

Conflict Iceberg Model Template

Introduction

The Conflict Iceberg Model is a powerful systems thinking tool that helps peacebuilders visualize and analyze conflicts beyond their visible manifestations. Like an actual iceberg, where only 10% is visible above water, conflicts have deeper, often invisible dimensions that drive surface behaviors. This template guides you through identifying and analyzing these layers to design more effective interventions.

The Three Levels of Conflict

The Conflict Iceberg Model divides conflict analysis into three interconnected levels:

1. Events (Above the Surface)

What we can readily observe: The visible manifestations of conflict that capture attention.

Examples:

- Violent clashes
- Public protests
- Inflammatory speeches
- Border incidents
- Displacement of populations
- Policy changes
- Resource blockades

2. Patterns & Structures (Upper Portion Below Surface)

Recurring behaviors and organizational arrangements: The systems, institutions, and repeated behaviors that generate events.

Examples:

- Power imbalances
- Resource distribution mechanisms
- Decision-making processes
- Communication channels
- Legal frameworks
- Economic structures
- Social hierarchies
- Historical relationships

3. Mental Models & Worldviews (Deep Below Surface)

Underlying beliefs and assumptions: The deeply held values, beliefs, assumptions, and cultural narratives that sustain structures.

Examples:

- Cultural values
- Religious beliefs
- Identity concepts
- Historical narratives
- Assumptions about "the other"
- Beliefs about power and rights
- Concepts of justice
- Developmental value systems
- Intergenerational trauma

Using This Template

Step 1: Identify Observable Events

1. **List the specific conflict events** that are currently visible
2. **Document when and where** these events occur
3. **Note who is directly involved** in these events
4. **Describe immediate impacts** on communities and stakeholders

Step 2: Discover Patterns and Structures

1. **Look for repetition** in the events you've identified
2. **Identify systemic structures** that enable these patterns
3. **Map institutional arrangements** that maintain the conflict
4. **Analyze resource flows** and power distributions
5. **Examine historical precedents** for current patterns

Step 3: Uncover Mental Models and Worldviews

1. **Identify underlying assumptions** held by different conflict parties
2. **Explore competing narratives** about history and identity
3. **Analyze value systems** using developmental frameworks (e.g., Spiral Dynamics)
4. **Recognize emotional dimensions** including collective trauma and fear
5. **Consider how worldviews** shape perceptions of the conflict

Step 4: Analyze Interconnections Between Levels

1. **Map how mental models** shape and sustain structures
2. **Identify how structures** generate recurring events
3. **Recognize feedback loops** between all three levels
4. **Identify how events** reinforce mental models

Step 5: Design Multi-Level Interventions

1. **Event-level interventions** (immediate stabilization)
2. **Structure-level interventions** (system redesign)

3. **Mental model interventions** (dialogue, education, trauma healing)
4. **Consider intervention sequence** (which level to address first)
5. **Design feedback mechanisms** to track changes across all levels

Conflict Iceberg Worksheet

Event Level Analysis

Visible Manifestations of Conflict:

1. 2. 3.

When and where do these events occur?

Key actors directly involved:

Immediate impacts:

Pattern and Structure Level Analysis

What patterns or repetitions do you observe in these events?

1. 2. 3.

What institutional structures enable or perpetuate these patterns?

1. 2. 3.

How are resources and power distributed?

Historical precedents for current patterns:

Mental Model and Worldview Level Analysis

What assumptions do different conflict parties hold?

Party 1 (name): _____

- Assumptions about self:

- Assumptions about others:
- Core values at stake:

Party 2 (name): _____

- Assumptions about self:
- Assumptions about others:
- Core values at stake:

Key narratives about history and identity:

Value systems analysis (developmental stages):

Emotional dimensions (fears, traumas, aspirations):

Cross-Level Connections

How do mental models sustain current structures?

How do structures generate recurring events?

How do events reinforce existing mental models?

Key feedback loops across levels:

1. 2. 3.

Intervention Design

Based on your iceberg analysis, design interventions for each level:

Event-Level Interventions (Short-term)

1. 2. 3.

Structure-Level Interventions (Medium-term)

1. 2. 3.

Mental Model Interventions (Long-term)

1. 2. 3.

Sequencing Strategy

Which level(s) will you address first, and why?

Integration Strategy

How will you ensure interventions across levels reinforce each other?

Case Example: Land Conflict in Post-Colonial Context

Events

- Violent clashes between farmers and herders
- Destruction of crops and livestock
- Public protests by both communities
- Inflammatory media coverage

Patterns & Structures

- Unclear land tenure systems
- Colonial-era boundaries that ignore traditional land use
- Climate change reducing available grazing land
- Weak dispute resolution mechanisms
- Political marginalization of nomadic communities

Mental Models & Worldviews

- Competing concepts of land ownership (communal vs. private)
- Traditional vs. modern identities
- Historical grievances from colonial displacement
- Religious and cultural differences in land management
- Narratives of victimhood and blame

Cross-Level Connections

- Colonial-era boundaries (structure) reflect assumptions about superiority of written law over traditional land management (mental model)
- Lack of inclusive governance (structure) leads to recurring violence (events)
- Media coverage of violence (events) reinforces narratives of incompatibility (mental models)

Multi-Level Intervention Design

- **Event Level:** Create local peace committees for immediate incident response
- **Structure Level:** Reform land administration to recognize multiple use rights
- **Mental Model Level:** Facilitate dialogue on shared histories and mutual recognition

Implementation Considerations

Participatory Application

- Include diverse stakeholders in creating the iceberg analysis
- Consider separate processes for different conflict parties before bringing perspectives together
- Use visual methods (drawing, mapping) for greater accessibility

Common Challenges

- **Confusion of levels:** Confusing structures with mental models
- **Projection:** Projecting one's own mental models onto others

- **Resistance:** Difficulty challenging one's own deep assumptions
- **Complexity:** Struggling to simplify without oversimplifying

Integration with Other Tools

- **Combine with Causal Loop Diagrams** to map feedback mechanisms
- **Use with Stakeholder Mapping** to understand different perspectives
- **Connect to Scenario Planning** for exploring intervention impacts
- **Supplement with trauma-informed approaches** for addressing deep emotional dimensions

Conclusion

The Conflict Iceberg Model provides a powerful framework for seeing beyond surface events to the deeper drivers of conflict. By analyzing patterns, structures, and mental models, practitioners can design interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms. Remember that effective peacebuilding requires working at all three levels, though not necessarily simultaneously.

As you apply this template, remain conscious of your own mental models and how they might influence your analysis. The most effective use of the iceberg model comes through inclusive, participatory processes that incorporate diverse perspectives on what lies beneath the surface of conflict.

Additional Resources

- Lederach, J.P. (2003). *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation*
- Senge, P. (2006). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*
- CDA Collaborative Learning Projects: *Reflecting on Peace Practice Program*
- Schirch, L. (2013). *Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning*