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Decision-making in Problem Solving; Conflict Resolution through Dialogue



Foreword

The American University of Beirut (AUB), in partnership with the Global Confederation of Higher Education Associations for Agricultural and Life Sciences (GCHERA), EARTH University and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has launched a project on “Transforming Higher Education”. This project seeks to share five Key Elements of Success practiced by EARTH University and others with universities in Mexico and Haiti, and across GCHERA’s global university network over a period of three years between July, 2018 and June, 2021.

The goal of the project is to advocate for the education of future leaders with the commitment to serve society—leaders capable of positively affecting changes in their environment, promoting peace and understanding, and respecting diversity while contributing solutions for the major challenges of the 21st Century. The project’s purpose is to encourage and facilitate change processes within the university as well as to promote greater university engagement with the larger community to achieve the twin goals of producing future leaders and change-agents, as well as fostering greater prosperity and equity in society.

This publication is one of a series of five papers that present Key Elements of Success the project seeks to share and which, taken together or individually, can contribute to facilitating university transformation processes. These five elements are considered fundamental in the successful education of leaders who will be prepared to offer solutions to the diverse and complex challenges of feeding an ever growing and more diverse population sustainably, mitigating and adapting to a changing climate while also contributing to the economic well-being of our communities. This requires leaders with strong ethics and values as well as solid grounding in theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary to provide the technical, environmental and socially sensitive solutions required. The five Key Elements of Success presented in the series of papers are experiential/participatory education; community engagement; training in entrepreneurial education and business development; ethical and value based leadership; and decision-making and conflict resolution.

Three additional factors which enhance the impact of the five Elements of Success should be considered as well. The first is the role of the university professor as a facilitator of learning, the second is an explicit recognition that the five Elements of Success should permeate and be reinforced across the university educational system, including both curricular and co-curricular activities and programs and the third is the need for policy changes which are essential to their success.

The traditional role of the university professor as the repository of knowledge is increasingly being questioned. An educational system featuring the Key Elements of Success envisions a role for the professor as one who guides and facilitates student's learning through discovery, self-directed learning, analysis, reflection, group interaction, among others. The responsibility of the professor is to create a stimulating learning environment and provide students with real life opportunities to observe, develop ideas, apply theories, implement solutions and learn from the results. Rather than focusing on "covering the material", professors should be concerned with students learning on multiple levels, including problem solving and analytical skills, self-confidence, teamwork, personal relationship skills among many others. Professors should be recognized and stimulated for their innovations and contributions as "Facilitators of Learning". The professor's commitment to participatory education, to learning with and from the community, to providing continuous feedback and support requires time and commitment far beyond the delivery of lectures and supervision of laboratory sessions.

In addition to the changed role for the professor as the facilitator of learning, the entire university must be committed to the learning system oriented towards the five Elements of Success. As the five essays make clear, each element of success goes beyond the traditional classroom and involves everyone on campus and beyond, including community members. Participatory and experiential learning occur in the community, on farms, as part of research activities and as part of the university's commercial undertakings. Ethics and values are not just discussed and analyzed in the classroom but must be key features of the university environment, embodied in institutional policies and consistently demonstrated by university administrators, faculty, staff and students. The effective resolution of conflict is an acquired skill requiring systematic evaluation and analysis and should be actively practiced in relations between faculty, staff, administrators and students and well as between the university and the

larger community. Team projects in classes provide a fertile environment for fostering skills in resolving conflicts, as do co-curricular activities. The University engagement with the community involves administrators, faculty, students and staff as does the inclusion of entrepreneurship within the curriculum. Each of the five areas are complementary and reinforcing.

The successful integration of the elements of success will frequently require policy changes, and in many cases a rethinking of the university mission and vision. The education of leaders requires creating a student focused learning community and the university policies need to promote greater faculty, staff and student engagement with the community; student driven learning where students take on more responsibility for their own education; student led business ventures; student supervision of research, and other initiatives. Policy changes may involve changing study programs, institutional access by visitors from the community, student access to laboratories and fields, as well as the level of responsibilities given to students to reinforce their learning. University policies must recognize and reward the new role of the professor as the “Facilitator of Learning” as a valid and viable road to advancement within the University Community. Therefore, it is critical to consider policy changes to ensure any successful university transformation process.

We hope that this series of documents will be helpful to your university as you engage in a process of transformation. Please take them as an invitation to open a dialog and stimulate discussion to enhance the university transformation process¹.

James B. French | Project Director

1 What is written in this series of documents represent the views of the authors and does not necessarily represent the thinking or vision of American University of Beirut, GCHERA, EARTH University or the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

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Irmino Perrera Díaz¹

Problems: from their necessity to their complexity in conflicts

Problems are circumstances that hinder normal progress toward the achievement of a desired objective in any sphere of human practice. Conflicts are a type of problem whose principal characteristic is confrontation.

Problems, by definition, reflect dissatisfaction with the perceived reality. Nobody likes having to deal with them, but they are unavoidable and play an important role in the development of society, knowledge and thinking. A problem-free world would be a static world, as there would be no inspiration for change. Such a scenario is as sad as it is impossible, because human beings have ever growing needs and, therefore, are dissatisfied with the *status quo*, and problems arise as a result. Resolution of the problems then leads to an improvement in the situation, which at some point will also prove to be insufficient and a new problem will then occur. Problems, then, drive and inspire personal and—by extension—social development.

It should be noted, however, that problems, especially when they take the form of conflicts, reflect dissatisfaction with the perceived reality rather than the true one. Perception is a process in which individuals organize and interpret the impressions of their senses and seek to assign meaning to their surroundings. Perception is therefore determined not only by the individual's external reality, but also by his or her experiences, attitudes, motivations and interests. Problems are not based on the reality, but on how the reality is interpreted, and this complicates matters. In the case of interpersonal conflicts, there are at

¹ M.A. Perrera is Professor of Ethics and Value at EARTH University and Director of Student Affairs.

least two deeply felt perceptions, interacting with each other in a relationship. That is why interpersonal problems are so common and so difficult to deal with. To understand problems, we must address the phenomenon of perception; and to solve them, we must find a way to comprehend their precise nature. For thousands of years, dialogue has been a reliable method for achieving that. One possible approach to a dialogue is to devise questions that will encourage those involved to come up with ideas, opinions and perspectives about a given situation.

Simply put, any response to a conflict can be divided into two basic phases. First, the construction of the image of the problem, followed by consideration of the decision that should be taken to deal with it. We shall look briefly at both phases. In the first case, we shall focus on the threats posed by the problem, stemming from perceptual distortions regarding the situation in question. We shall consider the second phase from the perspective of the opportunities that the conflict provides, which has to do with the values applied in decision-making.

Distorted perceptions: the dark side of the conflict

Endless amounts of information exist around us and it is impossible to perceive everything. Dearborn and Simon (1958) studied 23 individuals who worked in different areas of the same organization and asked them to describe the organization's biggest problem. The differences were dramatic. In more than 80% of cases, the problems described were related to situations very close to each individual concerned. This phenomenon is called **selective perception**, the process by which individuals, in briefly analyzing their situation, are highly likely to construct a mistaken representation of it. In such cases, it is advisable to ask, "*Is this vision based on my life experience*". Important distortions can also occur when an individual's general impression of another person leads them to base their perception on a single characteristic—their intelligence, social skills or beauty, for example. Based on that single characteristic, the individual can be perceived as a good or a bad person at any specific moment in time, due to what is known as the **halo effect** (Murphy, Jako and Anhalt 1993). The question that could be asked here is "*Is this a case of 'first impressions going a long way'?*" We also know that we do not evaluate a thing or a person in isolation. Our perception

of someone is influenced by other people with whom we have interacted recently (a phenomenon referred to as the **contrast effect**). To avoid it, we can question the perception in this way: “*You see him/her like that in relation to whom?*” Finally, we tend to perceive people according to the group to which they belong—their nationality, culture, gender or religion, or even based on their sports preferences. This practice, known as **stereotyping** (Hilton and Von Hippel 1996), is common and can have serious consequences for the perception of problems (Eberhardt et al. 2006). One way of counteracting this effect is to ask, “*Do you think you perceive him/her like that because of his/her ...?*” These are only some of the influencers that can lead us to construct an incorrect image of a situation, or create an interpersonal conflict, and people trying to facilitate the resolution of problems focus on them. The other important phase yet to be considered involves what should be done to solve the problem.

Ethical decision criteria: the light in the conflict

Value formation is at the heart of EARTH University’s educational process. The entire faculty and administrative team focus on the transformative process that students need to undergo as part of their development as human beings, which encompasses academic excellence, ethical behavior, a social conscience, the search for knowledge, as well as a commitment to sustainable development and biodiversity conservation. Values are the underpinnings of decision-making in response to a conflict. The values-based approach to conflicts is not only consistent with the nature of the university, but also a science-based necessity.

Faced with a conflict, an individual may have recourse to three different ethical criteria (Cavanagh, Moberg and Velásquez 1981). The first of these is **utilitarianism**, a term with which we must be especially careful in this case, because it can be misunderstood. Utilitarianism means providing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This vision is very useful in agricultural, community development and environmental management projects, but also in managing conflicts between two or more people and finding solutions. In the case of this criterion, the question we should ask is, “*What is the best solution for the greatest number of people?*” The second criterion is **rights**. In this case, our aim would be

to act in accordance with the socially accepted liberties and privileges of human beings. It means respecting and protecting basic rights. The question to ask could be, *“Has some right been violated, or is it at risk of being violated, in in face of the decision taken?”* The third criterion is **justice**. This criterion calls for emphasis to be placed on justice and impartiality, so that the solution to the conflict is perceived as distributing the costs and benefits fairly. The questions to ask here would be, *“Does the solution distribute the benefits fairly? Are the costs involved in the solution distributed fairly?”*

Now that we have an idea of perceptual distortions and the ethical criteria used to take decisions, we can proceed to discuss them. How to approach the discussion is the next question we need to consider.

Dialogue in conflict resolution in an educational setting

A conflict is a process that is triggered when one of the parties perceives that they are going to be negatively affected, or they are in actuality going to be, and it is a concern. Dialogue is a well-known tool for dealing with conflicts, but is it valid in educational settings?

Dialogue has been used as a means of getting to the truth of a matter for thousands of years. When it is values-based, it provides a great opportunity to resolve conflicts, and an effective setting for reaffirming and developing values in students. Dialogue exercises, which involve asking questions, challenge the parties in conflict to be active listeners, gauge the impact of an action on others, know how to defend their position while respecting the feelings of the other person, and even how to say sorry when they make a mistake. The facilitator or professor, through dialogue, creates opportunities to consider the role of emotions, irritation, anger or pride, and how such feelings make it difficult to engage in a constructive conversation about a conflict. A key element in the conflict resolution process is the emphasis on the importance of sincerity, without which the dialogue will not get anywhere.

Competency	Role	Score	GAP
Ability to make decisions	9.36	8.07	1.28
Ability for oral and written communication	9.35	8.40	0.95
Ethical commitment	9.35	8.86	0.49
Ability to work as member of a team	9.31	8.91	0.40
Ability to organize and plan use of time	9.24	7.93	1.31
Ability to act in new situations	9.24	8.07	1.17
Ability to identify, set out and resolve problems	9.23	8.05	1.18
Ability to learn and continually update one's own knowledge	9.22	8.02	1.20
Commitment to quality	9.22	8.41	0.81
Ability to apply knowledge in practice	9.21	8.51	0.70
Exercise leadership	9.17	8.45	0.72
Interpersonal skills	9.17	8.29	0.89
Ability to work on one's own	9.15	8.29	0.86
Ability to be critical and self-critical	9.13	8.03	1.10
Ability to motivate and lead others toward common goals	9.12	8.24	0.88
Ability to find, process and analyze data from various sources	9.11	8.16	0.95
Ability to use information and communication technology	9.10	7.29	1.81
Capacity for abstraction, analysis and synthesis	9.03	7.87	1.17
Commitment to environmental protection	8.98	9.14	-0.16
Ability to design and manage projects	8.93	7.93	1.00
Creative capacity	8.91	7.90	1.01
Social responsibility and civic commitment	8.90	8.61	0.29
Place value on and respect diversity and multiculturalism	8.87	9.08	-0.21
Knowledge of area of study and profession	8.74	7.91	0.84
Ability to work in international contexts	8.72	8.35	0.37
Ability to communicate in a second language	8.71	6.42	2.29
Commitment to the sociocultural environment	8.65	8.73	-0.09
Ability to undertake research	8.61	7.48	1.13
Arithmetic Mean	9.06	8.19	0.87
Standard Deviation	0.22	0.56	0.54

Table 1: General competencies rated by EARTH graduates

Source: Rodríguez 2019.

Note: The *ROLE* is the importance that graduates attach to each competency. The *SCORE* is the rating that graduates give to EARTH's educational efforts with regard to each competency. The *GAP* is the difference between the *ROLE* and the *SCORE* ($GAP = ROLE - SCORE$)

At EARTH University, this effort has produced results. Graduates rate very highly their own ability to make decisions, their ability to communicate and their ethical commitment, as can be seen in the above table. EARTH is an intentional community, i.e., it was created to operate with a series of characteristics far beyond the limits of conventional curriculum design, with a well-defined objective for its programs: to train leaders for social change. Nothing features in its design by accident.

Case studies: Resolving conflicts through dialogue

Presented below are three examples of how EARTH's strategies function in processes aimed at training competent leaders to resolve conflicts through values-based dialogue. For each type of case chosen, many more examples could be cited of specific conflicts of varying magnitude that were resolved successfully. But the examples chosen are felt to be particularly illuminating and instructive. It is easy to visualize their potential impact.

Case 1: Business Projects

Entrepreneurship is one of the key skills that EARTH seeks to instill in its students. Business Projects are a cross-cutting feature of the entire degree course, with students required to put forward business ideas and seek financing, as well as planning and implementing their projects. In these joint exercises, the leaders and collaborators are faced with many teamwork challenges. They have to weigh business ideas against one another, set objectives and determine the means to be used and monitoring and control methods. As if these conditions were not already complex enough, EARTH also establishes certain requirements with regard to the makeup of the project teams. These must be multicultural and include people of both genders, for example. We have continually faced situations in which one student leader has put forward a business proposal that would yield great financial returns, and

another then suggests an alternative form of environmental management. In such cases, efforts must be made to foster a dialogue on the expected benefits, ranging from those that are most probable to those that are least likely to be achieved. Then a series of questions emerge, such as: Which of the projects is most useful, and in what way? Will the benefits be distributed fairly? Is some basic right under threat? After this analysis, efforts can be made to reach agreement by consensus.

Case 2: Harmonious coexistence with people from diverse backgrounds

Under EARTH's model, strategies have been developed to take advantage of the formative potential generated by the university's diversity and complexity. One example of such strategies is, undoubtedly, the fact that students live together in halls of residence. At EARTH, student halls are not simply facilities that provide accommodation; they are, by definition, learning scenarios. Students are placed in them with peers of different nationalities. Students are not allowed to share a room with people of the same nationality. This is always challenging, but in some cases it is especially so. Muslims spend four years living with Christians; Catholics share their possessions and ups and downs with atheists; students from the humblest rural backgrounds share a room with companions from very wealthy families. The governing principle of life in the halls of residence is "freedom with responsibility," so students are expected to resolve their differences by themselves, with the least possible intervention by university officials. And when the latter do become involved, their role is not "to sort out the situation" but to act as mediators, facilitating dialogue, offering guidance to enable students to use the basic tools of the conflict resolution model through values-based dialogue. When conflicts arise, one of the range of questions that may be used to prompt dialogue tends to be: "Has some right been violated in the conflict of coexistence, or is it under threat?" The results are compelling: students develop strong harmonious relationships underpinned by loyalty, commitment, feelings and attitudes of solidarity and, in some cases, a connection that lasts a lifetime.

Case 3: Work Experiences

The Work Experiences course provides a permanent challenge throughout a student's time at the university. For ten hours a week, over the entire four years, students work for productive projects on farms managed for instructional purposes. The project leaders are fourth-year students who face an important series of conflicts involving issues such as indiscipline, performance problems, difficulties in working together as a team, interpersonal problems, among others. Students have goals to meet, however, and must resolve such issues with assistance from members of staff that gradually diminishes as they progress through their course. It is often the case that when conflicts of these kinds occur, more experienced students challenge the others to answer questions such as: "Do you think what you're saying has to do with how you see your fellow student, or the truth of the situation?"; "When you say it's no good, can you tell us for whom you think it's no good? Would it be okay for someone else or for some other people?"; or "Does some of what you say have to do with a particular worldview?" These are some of the questions that leaders and faculty members ask spontaneously in processes aimed at resolving conflicts through dialogue.

Conflict ethics and values

At first glance, it may seem that the complicated, complex nature of EARTH's community is not the most appropriate one for the task of training competent leaders to resolve conflicts through values-based dialogue. The social, ethnic, religious and ideological diversity of its members and their worldviews make for a complex multicultural system that has to operate on the basis of respect for such a melting pot, interacting with globalized and, at times, counterproductive cultural models, among many other elements. Moving beyond that first impression, when one looks at the operation of this educational project more closely, it becomes evident that its complexity is built-in. Students and faculty, as well as other staff of all kinds and at all levels, live and work together to achieve common objectives each day, both learning and using their expertise to solve problems and conflicts regardless of cultural and other kinds of differences. The built-in complexity is the big issue, leading as it does to unavoidable conflicts that then provide the required scenario for applying values as tools for problem-solving and growth. That is the advantage of having problems.

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For further information,
please contact:

Dr. James B. French,
American University of Beirut,
Project Director,
jim.french@aub.edu.lb

Dr. Roula Bachour,
American University of Beirut,
Project Manager,
rb63@aub.edu.lb