

A VOLUME IN INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION



# Conflict Management and Dialogue in Higher Education

*A Global Perspective*  
second edition



Nancy T. Watson  
Karan L. Watson  
Christine A. Stanley



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A volume in  
*International Higher Education*  
Fredrick M. Nafukho and Beverly Irby, *Series Editors*

## **International Higher Education**

Fredrick. M. Nafukho and Beverly Irby, *Series Editors*

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Second Edition*

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**Nancy T. Watson  
Karan L. Watson  
Christine A. Stanley**  
*Texas A&M University*



INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.  
Charlotte, NC • [www.infoagepub.com](http://www.infoagepub.com)

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress  
<http://www.loc.gov>

ISBN: 978-1-64113-093-6 (Paperback)  
978-1-64113-094-3 (Hardcover)  
978-1-64113-095-0 (ebook)

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Printed in the United States of America

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## *Foreword*

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Nancy and Karan Watson and Christine Stanley have written a very important book. During a Foreign Service career in the Middle East, I learned something about conflict, both political and physical such as the fights being waged today in that area. I also learned something about negotiations. There are negotiations to end conflicts, to strengthen relations, to find compromises and sometimes to clarify that in fact no agreement is possible and that conflict must continue.

When I arrived as a dean at Texas A&M, it did not take me long to figure out that conflict also permeates institutions of higher education. It may not be as spectacularly violent as the Middle Eastern variants, but understanding and managing it are just as important. The authors start with a crucial point. Whether we watch it on TV or experience it in the workplace, a common reaction is to see conflict as something negative, something to be avoided. Not so, we are told. Conflict is itself neither positive nor negative. Indeed, conflict is often the necessary driver for organizational change. No conflict, no change. This also holds true for personal growth.

The first chapter lays out the fundamentals. Conflict is part of life—we all experience it, and we all have our own style of dealing with conflict, even if we are not aware of it. Similarly, all organizations have conflict and an organizational culture that defines how conflict is managed. Strong organizations have to evolve, and change means conflict. The key for healthy organizations and individuals is how conflict is managed, and the book

makes an important point: not all conflicts can be resolved, but they can all be managed.

National issues of diversity and inclusion have been much in the news lately, and they have been highly contentious. No surprise for our authors who make the observation that diversity creates conflict. Indeed, diversity requires conflict. Again, the critical factor is how that conflict is managed.

There are many common threads in conflict and conflict management that are relevant in almost any circumstances. At the same time, organizations have unique cultures that affect how conflict is perceived and managed. Higher education is no exception, and the book devotes a very useful chapter to a description of who we are, what we seek and how we work, and how all of that has an impact on conflict and its management.

Moving from the institutional to the individual, the book lays out first the personal skills required for effective conflict management. It makes clear that good conflict managers are made, not born. We all can learn to do this. As so much does in life, it starts with self-awareness, an understanding of who we are and how we operate, including traits of which we may not be conscious, such as implicit bias. Speaking of bias, the book plays to one of mine by underscoring the importance of listening. I discovered long ago that the most important attribute of effective diplomacy and negotiation is the ability to listen well.

Having set the stage by defining conflict and identifying institutional and individual characteristics that relate to it, the book then moves to a practical discussion of how to deal with conflict situations. The key is communication. The authors lay out the elements that go into effective difficult dialogues with some very helpful examples before turning to the importance of mediation as a key form of conflict intervention, again with concrete examples.

Of course, no scholarly work on the subject would be complete without a discussion of the body of scholarship on conflict management, and the book has this. However, it is a work solidly grounded in the world of experience by three uniquely qualified authors. Nancy Watson is a professional counselor and mediator who has spoken and written extensively on conflict management. Karan Watson manages conflict every single day as Provost of Texas A&M University. Christine Stanley is Texas A&M's Vice President and Associate Provost for Diversity. They know what they are talking about.

Anyone with management responsibilities in higher education should read this book. Its relevance also goes well beyond the academy. Conflict is universal, as are many of the techniques for dealing with it. I found its analyses and prescriptions as applicable to the world of conflict and diplomacy

that I left as it is to the one I am in now. It is a major contribution to the literature on this important subject, but it is also a field manual for the effective management of conflict in daily life.

—**Ryan Crocker**

Dean, Bush School of Government and Public Service

Texas A&M University

Former Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq,

Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait and Lebanon

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## *Prelude and Book Organization*

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**T**his book includes the important topics of conflict, mediation, and dialogue in higher education. Conflicts are a part of life. Although many people assume conflicts are negative and, therefore, should be avoided, conflict is truly neutral; however, how one engages in the conflict is what can be perceived as constructive or destructive. There are many positive outcomes for a conflict that is managed well, hence the necessity for this book. One of the most important reasons for management rather than avoidance of conflict is some level of conflict drives most change that occurs in organizations. In order to manage change, we must learn, grow, and develop effective conflict management skills. The conflicts we engage in our personal lives and in the workplace are essential to personal, professional, and organizational development. However, when managed poorly, conflicts can escalate to the point where they can harm the health and vitality of individuals and organizations. As illustrated in this book, *the key to managing conflict is to expect, understand, and embrace conflict* in a manner that allows it to be beneficial to individuals and the organization. The alternative to well managed conflict is not the absence of conflict, but typically the costly loss of talented personnel, an unhealthy organizational climate, or even lawsuits. We provide approaches for one of the most recognized and useful alternative methods of managing conflicts—mediation. Further, we share important communication tools for addressing conflict and the value of using dialogue to address social and cultural differences.



The contents of this book reflect areas of importance addressed in work at The Center for Change and Conflict Resolution (CCCCR) Mediation: alternative dispute resolution practices, conflict management intervention options, models of thinking about conflict, the mediation format, and the skill set needed for a person to be a strong conflict manager and mediator. We challenge readers to reflect upon personal biases and beliefs that may negatively impact conflict and the mediation process.

Section I, of this book, *Defining Conflict*, introduces the framing, realities, and attributes about conflict and conflict management in Higher Education. This section includes Chapter 1, 2, and 3. Chapter 1 provides definitions and explanations for our framing of conflict, which is essential if it is to be managed. This includes when we should expect conflict, whether conflict is positive or negative, and the need for appropriate engagement in conflict for individuals and organizations. Finally, we will discuss the importance of framing conflict and the challenge with conflict to ensure management or resolution of conflict. Chapter 2, “Realities About Conflict,” shares information related to the multi-faceted consequences of conflict especially when is conflict negative and when is conflict positive, the idea of management of conflict to promote the positive consequences, and finally how an organization can affect its organizational culture through its approach to conflict management. Chapter 3, “Unique Attributes Around Conflict in Higher Education,” discusses the core missions of higher education, the community of higher education, and how leadership and conflict are often viewed differently than in other work settings.

Section II will focus on details that must be attended to when creating a conflict management approach for units in higher education. This section includes Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 4, “Personal Skills Required to be a Good Conflict Manager,” provides an approach to personal conflicts, and how to translate such personal competencies into organizational approaches. Finally, we will explicitly discuss the molding of a unit’s organizational culture and climate through its approach to conflict. Chapter 5, “Dialogue as a Conflict Management Strategy,” discusses a communication strategy, *Dialogue*, as a tool that is useful to support an organization, particularly when there is a difficult process, issue, or conflict to decide upon or discuss. Chapter 6, “Mediation Skills in Managing Conflict,” focuses on a specific method of conflict intervention, mediation. As discussed in this chapter, mediation is a structured conflict management process where the parties in conflict work to generate solutions to their issues. Mediation is a useful conflict management intervention strategy in higher education because it gives the power of the solution/outcome to the parties in conflict.

The mediators are responsible for establishing an environment where the parties in conflict can have a productive dialogue.

Section III: Scholarship on Managing Conflict includes Chapter 7, “Conflict Management in Higher Education: A Review of Selected Literature,” presents not only some of the literature concerning conflict in higher education, but our own scholarly work on conflict management at some of the institutions where we have worked.

Finally, Section IV: Personnel and Programs in Managing Conflict, includes Chapters 8, 9, and 10. Chapter 8, “Conflict Management from a Practitioners Perspective,” focuses on a specific method of conflict intervention, mediation. As discussed in this chapter, mediation is a structured conflict management process where the parties in conflict work to generate solutions to their issues. Mediation is a useful conflict management intervention strategy in higher education because it gives the power of the solution/outcome to the parties in conflict. Chapter 9, “Unit Leaders’ Responsibilities with Conflict,” discusses the unique issues of managing conflict at an institution of higher education. There are some conflict issues unique to higher education, particularly ones where there is no one person ‘in charge’ of faculty. Higher education structures often differ from business and industry, or even other nonprofit entities, and therefore effective conflict engagement and strategies for engagement differ.

Chapter 10 is the book’s “Conclusion and the Way Forward.” It concludes with a brief summary and discusses the “way forward” looking particularly at the areas of conflict management and dialogue in higher education and its implications for the future.

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## *Acknowledgments*

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**O**ur individual and collective work and experiences with organizations and groups in the public, government, and education sectors across the United States and in other countries, and particularly in higher education settings, have taught us that conflict is not only an inevitable part of life, but also recognizing and learning how to manage it, are equally important. Strategic conflict engagement and conflict management can lead to deeper dialogue and increased understanding for effective communication.

We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the people who have taught us about strategic conflict engagement and dialogue. Your reflections, the challenging dialogues, and your courage have shaped our thinking about conflict management over the years. We remain indebted to you, for without your insights and urging, the development of this book would not have been possible.

—Nanc, Karan, and Christine