

Designing a Conflict Management System for Higher Education: A Case Study for Design in Integrative Organizations

Integrative Organizations Yarn, Doug. "Designing a Conflict Management System for Higher Education: A Case Study for Design in." *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2014): 83-105.

The author of this article reflects on the Integrated Conflict Management Systems (ICMS) that were implemented for the University System of Georgia (USG) twenty years later. He notes that while one of the ultimate goals might be successful integration, when the options for both prevention and resolution are coordinated with multiple access points that provide upward feedback to improve the organizational management, there are still lessons to consider even if that goal is not perfectly realized.

In 1994 USG put forth an initiative to better address all levels of conflicts through a model that involved upper-level training, support, and an advisory committee along with individual institutions being able to conduct their own training assessment, and implementation of conflict resolution strategies. The broad goals were to establish a system wide conflict resolution program, decrease the reliance on adversarial (legal and rights oriented) processes, resolve disputes at the lowest levels, foster a healthier community, and lead the nation in alternative dispute resolution practices. By 2004 all institutions had some form of mediation program but they waxed and waned in their performance, with many failing to engage students and student conflict and also dealing with support and accountability issues because of personnel turnover.

The issues that provided the most relevant lessons:

1. Importance of narrative – The enthusiasm and novelty of the initiative helped to create momentum that gave the effort legitimacy and volunteers who allowed intervention of the program without the commitment of significant monetary resources. A shared narrative and excitement throughout the USG helped to get the program off the ground.
2. Context – Those who are working on a program of this nature need to be aware of the fact that things change and politics are complex. An organization might be dealing with heavy costs of conflict but still might not be able to initiate an intervention without the alignment of the right people and circumstances.
3. Design Framework – The organization needs to commit the necessary resources and make leadership at all levels accountable for the implementation of conflict management systems. There is also a need to stress and incentivize collaboration because the nature of most higher education institutions is to only operate within a small community.
4. Measuring Progress – While there are elements of this type of approach that can be difficult to quantify, like fairness and happiness, there is anecdotal evidence that lauds the shift to an interest-based process for conflict resolution to accompany results like lowered litigation costs for an institution. Remember that whatever the lofty goal, set measurable goals and baseline data.

These areas that present the strongest lessons also show that there is a great reliance on top-down implementation instead of bottom-up. For example, when leadership changes then the model and associated narrative might need to be revised as well in order to continue the program. Yarn

argues that if there is a common thread in these lessons it is that organizational leadership has to pay significant attention to understanding, setting, and maintaining conflict management systems because much of the success and failure hinges on them directly.

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