

Reaching Past the Barricades: Conflict Resolution at International Summit Events

Introduction

Less than two weeks before the G-20 Conference was held in Ottawa in November 2001, a representative of the RCMP asked a group of people at Saint Paul University for their assistance in preparing for this summit event. Originally to have been held in New Delhi, India, the logistical planning that is critical to the successful outcomes of such meetings was cut extremely short.

Daniel Clapin, the University's Alumni and Development Director, Dr. Vern Neufeld Redekop and consultant Shirley Paré agreed to meet with security officials in order to offer their expertise in reducing the levels of anxiety and violence which have attended such events since the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings in Vancouver in 1997. For Daniel, Vern and Shirley, the request was both an affirmation of the work they had begun in the area of crowd dynamics and conflict resolution and a reminder of their continuing efforts to find a financial part-

ner whose support will allow them to continue developing this process.

Modest Beginnings

"This work was originally begun as a result of the University's interest in creating a Masters of Arts program in Conflict Studies," says Daniel. In early 2000, Daniel approached Richard L'Abbé, the President of Med-Eng Systems Inc., to find out if he was interested in becoming a program sponsor. Med-Eng is a world leader in the research, design and manufacture of personal protective systems used in bomb disposal, de-mining, extreme temperature conditions and crowd management. Says Daniel: "Richard was concerned that as his products offered greater levels of safety to police organizations, there was a corresponding rise in the levels of force used to control crowds in protest situations.

Richard challenged Daniel to find a way to enhance police capabilities on the non-aggressive

Crowd Dynamics Continuum

(Table reprinted by permission, Dr. Vern Neufeld Redekop, 2002)

<i>Crowd Control Paradigm</i>	<i>Collaborative Management of Crowd Dynamics Paradigm</i>
Crowd thought of as “enemy” or “problem” by security	Crowd welcomed as essential component of civil society
Security develops strategy on its own	Crowds, security and possible targets collaborate on strategy for the event
All the means of antagonistic preparations are used including surveillance and covert intelligence gathering	Information is shared openly all around; identities and roles are transparent
Security is derived from using the tools of control including less than lethal and lethal means	Security is derived from trusting relationships based on mutual dignity and respect
Tries to have all contingencies covered before engagement with crowd	Uses open processes to imagine new and mutually beneficial ways of dealing with conflicts
Security fundamentally responsible to Target	Security responsible for well being of entire population including protesting crowd
Crowd seen as problem	Crowd seen as creative potential
Focuses on violent protesters as “criminals,” “trouble-makers,” etc.	Tries to understand reasons for extreme emotions and passions
Tries to thwart actions of protesters by closing borders, impeding logistics, harassing and arresting protesters	Expedites movements and organization of protesters
Debriefs a crowd event alone	Debriefs a crowd event together
Media frames event around conflict between protesters and police	Media frames stories around the creation of mimetic* structures of blessing arising out of mimetic structures of violence
Targets see crowds as nuisance and threat	Targets see crowds as a sign that some things need to change; as a source of key information about the world
Activists see police and targets as enemy	Activists see police and leaders playing essential roles
Mimetic* and escalating violence	Mimetic* and expanding blessing
Public gets message that violence is on increase	Public gets new vision for future possibilities
Public increasingly worried about future	Public reassured
People are boxed into roles and spaces	People move respectfully into each other’s spaces

* Mimetic means imitative: having to do with or exhibiting mimicry; copying closely. In the context of Crowd Dynamics and Conflict Resolution, paradigmatic structures of blessing and violence are imitated within the actions of the participants to change our culture for the better or worse.

side of crowd management and asked if the University would be interested in bringing people together to discuss the issue. Says Daniel: “Richard deals in the world of conflict. He felt that the University offered an avenue of conflict relief through academics.”

Daniel discussed Richard’s ideas with Vern, who at this time was finishing his term as President of the Canadian Institute for Conflict Resolution. Vern’s doctoral work in deep-rooted conflict was combined with a methodology of community-based conflict resolution to come up with a new approach to dealing with crowds. Med-Eng funds were released to prepare a seminar entitled ‘Crowd Management and Conflict Resolution,’ and an Advisory Council was established to oversee the development of this initiative.

The three-day pilot workshop was held at Saint Paul University in November 2000 and was attended by 20 participants, mostly police. Vern invited Shirley Paré to work with him on the initiative and she acted as coordinator and co-trainer for the event.

Says Vern: “Certain things function symbolically. My background in these activities to date had given me a certain affinity for some of the messages that activists want to get across. Shirley is from a military background and understands what it’s like to be in a context that’s organized in a command structure. As primary actors at this seminar, we demonstrated that a collaboration between these two mentalities is possible.”

One of the key learnings from that first event came as a result of a presentation on collaborative management – a paradigm which proposes an interactive structure where crowds are welcomed as essential components of civil soci-

ety rather than a problem which needs to be contained. “All of us began to see that there needed to be a neutral party which could help open a space where civil society could continue to grow,” says Vern.

By the end of the seminar, some participants and Advisory Council members who previously had some reservations about working closely with activists were asking that the larger follow-up event planned for the spring of 2001 contain a more equitable balance of all parties involved in world summit events – politicians, police, activists and members of the media.

Such a dramatic shift in attitude signalled to the group at Saint Paul’s that they had been successful in establishing a framework for discussion that was respectful and trustworthy, at least as viewed by members of the policing community. It remained to be seen if Daniel, Vern and Shirley could convince the activists, media and politicians of their neutrality and sincere desire for dialogue.

Recent events have challenged the stereotype of Canada as a sleepy, peaceful nation. Highly publicized confrontations between police and military organizations and citizens groups at Oka and Burnt Church are representative of the types of deep-rooted conflicts which Vern has studied. Media coverage of summit events in Vancouver, Quebec City and Ottawa have forced the recognition that conflict can occur anywhere in Canada, any time there are deeply held convictions.

“The media offers us a picture of ourselves as a society,” says Vern. “We need to start to think about whether we like what we see. Levels of distrust between activist groups and police groups are high. We knew it would take time to let our reputation spread, and for the process to gain acceptance.”

A second success

Shirley Paré spent the first three months of 2001 following contact leads and developing a participants' list for the next seminar. "It was important to the Advisory Council and to us to pursue a top level buy-in from the stakeholder communities," says Shirley. Funding from the Office of the Solicitor General of Canada and the Canadian Police Research Centre were hopeful signals that they were on the right track. Some members of the activist community stepped forward to participate, but the organizers knew that they had not yet achieved widespread acceptance among this group.

The event originally was scheduled to take place in April 2001, but was put off until May because many participants were involved in activities surrounding the Quebec City Summit of the Americas. In hindsight, that delay was fortuitous. Having the seminar closely follow the April summit ensured that everyone's memories of the event were fresh and the short intervening time gave their emotional responses time to cool but not grow cold.

The second event was structured to include a welcoming on the Monday evening. Individuals began by sharing their hopes and experiences, and this openness paved the way for an ultimately



Shirley Paré, Dr. Vern Neufeld Redekop and Daniel Clapin

successful outcome. Tuesday's presentations of the roots of conflict helped participants to identify their own and others' motivations for involvement and to understand better the dynamics of violent crowd situations. A debriefing exercise involving events at the Quebec City Summit of the Americas allowed participants to share their experiences with people on all sides of the barricades. This exercise demonstrated that attitudes and perceptions could shift rather quickly if given the proper environment.

"We saw that an increased balance in representation brought an increased level of collaboration," says Shirley. "After May, we began to press the Advisory Council to broaden its membership, and they agreed to do so."

Shortly after the second seminar, the three organizers and the Advisory Council held a strategic planning session in which they decided to focus attention on the upcoming G-8 summit scheduled for Kananaskis, Alberta, in April 2002. They continued discussions with stakeholder representatives and prepared a submission for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade outlining their interest and possible participation in the G-8 summit. Throughout the summer and early fall, Daniel, Vern and Shirley continued to meet with Canadian government and policing officials to investigate leadership and funding avenues. Upon request, they prepared a budget and an eight-step plan for their proposed involvement in G-8 preparations.

Says Vern: "Our two goals for Kananaskis are to provide a context for protest without violence, and to create relational structures where dissent and creativity can coexist more effectively."

During this period, they also made progress with members of the activist community. A

meeting which began with distrust that the University group was 'selling out' to police and government interests gave way to a willingness to listen and a conditional support of the neutral process. "Transformation of attitudes was beginning to occur at all levels of involvement," says Shirley.

When time was of the essence

Then came the November request from the RCMP. "We had four days to put together a condensed version of our eight-step plan," says Vern. "Twenty-six participants representing the government, police, activist and media groups attended. We had representation from more politically radical activist organizations than ever before, and a greater number of highly-placed government officials were in attendance. Unfortunately, the time was too short to allow us to do the kind of scenario visioning exercises that prepare everyone to respond positively to unexpected turns of events."

The media coverage from the Ottawa summit was not significantly different from previous world summit events; businesses were damaged, activists were arrested, violent film clips made the evening news. Despite this, Daniel, Vern and Shirley heard from police that they had made changes to their strategies as a result of the mini-seminar; press releases were framed differently and changes were made to on-the-ground procedures. Says Shirley: "People called to thank us for our involvement, and they reported feeling that their views had changed. It is this kind of shift in perception that will lead us from violent exchanges to constructive ones."

The G-20 summit concluded on November 18. Press coverage from a November 26 Ottawa Police Services Board meeting concluded with an announcement that there would be an open



Dr. Redekip addresses seminar participants.

meeting at Saint Paul University the following evening to discuss issues arising from the G-20 meetings. Daniel, Vern and Shirley were caught off guard. Yes, a meeting had been scheduled for that evening, but it was meant to be a private meeting between themselves and mini-seminar attendees.

Early on November 27, Daniel met with University Rector Father Dale Schlitt to discuss the problem. Father Schlitt's answer: "This is a university, a place for learning and dialogue – open the doors wide." They did. More than 100 people entered the building at 7 p.m. Most were activists and emotions were still running high. Vern's initial suggestion to establish a framework for small group discussions met with hostility; people needed to share their experiences with a larger group.

One by one the stories poured out, but by 9:30, Vern felt it was time to change directions. He asked the assembly: "How can we work constructively together?" They responded by putting forward 93 positive suggestions. When the meeting broke up several hours later, Shirley moved among the group, passing out registration forms so that those in attendance could stay in touch and continue their involvement with the process. Almost no one had filled in a form when they entered; more than 30 did so by the end of the evening.

Keeping the process alive

"The desire is there on the part of activists and police to continue to dialogue, build trust and generate ideas," says Daniel. "The Canadian

government is assuming a greater role in the staging of international summit events, and our country has developed a reputation as peacemakers and peacekeepers. The work we have done at Saint Paul's can provide greater depth, strength and structure for this type of work. The University and Med-Eng Systems Inc. have contributed all they can in terms of money and in-kind services. Our Masters in Conflict Studies program will be enriched by the results of our process to date, but we need to continue to develop the work we have begun. It remains to be seen how this will happen."

As Saint Paul University prepares to launch its Conflict Studies program in the fall of 2003, Vern and Shirley are in the process of writing a book which summarizes theory and practice. The preliminary title for the work is "*Collaborative Management of Crowd Dynamics – Getting the Dialogue Started.*" Daniel points out that the book project was made possible as a result of a grant from the Canadian Police Research Centre.

In an era in which many are content to see police used increased levels of aggression to quell protestors, it is a sign of hope to know that there also exist conciliators who seek to carve out a neutral space where real exchanges can occur and new visions can be explored.

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Dr. Redekop is also the author of "*From Violence to Blessing: How an Understanding of Deep-rooted Conflict Can Open Paths of Reconciliation,*" to be published by Novalis in the fall season, 2002.

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