

'Facilitation Environments' For Negotiation and Mediation

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Crucial to any attempt to negotiate or mediate in a confrontation or conflict are the following:

- understanding other parties' viewpoints;
- ensuring that they understand your position;
- developing a shared 'negotiation space' or common set of meanings;
- identifying the 'driving forces' behind the conflict and;
- ensuring the stability of any agreements.

These issues are awash with cultural, political and emotional concerns. As such, they're notoriously difficult to address using formal techniques. However, the amount of information to be assimilated, considered and incorporated in dealing with confrontations mandates the use of some framework to maintain a comprehensive understanding of the situation. It's unsatisfactory to rely on unaided judgment when risks are high.

Drama theory

...provides a formal method of analyzing and resolving confrontations that incorporates the 'soft' issues usually ignored by operational analysis (OA).

Unfortunately, the techniques used to support drama-theoretic analysis require the services of a technically skilled facilitator. This requirement to have a drama theory expert 'on tap' limits the problems that can be addressed. We come up against funding or security restrictions.

The principal relevant tools offered by drama theory are **confrontation analysis** (its analytical 'arm') and **immersive soap** (the role-playing arm).

Both techniques use a framework consisting of the actors (or 'characters'), their options (or 'cards') and the potential futures ('scenarios') suggested by combining and recombining these options in various ways. Within this model, the positions (suggested solutions) put forward by each actor are specified. So is the 'fallback position' of each actor, meaning the unilateral actions it is prepared to take if its position is rejected. When actors' fallback positions are combined, they form a future called the 'threatened future' – the future that threatens if the actors cannot agree on a solution.

Such a framework is illustrated in our diagram. Here department A wants to give department B some work under project X, provided B adopts A's methods; otherwise, it threatens to outsource the work. If it does so, B threatens to 'compete' for project X – i.e. to try to be given prime responsibility for it. In our

diagram, ticks and crosses show the options which are taken or not taken in each column, each of which represents a possible future.

A is Dept A's position

B is Dept B's position

t is the threatened future

	A	B	t
DEPT A			
give work to B	✓	✓	✗
DEPT B			
adopt A's methods	✓	✗	✗
compete	✗	✗	✓

Given such a setup, confrontation analysis asks which of a certain set of 'dilemmas' face the actors. These dilemmas are, in the real world, motivating forces for change. They may be used to move the situation towards a resolution.

Confrontation analysis identifies the dilemmas using a formal mathematical model. Immersive soap incorporates the insights gained from this into a richly documented format which can be used to brief role-players.

I propose

...a way to bring the benefits offered by these techniques to a wider audience. I would replace the skilled facilitator by computer support.

Using such a system, it should be possible for participants in a negotiation or mediation to develop their own drama-theoretic analyses and use these to support a resolution of their own disagreements.

The required software – a 'Facilitation Environment' (FE) – will be a groupware product. Those wishing to instigate a negotiation will 'post' a description of the problem on the system's bulletin board – a list of currently active negotiations. Then they ask the other party or parties to 'join'. The process continues with participants identifying options, scenarios and further actors. In suggesting initial or additional elements of the model, participants must discuss (via email) their understanding of these elements; this is crucial to encourage a common perspective among participants. To 'enforce' this debate, the FE might require all participants to sanction an element before it can be admitted into the model.

During the process of constructing a joint model and documenting the evolving common understanding, the FE guides participants with onscreen prompts and suggestions. However, the FE's real benefits will derive from its ability to identify dilemmas and advise participants on courses of action to dissolve them.

Via the iterative process of creating simple models of the negotiation and using the resulting dilemmas as a catalyst to suggest resolutions, movement towards a settlement will be encouraged.

If there is no agreement, there will at least be agreement on the reasons behind the conflict. The FE could then construct immersive soap role-playing exercises enabling individuals to explore alternative courses of action in the context of other parties' behavior. This should lead to more robust strategies for that individual.

The FE should be of use in many areas, including manager-subordinate relations, intra- and inter-departmental negotiations, inter-company negotiations, domestic politics negotiations and international relations.

After further development, an FE could become a standard business support tool used regularly to add rigor to the negotiation processes that exist within any organization, and make them more effective in the common interest. Just as project management tools are routinely employed in project planning, FEs could be used to mandate 'best practice' negotiation procedures.

In the course of documenting negotiation processes, an FE would also provide useful case-study material for training. The tool itself could be used in a training environment. Teaching staff would formally identify reasons for failed negotiation attempts and feed them back to students via a structured, justifiable framework.