

Faculty Council Chair's Reflection March 2022

About Conflict

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I started to think about this theme at the time when winter Olympics were happening last month, in Beijing, China. I was inspired by the concept of fair, rule-based, transparent competition as the basis of healthy conflict or just contest. In the wider meaning of the word, that of competitive conflict, as expressed by *balanced opposition to conjecture, points of view or theories*, wide spectrum of opinions, *points alternating with counterpoints*, etc could represent something very desirable. *Good* conflict could be the key to better collaborative efforts, to reaching better decisions, to improved performance and sometimes the key to new records, as in olympic sports. But this entails rules – clear ways on how we compete (fairly), as well as how we communicate. As for the latter, *it does matter* how we interact and communicate, as civil discourse, cultivation of hearing and especially that of listening, how we define integrity, safeguards against cheating (e.g., anti-doping measures, etc), what mechanisms we have in place to preserve equity, or the concept that, *everything else being equal*, performance can stand on its own and allows comparison. This is the *good* or milder version of the competitive conflict, which may lead to progress, and which entails preparation, sometimes extensive mentoring and coaching, a lot of work to improve performance, presentation or delivery, and ultimately embedded values of civility, fairness and respect for someone else's accomplishments, and likely alternation at the podium. All in a system that needs careful architectural design, thorough monitoring of its functionality, guard rails put in place, and operating characteristics monitored constantly. We *do* see often in our environments this type of competitive or creative conflict, and we embrace it as an intrinsic, inexorable part of academia's fabric.

Today, it does not take long to get to the other end of the spectrum for the concept of conflict: the one represented by military combat, as shown by the recent war of aggression by Russia in Ukraine. Here conflict is *malignant*, as it leads to pain, suffering, destruction or death to not only military forces, but to millions of innocent civilians. This type of conflict is sudden, oppressive, endangering the most fundamental liberties and rights of the human beings and accomplished by brute force and disrespect of any rules or values. Fortunately, this is not what we have here, in this country, at this time; nevertheless, we cannot ignore the social, economic, financial and geopolitical consequences of such extreme form of conflict and that we have ways to help those less fortunate, who find themselves in the middle of such a *bad* conflict, living or fleeing a war of brutal aggression. By comparison, *we do not have conflicts here*. By observing the consequences of the malignant conflict, we may wish not to see any conflict anymore, for a long time. Or at least to remember what is at the other end of the spectrum of the concept, and to make sure that any type of conflict in our own environments is dealt carefully, is properly managed, with very clear rules, and embraced for what its good qualities might be, before it escalates to counter-productive, harmful ways, to human suffering, burnout or alienation. Thank you.