense.” Conflict is virtually inevitable.

Culture and conflict

Heinz and his co-workers are on a collision course. At best, their goals for cooperation will not be met; at worst, significant damage may be done to relationships, people needing assistance and the NGO itself. They decide – with persuasion from their parent organization – to learn more about conflict.

Conflict itself is culturally situated. In the west, conflict is often understood as an expressed struggle over limited resources, with the ubiquitous language of war as the most common metaphor. “I am marshalling my arguments” or “he lobbed a shot at me over the table” are examples of war-informed metaphors for conflict resolution. People in conflict tend to want to talk about the conflict as clearly and directly as possible, in order to solve the problem. In Laotian culture, harmony is sought and efforts are directed to tending the intactness of relationship rather than addressing episodes of conflict. Disagreement tends to be expressed indirectly, through social rituals that seek the right balance between everyone involved. Conflict in Laos is a threat to relational fabrics; a troubling of underground waters that requires subterranean handling.

How can Heinz and his Laotian colleagues learn more about conflict and how to handle it between them when their starting points are so different? First, it will be important for them to learn about their respective ways of naming conflict. For westerners, addressing episodic struggles over limited resources often means blaming: apportioning responsibility and developing action plans to move forward. For Laotians, smoothing underground waters means sending indirect cues or using social rituals to telegraph issues. Both Heinz and his colleagues may agree with a broader definition of conflict: it is a difference that matters.

Cultural fluency in conflict situations

Heinz and his associates need to find ways to address differences that matter in ways that work for them. To do this, they need cultural fluency: the ability to notice and respond to diverse starting points – their own and each others'. Cultural fluency includes:

- **Anticipatory capacity** Anticipating patterns in unfamiliar contexts while distinguishing the influence of personal cultural lenses and assumptions.
- **Embeddedness** Remaining aware of unfamiliar cultural influences through ongoing inter-action, moving through unconsciousness to conscious learning and finally internalized awareness and responsiveness.
- **Expressiveness** Surfacing cultural assumptions in appropriate ways to expand individual and shared understanding of meaning-making patterns.
- **Navigational capacity** Relating effectively to culturally different others with awareness of self, other and context; applying a range of adaptable, appropriate tools.

To build cultural fluency and the ability to navigate the conflicts among them, Heinz and his colleagues may explore these dimensions:

Navigating conflict situations

Disclosing vs. guarding information Conflicts – differences that matter – matter because of clashing positions: each person may want a different outcome in a particular situation. Beneath positions are interests: needs, wants, concerns and fears – which may be individual, shared or complementary. Exploring interests can be a way to craft a path through conflict. But exploring interests generally means explicit communication, something more comfortable for Heinz. Heinz' Laotian counterparts have been taught to limit personal revelations about needs or interests to avoid being perceived as weak. To enhance their *anticipatory capacity*, each side may need to learn more about preferred patterns of disclosure of self and other, and find ways to bridge different ideas about what information is shared, how and when.

Naming conflict directly vs. using rituals and indirect communication A Laotian ritual for solving conflict involves a wishing ceremony called a *baci*. In this ceremony, a person may gently name a wish for the future while tying a cotton string around the wrist of another. Social rituals like the *baci* function to enfold conflicts in *embeddedness*, saving face and maintaining flexibility to communicate without confronting. While Heinz may expect confrontation in conflict, his defensive response to Kahoku suggests that a ritual may work for him as well as long as he recognizes its embedded functions.

Local vs. ex-pat cultural expertise Heinz' assumptions of cultural superiority are impeding *expressive* effectiveness. Because he views Laotian society as inefficient and corrupted, he is both impatient and imperious in his contributions. To partner effectively, Heinz will need to pick up on telegraphed cues and be willing to step back from his ethnocentric bias, focusing on *being* and *being with* rather than solely on *doing* or *acting*. Kahoku can help him explore questions like "How can I build sound relationships with Laotian colleagues and clients that facilitate collaborative outcomes?" Kahoku, knowing Heinz' cultural starting points, can look for calm times to provide cultural information in an even way that does not elicit defensiveness from Heinz.

Self in service of collective vs. individual achievement and autonomy Kahoku likely operates more from an awareness of his place in a web of relations, while Heinz is concerned with his individual impact. Their mutual *navigational capacity* will increase when they each consider the other's starting point. Because Heinz is operating outside his home culture in a setting where collective values take precedence, the onus is on him to recognize and respect the importance of harmony and social cohesiveness. Kahoku can help by noticing and complimenting Heinz' individual achievements and acting as a cultural interpreter. For example, their mutual goal of effectively serving Laotians could focus their *navigational* energies on how, in Laos, it is sometimes important to "go slow earlier to go fast later".

Principles for conflict prevention in situations of international cooperation

The above examples illustrate just a few ways that cultural fluency could improve relationships and effectiveness in the NGO. As relationships and effectiveness improve, conflict is easier to deal with

and less destructive. Here are some principles to guide collaboration and prevent conflict across cultures for Heinz and his colleagues to keep in mind:

- Effective cooperation is a dance between elicitive and prescriptive approaches. Informed by local context, local people and their cultural common sense, international partners offer technical expertise in ways that respond to and respect local conditions and traditions.
- Effective partnering involves a spirit of curiosity. Knowledge, experience and culture-specific expertise is most powerful when married with “beginner’s mind” at the beginning of each new association.
- Situating professional knowledge alongside traditional knowledge and engaging dialogue between the two is vital to success.
- Identity is always a part of intercultural cooperation. When partners see themselves as both experts and amateurs, they are more likely to notice differences and subtle cues. Attending to the symbolic dimensions of identity – status, hierarchy, lines of affiliation, sources of credibility, power dynamics, etc. – will enrich understandings of how to work across borders.
- Effective conflict prevention and engagement comes more from presence than technique. As workers develop mindful presence, their techniques will be both more responsive to others and have more potent impacts.
- Conflict always exists at the crossroads of the personal and the relational, so assisting others effectively means standing at the intersection of the two and understanding that the location of the crossroads may shift in different contexts.
- Intellect alone will not be a sufficient guide to intercultural conflict. Partners must be open to peoples’ feelings as well as their thoughts, particularly noticing subtle nonverbal cues.
- Conflicts can be solved effectively in many different ways. The challenge arises when parties in conflict have different ways of addressing the same conflict.

This story continues, not only with Heinz and Kohaku in Laos, but in many sites of international cooperation. The characters in this story learned – through painful experience – that culturally-fluent conflict resolution skills are essential to effective cooperation. These skills and capacities cannot be developed through one course or program; ideally, pre-departure training includes these elements and is built-upon through ongoing development in the field.

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Workshop

cinfo offers an advanced workshop in [Managing Conflicts in International Cooperation](#) with Michelle LeBaron.