

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2016.022.017](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2016.022.017)

## **MICHAEL FISCHLER**

**Plymouth State University of the University System of New Hampshire, USA**

### **CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY TO CHANGE**

#### **Abstract:**

As diverse groups (from tenured professors to their unbenefited colleagues; Palestinian intifadists to Zionist real estate developers; native Europeans to crisis driven refugees; entrenched leaders in their "Arab Winters" to fellow countrymen in their discordant "Arab Springs") struggle to gain possession of lost, stolen, or disputed pieces of soil or self, our world finds itself enmeshed in ever deepening levels of conflict. Diverse groups collide in a battle to attain the prizes of territory, identity, security, and respect. As battle lines are drawn, friction becomes evident and conflict becomes endemic. These are the conflicts that know no boundaries. They release their tremors into Everyman's village and their traumas into Everyman's soul. Like swollen streams, they flow down trash-laden streets and onto tree-lined boulevards. They move from sectors of third world tragedy through centers of new world trade; through the halls of fortified high schools and over the walls of sanctified universities; into pristine rural communities and through sectarian tribal villages; through distressed urban war zones and into sheltered enclaves of wealth. These are the conflicts that ignore the rules of scholarly discourse. They are filled with all the invective and passion that diverse groups, struggling for their social, intellectual, and/or physical lives tend to manifest. To some they are threatening. To others they are encouraging. To all they are stimulating. They capture attention; they capture imagination; and they capture resources...

Triggers for these conflicts seem to exist most everywhere... a political slight; a perceived inequity; a change in the balance of power; a long-standing hurt; today's exploitation; yesterday's grudge. Along with a diversity of triggers comes a diversity of targets... Corporations with unimaginable wealth... Nations with unimaginable power... Well-established political bodies... Newly-established political movements... Universities... A religiously sectarian community... None are beyond scrutiny. None are beyond threat.

The author/presenter explores how conflict can provide individuals, institutions and political states with precious opportunities to recognize and institute procedures that can lead toward creating personal, social and political change. A model designed to effectively process conflict and facilitate essential change, the seven stage "Crisis to Opportunity to Change" is presented.

#### **Keywords:**

Culture, Conflict, Change, Crisis, Growth

**JEL Classification:** A14

## Story #1:

*Carlos Arredondo, 52, was sitting in the bleachers near the finish line of the Boston Marathon when the bombs went off. He had been waiting to greet runners from Tough Ruck, active duty National Guard soldiers who march the course carrying 40-pound military backpacks, or “rucks,” to honor comrades killed in combat or lost to suicide. Arredondo clutched an American flag and photos of his two deceased sons—Alexander, who died in a fire in Iraq in 2004, and Brian, who, deeply depressed over his older brother’s death, hanged himself seven years later. Spotting a young runner with both legs blown off below the knee, Arredondo rushed from the stands, smothered the flames that were still burning the runner’s legs with his hands, then ripped a T-shirt into makeshift tourniquets. An iconic photograph from the day captured Arredondo, in his cowboy hat, his hands soaked in blood, pushing the 27-year old Jeff Bauman in a wheelchair. He would later say, “I had my son on my mind” as he repeated to Bauman, “Stay with me, stay with me.”*

*This story illustrates what experts call post-traumatic growth, or PTG, the phenomenon of people becoming stronger and creating a more meaningful life in the wake of staggering tragedy or trauma. They don’t just bounce back—that would be resilience—in significant ways, they bounce higher than they ever did before. (Levitt, 2014)*

## Story #2:

*A Taoist farmer lived in a remote village in the furthest corner of China. He was not a wealthy man, but he was content with his life, and farmed a small plot of land with his son and wife. One day, a wild horse galloped on to his land, jumped the fence and began grazing in the farmer’s field. According to the provincial law, the horse now rightfully belonged to the farmer and his family. The farmer’s son could hardly contain his excitement, but the farmer put his hand on the son’s shoulder and said, “Don’t be quick to judge! Who knows what’s good or bad?”*

*The following day, the horse broke out of the field and galloped away. The farmer’s son was heartbroken. “Don’t be quick to judge,” said the father. “Who knows what is good or bad?”*

*On the third day, the horse returned with four mares. The farmer’s son could hardly believe their good fortune. “We’re rich!” he shouted, but again his father said to him, “Don’t be quick to judge. Who knows what is good or bad?”*

*The following week, while riding the horses, the boy fell and broke his leg. The farmer ran to get the doctor; within a short time, both the farmer and the doctor were tending to the boy, who was moaning and complaining about his miserable fate. The farmer wiped his*

*son's forehead with a cool, damp cloth, looked deeply into his eyes and reassured him once again, "My son, do not be too quick to judge. Who knows what is good or bad?"*

*The following week, war broke out in the province, and army recruiters came through the village and conscripted all of the eligible young men – all except for one young man who was unable to fight due to a broken leg! (Jackson, 2009)*

Thus, posited the new "Post-Traumatic Growth" theorists today, and the "Taoists," who evolved their "theories" so many years ago... "Don't be quick to judge. Who knows what's good or bad. Tragedy can turn to triumph, and triumph to tragedy.... Such is the nature of our collective lives, mental sets and shared destinies...

As diverse groups (from "Troll Party" patriots to aspiring neo-socialists; Isil "Islamists" to most everyone "non-Isil": tenured professors to their unbenefited colleagues; Palestinian intifadists to Zionist real estate developers; native Europeans to crisis driven refugees; entrenched leaders in their "Arab Winters" to fellow countrymen in their discordant "Arab Springs") struggle to gain possession of lost, stolen, or disputed pieces of soil or self, our world finds itself enmeshed in ever deepening levels of conflict. Diverse groups collide in a battle to attain the prizes of territory, identity, security, and respect. As battle lines are drawn, friction becomes evident and conflict becomes endemic.

These are the conflicts that know no boundaries. They release their tremors into Everyman's village (reflected in the 15<sup>th</sup> century morality play, Everyman, that illustrates how death and the commission of good deeds connects us all) and their traumas into Everyman's soul. Like swollen streams, they flow down trash-laden streets and onto tree-lined boulevards. They move from sectors of third world tragedy through centers of new world trade; through the halls of fortified high schools and over the walls of sanctified universities; into pristine rural communities and through sectarian tribal villages; through distressed urban war zones and into sheltered enclaves of wealth.

These are the conflicts that ignore the rules of scholarly discourse. They are filled with all the invective and passion that diverse groups, struggling for their social, intellectual, and/or physical lives tend to manifest. To some they are threatening. To others they are encouraging. To all they are stimulating....They capture attention; they capture imagination; and they capture resources...

Triggers for these conflicts seem to exist most everywhere... a political slight; a perceived inequity; a change in the balance of power; a long-standing hurt; today's exploitation; yesterday's grudge.

Along with a diversity of triggers comes a diversity of targets...Corporations with unimaginable wealth... Nations with unimaginable power... Well-established political bodies... Newly-established political movements... Universities... A local public school...

A not-so-local madrasah... A religiously sectarian community... None are beyond scrutiny. None are beyond threat.

Some would argue that for change to take place conflict is essential... a blessing ... a necessary precursor to social transformation and institutional growth. In 1957, Leon Festinger, an American social psychologist first asserted that dissonance, the internal manifestation of conflict, could be a fundamental element in the fostering of individual and institutional growth. If change were to occur, something must first challenge the existing social order... there must be a ripple... there must be a conflict. It is that human struggle to achieve homeostasis and reduce dissonance that can eventually facilitate awareness, cognitive restructuring, and growth (Garonski and Strack, 2012).

The idea that conflict presents opportunities for growth is neither new nor novel. American politicians, from John Kennedy to Al Gore have asserted this belief in political speeches by maintaining that, "the Chinese word for crisis reflects both danger and opportunity." (That catchy linguistic interpretation is routinely refuted by Chinese language scholars.) Winston Churchill, in a similar conceptual vein maintained that, "Difficulties mastered are opportunities won." Frederick Nietzsche, adding his conceptual spin asserted that, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger." (Joseph, 2011; Rendon, 2015)

Manifestations of this perceived link between crisis and change can be found in therapeutic interventions designed to treat behavioral and medical conditions ranging from unsafe sex practices to tobacco addiction (Miller and Rollnick, 1991; Stone et al., 1997; Gibbons et al, 1997; Baron and Branscombe, 2012; Park et al, 2009). Not unlike clinicians, successful leaders (be they industrialists, politicians, mutual fund managers or field hockey coaches) have come to recognize that dissonance can be a powerful ally and equilibrium a powerful adversary. For it is during times of equilibrium that the seeds of complacency are sown. With success and profitability come celebration and stagnation. Conversely, it is during times of threat and challenge that growth is most possible. It is then that human beings, political states, and sundry organizations struggle mightily to create the solutions that will insure their future viability.

Yet most human beings, and the political and social entities they create, struggle mightily to avoid the specter of dissonance and conflict. Humans are dissonant reductive creatures. (Tarvis and Arronson, 2008; Egan, Santos and Bloom, 2007) Challenges to well-entrenched norms, especially those that are externally (i.e., outside of the formal power structure) imposed are rarely welcomed. Therapists refer to this as "resistance." This phenomenon is central to Freud's theory of psychoanalysis (Freud, 1920). Such conflict is perceived as a very real threat... as a precursor to unwanted personal, political or institutional disintegration (Graff, 1992). Leaders are often rewarded for resisting such threats. Those who are well-skilled at threat avoidance often become corporate or political leaders... but not for long (Edsall, 2012). As Charles Darwin posited some 160

years ago, the ultimate penalty for avoiding growth and adaptation is not the preservation of the status quo, it is death.

Thus, while the avoidance of conflict may spawn relief for some, for others it generates ample quantities of resentment, anger, and rage. These three elements are primary ingredients in a recipe for revolution. For if leaders choose to block the natural processes associated with adaptation and change, the important question is not whether revolution will occur--because it will--but more significantly who (or what) may lie in waiting.

For growth and change to occur, the conflict must not be buried. It must be recognized (however undesired) as a "gift." The dissonant crisis is the initial ingredient in a formula for change. It presents a rare opportunity... one to be captured, not squandered.

The following: "Crisis to Opportunity to Change" model is designed to provide a structure for "seizing the opportunity," engaging the conflict, and transitioning the institution, individual or political state from crisis to growth. [The model was developed in response to an incident that occurred at a major university, involving public usage of racially and sexually provocative music and language.]

The first stage involves the occurrence of a Critical Incident... a crisis... a "blessing." Awareness is essential. Critical incidents can take most any form... violence directed at members of a minority group; the emergence of political revolt; alleged bias in the curriculum of an educational institution; anti-Semitic acts; a law banning the wearing of hijabs in public; conflict over the "preferred" educational curriculum... Steps should be taken to train individuals, political leaders, and organizational staff members (through strategies ranging from the reviewing of case studies to engaging in role rehearsal), to recognize (and not bury) critical incidents that present opportunities for dialogue and growth.

The second stage, Problem Identification, focuses upon evaluating the critical incident. The incident is evaluated in specific terms by examining all relevant/discernible motives for the behavior. Attention is directed toward identifying underlying causes, considering the personal characteristics of those most involved, and assessing probable consequences. Questions of concern might include: Is the complaint legitimate and what standards are being utilized to determine legitimacy? Who are the perpetrators? Who are the victims? What are the probable effects of the behavior on the perpetrators/victims/institution/community/nation/world? What does the behavior and responses (or lack of responses) tell us about the nature of the concern that is present? What standards (or whose standards) are being utilized to judge the legitimacy of the critical incident (and how might diverse cultural standards effect determining causation)?

The third stage, Confrontation, involves direct confrontation with the principal(s) [i.e., perpetrator(s) of the incident]. The behavior of concern is openly discussed; causation more deeply assessed; and consequences considered, and if appropriate, administered.

The fourth stage focuses upon Problem Illumination. For “problem illumination” to be utilized, it is essential that the incident be one where there exists the potential to produce critical, necessary and adaptive change for not only the principals, but for the community, organization and/or political state. (Note: If the incident does not meet the criteria established for Problem Illumination, the “process” will end with the at “stage three.”) Thus, after meeting the criteria necessary for “problem illumination,” the incident is then emphatically presented to the greater community (thus creating, and/or adding to existing dissonance, and further disrupting the “greater community’s” equilibrium). A magnifying glass is focused upon the incident (or upon significant elements) drawing interest, involvement, concern, dialogue, and debate. Indignation/outrage is shared. Individuals are encouraged to become involved and to communicate thoughts and feelings. The intent of this step is to present the critical incident in a way that insures that the greater community, organization or political state will recognize the importance of the event, and ultimately involve themselves in a process that will lead toward attitudinal and behavioral change.

The fifth stage, Developing the Plan, focuses upon planning an appropriate response (to the now escalating dissonance). Given the nature of the problem, key individuals are identified, invited to meet, and encouraged to develop a plan for addressing the crisis. (Motivation to meet, and “Develop the Plan” is now high, due to the human desire to reduce and eliminate escalating dissonance.) A format for addressing the “crisis” is established which includes: process development; identification of appropriate facilitators; recognition of technical needs; selection of advertising formats; and establishment of meeting time(s) and place(s). Care should be taken to develop an overall process that addresses endemic concerns, while at the same time maximizing involvement of key individuals, and impact upon the greater community, organization or political state.

The sixth stage, Process Actualization, reflects the actual implementation of the process. All appropriate/involved/aggrieved individuals are encouraged to participate. The effectiveness of stage six is enhanced by the implementation of a process which supports the open expression of all perspectives. Leadership behavior which reflects empathy, warmth, appropriate humor, gentle confrontation, feedback, listening, and respect is encouraged (Heider, 2005). Effort should be directed toward helping all involved to form insights and generalizations that will lead toward creating an understanding of the nature, depth, extent, and effect of the given problem on the immediate and greater community.

The seventh and final stage in the model focuses upon the creation of a New Awareness (and associated behaviors). A “new awareness” is the result of involvement in a process that keeps one's values, insights, ideals, and behaviors above-ground and available for consideration, challenge, and change. Adaptive change, in its attitudinal, intellectual, and behavioral forms provides the individual (as well as the community, organization or

political state) with not only the necessary ingredients to survive but also to effectively evolve in an increasingly complex and contentious world.

Thus, the “Crisis to Opportunity to Change” model provides a process for examining and addressing pertinent and vital issues. Crises are no longer perceived as events that individuals and political entities must avoid in order to survive, but as potential “blessings” that will facilitate their survival.

The concept of embracing social (and personal) conflict in order to restructure is a difficult one for most to accept. As the title of a popular book asserts, “Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven, But Nobody Wants to Die” (Crowder and Hogan, 2009). Yet if individuals, institutions, and other political entities “want to go to heaven” (i.e., evolve, adapt, and endure)... they will first have to experience death... the death of antiquated systems, antiquated beliefs, and antiquated dreams.

As with conventional death, the death of maladaptive beliefs and systems is best achieved with courage, faith, and a belief that something better might exist in the hereafter...

So with profound courage, enlightened faith, and a firm belief in the “hereafter,” human beings, institutions, nations and political states must move toward identifying and embracing endemic areas of conflict; seeking just and fair resolutions; and implementing necessary change.

And then, perceived “bad” events may evolve into “good;” tragedy into triumph; and conflict into growth... as the Taoists posited so many years ago, and contemporary “post-traumatic growth” theorists do today...

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Dr. Michael Fischler:** I am a professor in the departments of Educational Leadership, Learning and Curriculum; Elementary Education and Childhood Studies; and Counselor Education and School Psychology at Plymouth State University, in Plymouth, N.H. I received my Ed.D. from the University of Colorado in Boulder, CO, and my M.Ed. and B.Ed. from the University of Miami in Coral Gables, FL. My research interests include cultural diversity; intercultural communication; social behavior; psychological counseling; and reducing prejudice and discrimination.

## **REFERENCES**

- Adam Jackson. *The Flipside: Finding the Hidden Opportunities in Life*. (London, England: Headline/Hatchette. 2009), 32-33.
- Crowder, David and Michael Hogan. *Everybody Wants to Go to Heaven But Nobody Wants to Die*. New York, NY: Zonderland-Harper Collins, 2009
- Festinger, Leon. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957.

- Frederick X. Gibbons, Tami J. Eggleston, and Aida C. Benthin, "Cognitive Reactions to Smoking Relapse: The Reciprocal Relation Between Dissonance and Self-esteem." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 72 (1997): 184-195.
- Gawronski, Bertram and Fritz Strack (Editors). *Cognitive Consistency: A Fundamental Principle in Social Cognition*. New York, NY: Guilford, 2012
- Graff, Gerald. *Beyond the Culture Wars; How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* W.W. New York, NY: Norton and Company, 1992.
- Heider, John. *The Tao of Leadership: Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching Adapted for a New Age*. Lake Worth, FL: Humanics, 2005.
- Joseph, Stephen. *What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011.
- Levitt, Shelly, "The Science of Post-Traumatic Growth." *Livehappy Magazine*. (February, 2014).
- Louisa L. Egan, Laurie R. Santos and Paul Bloom, "The Origins of Cognitive Dissonance. Evidence From Children and Monkeys." *Psychological Science* 18 (2007): 978-983
- Miller, William R. and Stephen S. Rollnick, S. *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People for Change*. New York, NY,: Guilford, 2002.
- Robert A. Baron and Nyla R. Branscombe. *Social Psychology*. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2012), 169-172.
- Park, Crystal L. and others, *Medical Illness and Positive Life Change: Can Crisis Lead to Personal Transformation?* New York, NY: American Psychological Association, 2008.
- Rendon, Jim. *The New Science for Post-Traumatic Growth*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 2015.
- Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*; translated by G. Stanley Hall. (New York, NY: Boni and Liveright, 1920), XIX.
- Stone, Jeffrey, and others. "Inducing Hypocrisy as a Means of Encouraging Young Adults to Use Condoms." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20, (1994): 116-128.
- Tarvis, Carol and Elliot Aronson. *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)*. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin & Harcourt, 2008.
- Thomas B. Edsall, "Hello, Heterogeneity." *New York Times*, June 4, 2012, Campaign Stops, The Opinion Pages, Final edition.