

## **Search for Common Ground USA Cincinnati Case Study**

*Running straight at the problem isn't always right. Getting the right people on the bus turns out to be more important than knowing where the bus is supposed to go. Start with getting the right people on the bus and they will lead you to where you need to go.*

—Roger Conner, *Personal Interview (2003)*

### **History of Program**

Search for Common Ground-USA brings groups together that have a history of disagreement and conflict and helps them work together to advance the interests and values they share. The international organization approaches situations differently than most conflict resolution groups, in that they do not have one primary tool or method they apply.

Search for Common Ground (SFCG) has developed a broad array of methods, which collectively form the SFCG "toolbox." These include well-known conflict resolution techniques and less traditional ones. SFCG has found that employing several tools at the same time increases their overall effectiveness. Approximately 30 tools are currently in the toolbox and include:

- Traditional Conflict Resolution Techniques—mediation and facilitation, capacity strengthening, shuttle diplomacy, back-channel negotiations, court-based mediation
- Practical Cooperation Projects—bringing together partners to complete a special project
- Radio and Television—including a radio soap opera for social change and TV productions
- Common Ground Journalism—including journalist training, news service, issue-oriented magazines
- Arts and Culture—music, dance, drama, and film
- Sports—including sporting matches between two sides of a conflict
- Policy Forums
- Polling—commissioned polls to ascertain attitudes and test innovative approaches
- Awards—annual awards to recognize outstanding achievements and to bring public attention to the field.

### **Program Overview**

Search for Common Ground recognized that the Cincinnati community police relations agreement was not going to be self-enacting. As a result of being an expert witness, SFCG Director Roger Conner went to Cincinnati and became aware of the need to support the effort. SFCG uses an approach of “show, tell, do” whereby they seek to show the power and potential of common ground approaches to conflict, tell the story or draw public attention to what is working, and connect people and organizations to carry out partnerships.

Search for Common Ground developed four initiatives to meet these goals that also drew upon opportunities in the Cincinnati context. Each initiative attempted to attract new resources to existing efforts, made connections to the community-police relations work that had not existed, and offered a new tool to complement what was already happening.

The first initiative was shuttle diplomacy in an effort to help the parties locked in combat over an economic boycott of the downtown to find a solution that would be mutually acceptable. SFCG staff conducted extensive confidential meetings with the participants, and developed several drafts of potential agreements. For a variety of reasons this initiative was ultimately unsuccessful.

The second initiative a youth component seemed critical since African American youth made up the heart of the group protesting racial profiling. The youth project was a youth leadership-training program developed in partnership with Cincinnati Collective Learning Center, a program for African American youth who have lost their connection to schools and other formal institutions. As of this writing, the joint SFCG-CCLC initiative has received an initial grant from the Greater Cincinnati Community Foundation—the first such grant ever received by CCLC, which has struggled to receive recognition in the city for over 15 years.

The third initiative involved developing participatory community art, a process and organization developed by William Cochran, an artist in Maryland who directs Shared Vision: Public Art for Community Transformation. SFCG brought Cochran to Cincinnati because the process they use is highly visible and gives voice to ordinary citizens.

Finally, a community economic development initiative emerged as Gale Smith, a local philanthropist bought up an entire block in the Over the Rhine neighborhood and asked SFCG to help him connect with community members to determine how to develop the block. SFCG facilitated several meetings with area residents and activists, some of which used the “what-why-how” framework of the ARIA process to help the participants focus their suggestions to Smith.

### **Principles of Practices**

The SFCG methodology has developed out of five core principles (see Appendix 1), which are outlined in a document on the SFCG Core Concepts. These principles have lead to several key operating practices that serve as general principles of practice.

- *We avoid parachuting.* We do not to drop into a conflict for a short visit. We make long-term commitments. We use our continuing presence to develop a knowledge base and to build networks of relationships on all sides of the conflict.
- *We use an integrated approach.* We work simultaneously on multiple levels and on multiple fronts. In essence, we practise societal conflict transformation.
- *We become engaged and then see the possibilities.* Conflicts are extraordinarily complex, and it takes profound engagement in order to start to understand them. Although we conduct assessment missions before undertaking any new programme, we strive to remain flexible to adapt to the changing environments in which we operate.
- *We are social entrepreneurs.* In our staff, we look for problem solvers and creative thinkers who, from a shared vision, can develop finite and achievable projects. We continuously develop new tools and approaches.

- *We are immersed in local cultures.* We work with and build on individuals' and communities' knowledge, wisdom, and creativity. We partner with local peace builders to strengthen their ability to transform their own conflicts.
- *We practise cooperative action.* Dialogue is a necessary but insufficient means to change attitudes and behaviours. Wherever possible, we work with parties in conflict to help them not only understand their differences but also to act on their commonalities.

The initiative in Cincinnati illustrates how these principles of practice are applied to a real conflict situation.

### Facilitators

The facilitator begins by learning what has taken place and identifies key and potential leaders and organizations that can serve as local partners. Based on this informal assessment process, the facilitator determines which tools in the SFCG toolbox should be used.

A central role of the facilitator is to make connections among local resources, leaders and organizations, as well as between these assets and non-local assets.

### Confidentiality and Neutrality

With less focus on the conflict itself, confidentiality is less of an issue for SFCG facilitators. Confidentiality also depends on the particular tool being used in a situation. In Cincinnati one of the tools was shuttle diplomacy and confidentiality followed the normal assumptions with that type of negotiation (i.e. only share with the other party what you have permission to share).

### Process

Go into a situation with an entire toolbox of techniques developed by other specialists and apply the appropriate tools that will help people break out of the cycle of conflict. Do not necessarily confront the conflict directly

Graft onto existing strengths in a community—both leaders and organizations—the missing element or program component that can further shift people out of the conflict cycle. In the youth component, for example, this was to add curriculum that trained marginalized youth to be leaders in problem solving in their community.

The process, according to Roger Conner, is like a judo match with conflict. You try to absorb the blows sometimes; other times you redirect it. The conflict is living and transforming and you keep looking for an opening. The opening can be a person, an opportunity for partnering between groups that do not know each other, or a constellation or intersection of interests that others do not see.

Helping people connect the dots is a major part of the process, which often entails a number of steps such as writing grant proposals, doing shuttle diplomacy or gathering people and groups together.

Find “common grounders”—those people who have a similar approach to conflict situations and who value working with others to constructively transform the situation. Connect with the people and simultaneously see the potential they offer.

Do large scale or highly visible projects to get a minimum critical mass to change the way they talk about the community. This critical mass then believes that things can change for the better and actually are changing for the better. At least they are behaving as though they believe it.

The end result of the process is increased trust. According to Conner, “trust is a feeling, a feeling of confidence that another person will behave toward you within a predictable and acceptable range; it is an expectation that the other will treat you the way you *should* be treated.

Conner is fond of quoting William James who said, “Action precedes feeling.” Put another way, dialogue alone can build understanding, but only working together builds trust. And trust is a precursor to cooperation. Where trust is present, cooperation becomes normal and requires less effort. It is both the glue and the lubricant—the glue that holds people together and the lubricant that minimizes the friction when people try to move together. When people work together, something often happens that they cannot explain, and that is trust.

### Goals

The goals of the Cincinnati Partnership for Common Ground included:

1. Increase the capacity of community leaders to work cooperatively,
2. Increase participation of marginalized populations across racial lines and among youth,
3. Increase connections across sectors to build partnerships,
4. Increase opportunities for people to express and build shared visions.

### Content

Content is determined in coordination with the partners identified in the emergent design. Both the method or tool used and the content of the initiative is less important than the process of making connections and working together to construct a new story and future. Building trust through acting together supercedes specific content about reducing prejudice or resolving conflict.

Success is when people are telling a different story about the community.

### **Methodological Note**

Upon learning that Search for Common Ground was also working in Cincinnati police-community relations, I sought to learn how this approach differed from the work of Jay Rothman and the Action Evaluation process. Initially, I interviewed Michael Shipler from SFCG to learn about the program components and history of their involvement. I then conducted an audiotaped interview with Roger Conner, SFCG Director, at the Association for Conflict Resolution Annual Conference. Conner had attended the workshop led by Rothman and the ARIA Group, where he reflected on the Cincinnati situation and the approach SFCG was taking. I had several conversations with Conner during the Conference, culminating in the formal interview. Following the Conference, Conner sent me internal SFCG documents that identified their guiding principles. I also reviewed the information on the SFCG website. This report reflects an analysis of the interview notes and transcripts, documents, and website.

## **Appendix 1: Search for Common Ground Core Concepts**

*Summarized from Search for Common Ground Core Concepts (2003)*

### **Principle One – Conflict is Neither Positive Nor Negative**

One way to look at it is that we live in a world of differences – of ideology, belief systems, ethnicity, social and cultural values, whatever it might be. These differences are completely natural. They're not something that we're going to be able to banish or get rid of, nor would we want to – in fact; it is these differences that enrich our lives. What is important is how we deal with these differences.

A leader of the South African liberation struggle put it best: ***“Understand the differences; act on the commonalities.”*** A leap of faith is required to move from an adversarial response to a non-adversarial one. It takes character and courage to make that shift. One of our basic beliefs is that dealing with conflict constructively is a skill that can be developed. This is where we focus our work. We are constantly developing ways to empower people to make that shift for themselves. Much of what we strive for is to create an environment in which people feel sufficiently safe and empowered to make positive choices about how they deal with conflict.

### **Principle Two – Conflict Transformation**

We are working to transform the way people deal with conflict – so that it is no longer a source of violence and discord, but is instead used as a catalyst for progress. We are not trying to end conflict, to prevent it, to mediate, manage or even resolve it. We are not a conventional conflict resolution organization that tries to resolve conflict in discrete pieces. We do include those things in our work as appropriate – there are times when mediation or negotiation is needed and useful – but these are usually applied to very specific problems. Our goal is much broader: *to transform the way communities and societies view and deal with their differences.*

Transforming conflict can be as simple as reframing a situation – creating a new context in which people attack problems, rather than each other. Conflict is commonly dealt with as though the outcome has to produce clear winners and losers... A more practical and constructive response to conflict is to approach it with the goal of engaging as many of the people involved as possible in creating cooperative, mutually beneficial solutions.

### **Principle Three – Peacebuilding is a Process**

There is no instant method for causing conflict transformation – it is a process, not an event. To really shift a conflict situation it is necessary to make a long-term commitment to working in partnership with local people from various sectors of their society. Once people show up and participate in a process that has integrity, they tend to find each other's humanity and break down the stereotypes that divide them.

Some practices for successful peacebuilding are:

- Understanding where people’s perceptions are coming from – their fears, hopes and concerns – rather than trying to change their perceptions to fit your sense of reality.
- Actively listening for what everyone’s deeper interests are, and actively speaking to people’s highest place, whatever that may be.
- Demonstrating with one’s actions the values of the process – values such as inclusiveness, tolerance, mutual understanding and respect.
- Supporting processes that improve the quality of life and support just and sustainable peace for communities as a whole.

#### **Principle Four – Finding Common Ground**

Finding common ground does not mean settling for the lowest common denominator. It’s about generating the highest. Often when people disagree, eventually they have to meet in the middle and everyone has to compromise. What we’re talking about is creating a new, “highest common denominator.” Not having two sides meet in the middle, but having them identify something together that they can aspire to and are willing to work towards.

When people care passionately about two sides of an issue, there is usually something of value in each point of view. People’s underlying interests, concerns and values tend to be much broader and less polarizing than their negotiating positions. When we look from this perspective, the truth of each competing point of view can be appreciated and creative options can be generated that benefit all.

We believe that finding common ground and taking a non-adversarial approach to social change leads to the most sustainable and most effective solutions, and brings along the largest sectors of society.

#### **Principle Five – Interdependence**

The world has changed radically in the past 100 years. We are witnessing the impact of globalization on an unprecedented scale. Increasingly we are becoming enmeshed in global systems of economy, security, environmental protection and health.

We can either be paralyzed by the threats that many perceive in this globalization, or we can approach it as an opportunity. We view it as the latter, and a key determinant of our ability to maximize this opportunity will be how constructively we are able to deal with our differences. Whether we like it or not, we are all in our own way members of minority groups that need to be able to get along with the majority of the people in the rest of the world.

One of the most pressing issues currently facing us all is – how do we go about creating a safer, saner, more secure world? In an increasingly interdependent reality, the way we resolve this question is becoming more and more central to our shared future.