

Guided Tour of Search for Common Ground

Welcome to Search for Common Ground, an organization dedicated to transforming how the world deals with conflict.

We created this introductory tour for people new to our work and/or conflict transformation. We hope this tour meets your needs to learn about who we are, what we do and how you can become involved.

Just click on the links below. When you are done, feel free to visit the other sections of our website.

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1. Who are we?

Founded in 1982, Search for Common Ground works to transform the way the world deals with conflict - away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative problem solving. We work with local partners to find culturally appropriate means to strengthen societies' capacity to deal with conflicts constructively: to understand the differences and act on the commonalities.

Using innovative tools and working at different levels of society, we engage in a pragmatic long-term process of conflict transformation. Our toolbox includes media production – radio, TV, film and print - mediation and facilitation, training, community organizing, sports, drama and music. We promote both individual and institutional change and are committed to measuring the results of our work. We strive to constantly increase our effectiveness through monitoring and facilitated learning.

Search for Common Ground works with local partners in many countries to find culturally appropriate means of strengthening those societies' capacity to deal with conflicts constructively. We are currently working in 17 countries: Angola, Belgium, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, D.R. Congo, Guinea, Indonesia, Iran, Liberia, Macedonia, Middle East (with offices in Jerusalem & Amman), Morocco, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ukraine, and the USA. Our toolbox includes media - radio, TV, film and print - mediation and facilitation, training, community organizing, sports, drama and music.

2. Why do we exist?

Our ability to deal with conflict affects how we handle every issue that faces humanity. Whether global in nature, such as poverty, hunger, education, the environment, HIV/AIDS, or closer to home, such as family or community relations, we are faced with daily challenges to our abilities to deal with conflict constructively.

The cost of dealing with conflict from an adversarial, win/lose mind set is apparent on the evening news every night. There are the obvious consequences where thousands of lives are lost to armed combat or neighborhood crime. Billions of dollars are spent on military expenditures and humanitarian aid after wars. Then there are the less obvious consequences, such as thousands of lives lost to hunger, poverty and preventable diseases, and the billions of dollars spent in legal battles.

By transforming how people deal with conflict, we can make significant strides in addressing the major issues facing the world.

John Marks, the President and Founder of Search for Common Ground said it this way:

"Current problems - whether ethnic, environmental, or economic - are simply too complex and interconnected to be settled on an adversarial basis.

Although the world is overly polarized and violent behavior is much too prevalent, we remain essentially optimistic. Our view is that, on the whole, history is moving in positive directions. Failures in peacemaking do not cause us to give up. Rather, they convince us that we - and the world - must do much better in addressing conflict."

Please go to this Link to learn more basic facts about conflict:

http://www.sfcg.org/resources/resources_conflict.html

3. Organizational Video

Please go to link below to view the 10 minute video which provides an overview of the organization's work.

High Quality:

<http://interface.audiovideoweb.com/lnk/ca25quick27015/0406qtmed.mov/play.qtl>
SFCG Video (High quality) Fast Internet Connection

Low Quality:

<http://interface.audiovideoweb.com/lnk/ca25quick27015/0406qtlow.mov/play.qtl>

Download:

<http://interface.audiovideoweb.com/lnk/ca25web26007/0406qtmed.mov/play>

Please go to the link below if you don't have the necessary software to view this video:

<http://www.apple.com/quicktime/download/>

4. What is the Common Ground Approach?

The Common Ground Approach is a means of navigating through conflict and identifying possibilities that are not apparent from an adversarial mind set. It is a set of principles and practices that, when utilized, causes a fundamental shift in people's relationship with conflict - away from adversarial approaches toward cooperative solutions. The Common Ground Approach - whether applied in a home in New York City, on the streets of inner city Cincinnati, or between ethnic groups in the Balkans or Burundi - creates new possibilities of peaceful coexistence, drawing upon the strengths of diversity and interconnectedness.

What makes the Common Ground Approach effective is that it is derived from over two decades of practical experience - it has been created from what works. We have found that people who become aware of the approach can begin to apply the principles and key practices immediately in their lives.

Core Principles

There are five core principles to the Common Ground Approach:

1. *Conflict is neither negative nor positive*

Conflict isn't a bad thing in and of itself. It is the natural result of differences between people - religious, political, ethnic, or whatever they might be. Those differences can enrich us and can be as much at the root of peaceful progress as at the root of violence. Dealing with these differences constructively is a skill that can be developed.

2. *Conflict can be transformed*

Conflict transformation is not about ending conflict or even solving specific disputes - the goal is to shift the way individuals, communities and societies view and deal with their differences. What is important is how conflict is approached, to shift away from an adversarial stance toward a cooperative, problem-solving one. An essential step in transforming conflict is enabling people to communicate and have accurate information about each other.

3. *Finding common ground*

Finding common ground is not the same as settling for the lowest common denominator - it's generating a new "highest common denominator." It's not about having two sides meet in the middle, but having them identify something together they can aspire to and work toward. When people who really care about an issue come together and bring their best thinking from their various perspectives, there is the potential for new options to be generated.

4. *Peace is a process*

There isn't a method for causing conflicts to transform instantaneously - it is not something you can achieve in a single event or by signing a peace accord - it is an on-going process of developing relationships of mutual respect and trust. Every peace process has its ups and downs. Making long-term commitments allows us to keep working on the underlying causes of a conflict even during periods of increased intensity.

5. *Humankind is interdependent*

We are witnessing the impact of globalization on an unprecedented scale. Current problems - whether ethnic, environmental, or economic - are simply too complex and interconnected to be settled on an adversarial basis. The earth is running out of the space, resources and recuperative capacity to deal with wasteful conflict.

Key Practices

Although there are many practices that are useful in dealing with conflict constructively, we have identified four that we feel are essential:

1. *Distinguish between positions and interests*

People naturally tend to take positions about issues, especially when in a conflict. Underlying these positions are generally broader interests, such as security and the well being of one's family. Interests usually relate to basic needs, while positions are opinions about how to achieve those needs. Positions may appear mutually exclusive, while interests tend to overlap.

2. *Respect each other; face problems together*

By making the distinction between problems and the people involved in a conflict, it is possible to help people shift their energies to focus on common concerns rather than seeing each other as the problem.

3. *Listen to understand*

When we focus our full attention on someone with the intention of improving understanding rather than winning an argument, it helps to create a relationship conducive to mutual problem solving.

4. *Choose your approach*

While we may not always have a choice about the conflicts we find ourselves in, it is possible to choose our response to them. Peace is generated by the moment-by-moment choices we make in how we deal with conflict in our relationships and community.

5. How do we apply the Common Ground Approach to societal problems?

The Common Ground Approach was developed while addressing societal challenges in the 17 different countries where Search for Common Ground works. Through this experience we developed the following operating practices:

Make long-term commitments

Avoid parachuting - dropping into a conflict for a short visit. Use a continuing presence to develop a knowledge base and to build networks of relationships on all sides of the conflict.

Use an integrated approach

Work simultaneously on multiple levels and on multiple fronts while striving for societal conflict transformation.

Become engaged in order to see the possibilities

Conflicts are extraordinarily complex, and it takes profound engagement 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.

Be social entrepreneurs

Look for problem solvers and creative thinkers who, from a shared vision, can develop finite and achievable projects. Continuously develop new tools and approaches.

Become immersed in local cultures

Work with and build on individuals' and communities' knowledge, wisdom and creativity. Partner with local peace builders to strengthen their ability to transform their own conflicts.

Practice cooperative action

Dialogue is a necessary but insufficient means to change attitudes and behaviours. Wherever possible, work with parties in conflict to help them not only understand their differences but also to act on their commonalities.

6. What have we accomplished?

We are committed to measuring and increasing the impact our interventions have in the communities where we work. With this in mind, we created an Institutional Learning and Research Division (ILR) that serves as the focal point for coordinating program evaluations and knowledge management.

Examples of what we have accomplished include:

Supporting and advancing peace processes

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) our information-dissemination activities are reported to be one of the critical sources of public awareness of the peace process, helping to reduce suspicion and rumours that can lead to violence.

In the Middle East anecdotal evidence and continuous follow-up with participants indicate that our activities have helped forge key relationships between influential decision makers in the peace process.

Reducing violence

In Burundi and in Sierra Leone surveys indicate that our radio programming is a trusted and credible source of information about events in the country, including peacemaking efforts. Such information reduces preemptive violence resulting from fear and misinformation.

Shifting attitudes and building foundations for peace

In Sierra Leone our community outreach programme is strengthening many people's participation in the democratic process - a key to the maintenance of a fragile peace. External evaluations in Burundi found that the radio programmes produced by Search for Common Ground's Studio Ijambo have changed the way people feel about and relate to other ethnic groups in their society. Similarly, evaluations of the interethnic kindergartens we founded in Macedonia have shown them to have significant positive influence on children's views of other ethnic groups, particularly during periods of increased tension.

Equipping communities to prevent and resolve conflicts

Informal tracking and feedback show that many of the vast numbers of people we have trained - 10,000 internally displaced persons in Angola, for instance - go on to implement their new skills, establishing new organizations or personally employing the techniques learned. In Macedonia our evaluations show that the Nashe Maalo television series provides children with valuable skills for preventing or resolving conflict with their peers in diverse ethnic groups.

7. How do you help people in my community?

Search for Common Ground is working in 17 countries around the world, including the United States, at all levels of society.

In the United States, we are helping communities bridge their divides. For example, through a consensus building process, we bring political, community and business leaders together to address important policy issues such as health care for the uninsured. To learn more about our work in the United States, please go to this link:

http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/us/programmes_us.html

In Sierra Leone, we help link communities into national-level dialogues on important issues through our radio programming. By incorporating voices that represent all Sierra Leoneans, including disenfranchised groups like youth, women, and children in our radio programming, we ensure the opinions of all stakeholders are heard in a way that searches for solutions to problems.

We also recognize that after the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, security in the world is dependent on the well being of people in all nations and the quality of relationships between nations. We have programs that directly affect how the US relates with the Islamic world:

Partners in Humanity

Partners in Humanity aims to address feelings of mutual fear and suspicion between the West, especially the United States, and the Muslim world based on perceived and real injustices, extreme inequalities in political and economic opportunity, and pervasive stereotypes. To learn more please go to this link:

http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/humanity/programmes_humanity.html

US-Iran

In response to President Khatami's call for a "Dialogue of Civilizations" in 1998, Search for Common Ground launched a program aimed at transforming the US-Iranian relationship. To learn more please go to this link:

http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/iran/programmes_iran.html

Search for Common Ground openly shares all of its methodologies with organizations working in peacebuilding activities, including the US Agency for International Development, United Nations and other agencies involved in international affairs.
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8. How can I get involved?

Search for Common Ground strongly believes that transforming the way the world deals with conflict starts with its own staff and its partners - meaning, people who contribute time, resources, and energy.

We invite you to help Search For Common Ground make a difference through the following means:

Make a financial contribution

By making a financial contribution, you will join a growing network of "Common Ground Partners" - people dedicated to transforming how the world deals with conflict. Your donation is tax deductible. Click here to learn about the impact your contribution can make. To learn more please go to this link

http://www.sfcg.org/help/help_home.html

Host an Introductory Event

Many SFCG partners host "introductory events" in their homes and workplaces where their families, friends and community can learn about the impact of conflict in the world, the principles and practices developed by Search for Common Ground and the inspiring work our staff are doing around the world. (email Phillip Hellmich at phellmich@sfcg.org)

Serve as a Volunteer or Intern

We welcome pro bono professional services on a case-by-case basis for our programs based in the United States. We also have internship programs for graduate and undergraduate students in the headquarters offices in Brussels and Washington, DC. To learn more please go to this link:

http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/job/sfcg_employmentw.html

Become Educated About Conflict & Common Ground Approaches

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Ultimately, it is up to each of us to transform how we deal with conflict. If you are new to conflict transformation, we invite you to visit our "introduction to conflict" in our resource section. The following links will take you to components of that section.

Basic Facts About Conflict in our World:

http://www.sfcg.org/resources/resources_conflict.html

Commonly Used Distinctions:

http://www.sfcg.org/resources/resources_distinctions.html

Commonly Used Terms:

http://www.sfcg.org/resources/resources_terms.html

Suggested Reading List:

http://www.sfcg.org/resources/resources_reading.html

Tips for Conflict Transformation:

http://www.sfcg.org/resources/resources_tips.html

Thank you for visiting Search for Common Ground. We hope you will join us in transforming the way the world deals with conflict.

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