

Dean Tjosvold

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Developing a Shared Understanding of Conflict: Foundations for Sino-Western Mediation

Conflict is inevitable, especially when people from diverse cultures work together. Managing these conflicts is an intellectual challenge to understand and an important practical issue. Research has challenged the assumption that conflict is typically destructive by documenting that conflict, when managed appropriately, strengthens collaboration. Recognizing both the positive and negative consequences of conflicts, researchers have proposed various ways to identify and distinguish the nature of productive conflict. However, language ambiguities, specifically misunderstandings about the nature of conflict, have interfered with both the research and the practice of managing conflict. Even researchers have contributed to the negative reputation of conflict by using definitions that emphasize the destructive side of conflict. Specifically, they have defined conflict as opposing interests. However, this definition confounds conflict with competition. Another important language difficulty is confounding cooperation with conflict avoidance. These definitions deny the reality that people with cooperative, highly overlapping goals can be and often are in conflict. Project team members committed to the common goal of building a cost-effective information system may well disagree over the most appropriate software system as well as about the division of labor and the distribution of rewards. Defining conflict as incompatible activities recognizes that conflicts occur in both cooperative and competitive situations. Research in the West and East indicate that by developing cooperative relationships and the skills to discuss diverse views open-mindedly,

individuals and teams, even if they are culturally diverse, can use conflict to solve problems, create innovative solutions, learn from their experience, and strengthen their relationships. Recent studies further demonstrate that such key Chinese values as collectivism and social face, when properly understood and skillfully expressed, contribute to making conflict constructive.