TOWARDS AN INTELLECTUAL BASE
IN THEORY
FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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The people of the world have a right to look to scholars for ways to ameliorate the extensive and ever-more ingenious forms of conflicts that harass individuals, groups, organizations, and nations.

Perhaps the most cogent explanation for why scholars have not yet provided much lies in the way the intellectual community is organized. There is little point in spending much space to remind the reader that the way disciplines are organized does not, by itself, offer much hope for rendering solutions to problems that cut across those disciplines.

Yet those who seem to be fully aware of this characteristic of the intellectual community seem, at the same time, not ready to accept the implications. Clearly, if the principal scholarly knowledge lies within the disciplines, then the key to developing intellectual bases for such areas as conflict resolution lies, to considerable degree, in bringing together, or integrating knowledge from the disciplines.

While people may say that they perceive the need to integrate knowledge from the disciplines, yet they do not seem ready to accept the implications. Clearly, to integrate knowledge from the disciplines, we must bring together representatives of those disciplines in environments that have been designed to facilitate the integration of the knowledge that is available from the disciplines. And in order to hedge against the possibility that not all the needed knowledge is available from the disciplines, we need to engage the disciplinary representatives with others selected because of their experience or knowledge of the relevant issue areas.
While some have developed institutes that aim to focus upon a specific interdisciplinary problem area, such institutes are subject to certain hardships. Within the university, they tend to be viewed with suspicion and sometimes have a hard time gaining or retaining academic credibility. Moreover, in the absence of degree-granting authority, they may have difficulty getting good graduate students to assist. Outside the university, they may do superficial work, treating the issues under study more as a means of livelihood, rather than as offensive problems to be solved and eliminated.

It was in full view of the foregoing difficulties that the author, in the late 1960’s began a research investigation dealing with the question of how to make interdisciplinary teams effective and efficient in dealing with interdisciplinary issues. This investigation has continued ever since that time, and has lead to some of the following results:

- A theory of interactive management has been developed
- A theory of generic design has been developed
- Several methodologies have been invented for use in interdisciplinary work
- Numerous experimental applications have been undertaken with groups to deal with their real issues and problems, in such areas as fisheries research and management, forestry research and management, physical systems design, organizational planning, the design of meetings, strategic planning, reliability in manufacturing, and the study of global issues
- Dozens of scholarly papers have been published dealing with this area, as well as several monographs and books
- Japan and West Germany have published books in their own language that reports on aspects of this work
- Satellite organizations have begun to grow and operate in Brazil, England, India, and Australia; and in the United States in California, Georgia, and Iowa
- A course in generic design has been offered three times with good results
- A specially designed environment for interdisciplinary work has been operating for about four years
- The Center for Interactive Management at George Mason University has worked with a variety of clients, and its clientele continues to grow
- Those who work with the processes invented for this purpose acclaim its uniqueness and effectiveness

Nevertheless, it is largely ignored by disciplinary advocates, both in universities and government, and some researchers are publishing papers in this area that replicate work first published by us up to 15 years ago. Some of this re-inventing of the wheel is being sponsored by the National Science Foundation.

**TWO ASSERTIONS**

As a result of 15 years of research in interdisciplinary areas, during which the author served as President of both the IEEE Systems, Man, and Cybernetics Society and the Society for General Systems Research, and during which the author also served as editor of the IEEE Transactions on Systems, Man, and Cybernetics, and as founding editor of Systems Research, the official journal of the International Federation for Systems Research, the author has had almost unparalleled opportunity to assess the state of the art in interdisciplinary research, and the state of mind of people heavily ensconced in the disciplines. As a result, the author is able to make the following assertions:

1. The approach that has already been successful in developing Interactive Management and in developing Generic Design, can be applied directly to develop a package of conceptual material that will provide an intellectual base of high quality for dealing with conflict resolution.

2. The components of the package for Conflict Resolution will overlap considerably with the package already developed for Generic Design.

Both of these assertions will be dealt with in detail.
THE "PACKAGE" CONCEPT

Wherever there is a major interdisciplinary issue to be dealt with, it is highly desirable to consider a "package" concept. To illustrate the idea of the package, the Generic Design package consists of seven strongly connected parts, which are:

- A new cosmology
- A set of postulates upon which the theory is based
- A theory, that consists of:
  * Three Laws of Generic Design
  * Thirteen Principles of Generic Design
  * Nine Criteria for Choosing Generic Design Methodology
- A set of seven "Consensus Methodologies" available for use in Generic Design
- A set of cases taken from the media, against which all of the foregoing can be tested, and which can be used to illustrate the meaning and significance of the foregoing
- A set of direct applications with clients that have been used to test the theory and methodology
- A specially designed and equipped situation room in which generic design is carried out participatively, the room being tailored to the use of the Consensus Methodologies, with leadership provided by a specially trained facilitator

The cosmology was created to replace the kind of cosmology represented by physical science thinking, which is attuned to descriptive science. The new cosmology furnishes a sound basis for deep understanding of prescriptive science, while accounting as well for descriptive science. The new cosmology is used partly to explain, partly to distinguish heretofore blurred concepts, and partly to screen the literature for relevant postulates to underlie the development of theory.

The theory itself has, as its primary function, to provide a basis for the selection or invention of methodology. To attain this status, it must expand the practical understanding of the
cosmology. Also it must reflect a dual behavioral-technical basis that is a natural outcome of an understanding of the cosmology. It is this dual behavioral-technical basis that has turned out to be a primary reason for the difficulty that people oriented to disciplines have in understanding what we have developed. They are so accustomed to concepts that have either a behavioral basis or a technical basis but not an integrated dual basis, that they have considerable difficulty appreciating decisions made on this dual basis.

The methodologies differ substantially in several respects from what most practitioners are accustomed to using, though they may not always appreciate this until they actually engage with the generic design process.

The Consensus Methodologies are partly adopted and partly invented. Of the seven, three have been invented to meet needs that no existing methodology could satisfy.

AVAILABLE LITERATURE

There are perhaps 200 publications dealing with Interactive Management and Generic Design. No single document has been prepared that captures comprehensively the totality of either Interactive Management or Generic Design.

The paper "A Course in Generic Design", by John Warfield, provides an overview of most of the Generic Design Package. It explains how the components of the package are interrelated. A copy of this paper is attached as Appendix I.

The paper "Organizations and Systems Learning" by John Warfield provides motivation for the Consensus Methodologies, and in its own appendix provides a detailed outline of all seven of these methodologies. A copy of this paper is attached as Appendix II.

The paper "A Role for Systems Scientists in the Age of Design" by Alexander Christakis discusses the cosmology and its relevance to prescriptive science. A copy of this paper is attached as Appendix III.

Additional literature can be made available that discusses applications to real cases.
CONNECTION TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The goal of providing an intellectual foundation for conflict resolution is best achieved through adopting the package concept. Without an integrated system involving a cosmology that can encompass and distinguish descriptive and prescriptive science, the necessary sharpness of thinking required to develop the postulates of conflict resolution is unlikely to materialize.

Without the right set of postulates, theory will lack the direction, focus, and sharpness to fulfill its function of guiding us to the proper framework, methodology, roles, and setting for conflict resolution.

Methodology that is not supported by theory is adrift in space, and is unlikely to be more than marginally effective.

Methodology that cannot be properly implemented is crippled. The necessary supporting roles and physical environment must be coupled to the methodology.

The use of real cases to explain the elements of the cosmology, theory, methodology, and environment is necessary in order to educate people to apply the package.

The Generic Design package provides a prototype of what must be done to deal adequately with conflict resolution.

It is misleading to offer a few insights into conflict resolution that would lie in one narrow part of a package. Nevertheless, one can emphasize again the need for a dual behavioral-technical design of the entire package. The Generic Design package offers a means for rapid prototyping of a conflict resolution package. This prototyping could be done at modest expense, and would provide the foundation for a more elaborate development of a full-blown package.