

Tools for Conflict Resolution

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Conflict is a natural outgrowth of wanting to be in relationship with others (romantic or otherwise) when our cultural training is more about competitiveness and not being vulnerable than it is cooperating and opening up. And the reality is that all of us do things that bug other people, and it is easy to have that slide from irritation into conflict.

An effective and complete conflict resolution process has **6 common elements**:

1. **Authenticity.** Emotions do not = logic and they shouldn't have to. What you feel is what you feel, and being able to own and acknowledge whatever that is can be a key to having things go well. And: **emotions are needed, aggression is counter-productive.**
2. Encouragement to **self-honesty and discernment.** When each person is encouraged to get clear about any roles they may be playing, as well as what they truly need to communicate, the whole thing goes better. Self-honesty is also related to compassion, which almost always helps.
3. Sharing **the story** of the trigger(s). What happened? What started your reaction? Sometimes conflict feels really “out of nowhere” to some people involved; the story helps connect the dots.
4. **What's at stake?** Why is this important enough to you that you are upset?
5. **Reflection and checking for mutual understanding.** Classic tools like reflective listening are really useful.
6. **Pro-active options:** a request, an offer, a commitment to process, etc.

Often you can diagnose where an interaction went off the rails if you walk through the above list like a checklist and see what was skipped. The following tools all approach conflict resolution a little differently, and are offered so that you have something to try in a variety of situations. Each of these addresses a an element or elements from the above list.

The Compassion Exercise: Useful to help bring you back to a place of centeredness and to reel in projections you may be placing on the other person. It's a good warm up for any of the other tools here, and can also be used as part of a daily spiritual practice.

By Harry Palmer, from ReSurfacing (updated with gender neutral pronouns)

Do all 5 steps on the same person. If you are coaching others, use this prompt, “With attention on the person, repeat to yourself: _____,” and pause for about 5 seconds between each step to allow the person to feel each stage of the exercise. I typically do three rounds, starting with someone easier and working my way up to the person I am in active conflict with.

Just like me, this person...

- is seeking some happiness for their life.
- is trying to avoid suffering in their life.
- has known sadness, loneliness and despair.
- is trying to get their needs met.
- is learning about life.

Exploring an Unresolved Conflict Using Different Modalities: Excellent demonstration of why different approaches and tools are necessary. Often, we have the one way we approach conflict, and this one can give you three different angles of approach, breaking up routine patterns and ruts in how we approach conflict.

By Laird Schaub, CANBRIDGE Consulting

Pair off with a partner you'll work with for the first two steps. Choose a conflict that didn't resolve well. and does not involve your partner.

Step 1: spend two minutes in turn sharing your best thinking about the conflict. The listener is just listening, not commenting, advising, etc.

Step 2: spend two minutes in turn sharing your emotions around the conflict; also speculate on what the other person may have been feeling. Again, the listener just listens.

Step 3: the group leader will lead a visualization exercise. Have everyone get comfortable in their seats, and tell them you will give them the opening of a scenario, then leave them in silence for a few minutes to let it play out. Here's a sample script for this:

It is a nice spring day out, sunny and warm with a gentle breeze. You've been invited to a meeting to explore the conflict you have had, with the intention of resolving things and moving on. You walk up a stone pathway to a low building, set in the woods, and open the door. As you step in and look around, you realize that you are the last to arrive. Everyone else is seated around a large, round table. There are flowers floating in a bowl in the center of the table. As you walk in, the other people look up and smile at you. You sit down, and the meeting begins.

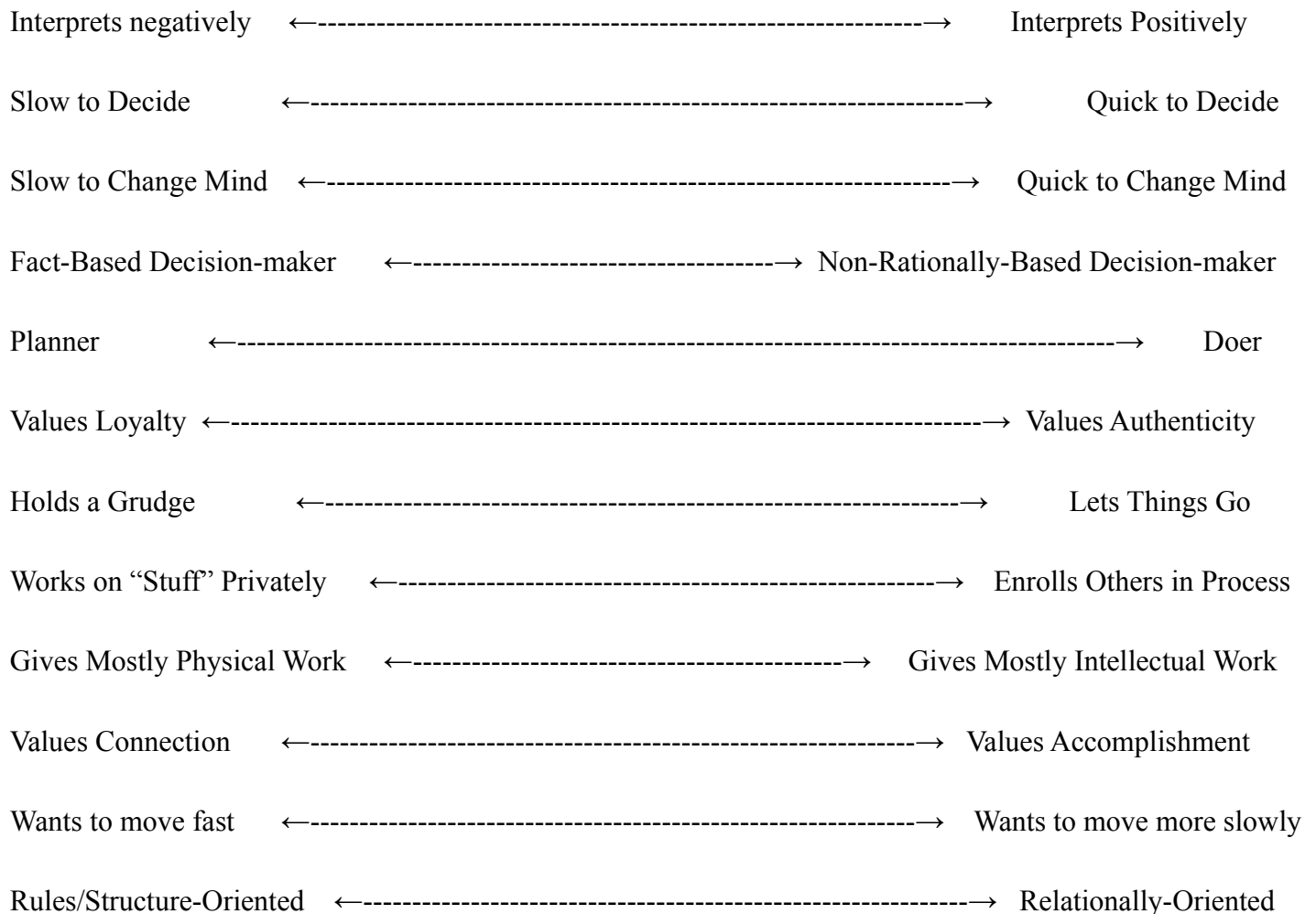
Note: this whole exercise can be done on your own (using writing for the first couple steps) or in a group setting. In a group, you can then share what happened and explore which modalities felt like they worked best for each person.

Spectrums that can lead to (or feed) conflict: This is a great group exercise (asking people to line up on a designated line in a room, literally placing themselves where they generally find themselves on each spectrum) or a personal meditation and contemplation tool, considering how you and the person you are in conflict with may be different in some key ways.

From Yana Ludwig

The following are common scales that describe basic approaches to life; they can also be sources (or complications) of tension when the other end of the spectrum is not honored. In most healthy groups, there are people spread out throughout these scales. All traits have a valuable aspect to them and all have pitfalls. Ideally, the membership of an organization takes into account these sorts of things when trying to find a good roles for someone to play, i.e. quick decision-making is valuable in a work-party leader, but not so much for budget team members, where you want more measured thinking.

Suggested uses: Perspective. Create an exercise to get to know each other better. Use to reduce judgment. Foster understanding of the source of conflicts.



The facilitator can make up other examples that are powerful for the group you are in. Have people stand along an imaginary line, with one end of the line representing the extreme of each orientation. A standard question for the facilitator to ask might be, “How is this playing out in our group? Are some of our conflicts related to this piece?”

4 Step Conflict Resolution Model: For use in an active conflict. This technique can be used during a meeting (with an active facilitator keeping the conversation focused on the protagonists), in a mediated session, or as an individual contemplation to bring clarity (especially in terms of what is at stake for you in the conflict).

by Laird Schaub, CANBRIDGE Consulting

Originally designed to be used in meetings where conflict emerges, this can be done in dyads, when two people are in conflict with each other. Start with the person in the most distress (if that is obvious). Do the first two steps, asking the other party to reflect what they’ve heard, then switch roles and let the other person do the first two steps. Sometimes a misunderstanding gets cleared up just with these first two steps, and the conflict can resolve at that point.

For long term conflicts, there is often nothing new said in the first two steps, and it isn’t until the last two that you see some movement. If the parties start wanting to converse mid-way through, that can be OK as

long as it isn't inflaming more hard stuff, and is more along the lines of clarifying and seeking understanding of the others perspective. The facilitator should use their judgment about when to get them back on the strict steps.

Remember: **emotion is OK (and often contains valuable information) aggression is not.** The facilitator may need to rephrase something if it is coming with a lot of charge and phrased like dumping or attacking.

It is important that the content is reflected back, not just by the facilitator, but by the other party. You are working to restore a bridge of connection between the people.

- 1) What are the feelings?
- 2) What is the story?
- 3) What is at stake? Why is this so important for you?
- 4) What would you like to do about it?

The first two steps are often done together; as long as they both get covered, that's fine. The final step must be a measurable action you'll take to begin to restore relationship and understanding with the other person. Please note it is not, "What do you want THEM to do about it?"

3DT

from the InterPlay materials

This is a kinesthetic and intuitive tool for accessing more information about what is happening for you, and allowing you to literally move through something. For people who are more body-centered, this can be a powerful way to express emotions.

3DT stands for Dance, Talk, Dance, Talk, Dance, Talk, and that is literally what you do. With your attention on the situation, stand or sit until you feel yourself wanting to move... move until you feel done, then let words arise and speak until you feel done... repeat two more times. This is best done with as little editing or rational thought as possible. It doesn't have to "make sense"--what matters here is the authenticity of what is present and real in the moment. Afterward, you can think about it and analyze it.

The 8-Minute Life Story

By Yana Ludwig

There are MANY really good tools out there to begin work (individually or collectively) on oppression, privilege and cultural power dynamics that effect all of our groups, and often underpin conflicts. I offer here one small step that I've used a few times with groups as a starter: The 8-minute Life Story.

Choose a particular identity (race, class, gender, etc) to focus on and ask people to prepare an 8 minute version of their life story through that lens. For instance, "Tell your life story through the lens of race." That's the whole prompt. Do as a go-around with no cross talk and a timer. After everyone has had a turn, you can open a dialogue about what patterns or differences you heard and why you think we have these differences. Make sure to have someone designated as the facilitator who has some background in unpacking oppression! This is a good precursor to any serious work your group might be doing on policies related to justice and equity.

The Art of True Apology

by Yana Ludwig, Sol Space Consulting

- 1) Own what you did, said, didn't do or didn't say.
- 2) Recognize the impact your act had on the other person.
- 3) Express sincere regret and apology.
- 4) Offer to make amends in a manner that helps rebalance the relationship.
- 5) Invite the person's feedback.

Example 1: From a work situation:

(Step 1) Jamie, I've been really critical of your work lately, and it seems like it came to a head last week when I replied to your email with a bunch of changes I wanted you to make to the report, and no acknowledgement of the work you'd already done. I know you follow up on my suggestions, so my communication was unnecessarily harsh. When I used the word stupid to describe your framing of the last section of the report, I was being hurtful and unmindful.

(Step 2) I'm seeing how my communication has been really hard for you, to the point where you don't even want to work with me. You care a lot about this work, and my actions have made it unsafe for you to make your contributions. You've withdrawn this last week, and I think that is my fault.

(Step 3) I'm sorry. I've been feeling really sad about this, because I really value your voice in our organization. I obviously need to work on this pattern I have.

(Step 4) I'm wondering if we can spend some time in the next couple weeks backing up and looking at this project through new eyes? I'd like to buy you lunch on Monday and just talk about what is exciting for you about this project, and how I can support you doing the pieces that inspired you to work for us.

(Step 5) If that doesn't sound good, I'm open to your suggestions for what else I could do to restore trust between us.

Example 2: Between members of a car coop:

(Steps 1/2) Ali, Martin just told me that when I got the car back really late on Thursday without calling you, you ended up missing your doctor's appointment that you have had scheduled for three weeks.

(Steps 2/3) I'm really sorry! I know you've been super stressed about your health and really needed to talk to your doctor, and I imagine you were probably pretty angry, and probably wasted a bunch of time getting ready for an appointment you didn't make. I was really sloppy about the time, and I see that had major consequences for you.

(Step 4) I've thought of a few things I can offer to try to make it up to you. Can I make the calls for you to get you another appointment? I know that doctor charges a missed appointment fee, and I think I should cover that for you. I'm also happy to schedule some time with you to talk about your health issues if you need an ear while you are waiting for another appointment. And I'm really, really sorry.

(Step 5) Would some of those ideas work for you?

Tips:

Think about the setting for the apology; try to set it up in a way that will express care for the other person, will feel like a moment that is different from daily life. Make them tea, clean up the kitchen before they arrive, make sure you won't be disturbed, etc.

Do not include excuses or transferring blame to someone else. Background is OK, especially if it includes an insight into something you've learned from the situation about yourself.

Do not expect immediate reciprocation, or even acceptance. If you need some kind of follow-up, set up a time later to receive that. However, if the person does offer it, do your best to be gracious in receiving it (even if it isn't done perfectly). Remember that you only have access to some of the information about the situation, and if you missed something in your own contemplations, you want to hear about that (particularly if it relates to the impact on them that you might not have fully understood).

Conflict Resolution Resources

Here's a short list of places to learn more.

Books and on-line reading:

Non-Violent Communication, by Marshall Rosenberg

Conscious Communication, by Miles Sherts

Sitting in the Fire, Arnie Mindell

Restorative Circles: www.restorativecircles.org/

Laird Schaub's blog: communityandconsensus.blogspot.com has a variety of articles about conflict resolution

Courses and Practices:

Anything that encourages personal growth and self-responsibility, such as:

- Re-evaluation Co-counseling—aka Peer Counseling (www.rc.org)
- Vipassana meditation (www.dhamma.org/)
- The Work (www.thework.com)
- *The Four Commitments*, by Don Miguel Ruiz

Anti-oppression work

- Workshops led by people of color on race, by poor and working class people on class, and by women, trans and non-binary folks on gender are offered in many places, and most organizations could use support in these areas!
- AORTA is a great organization for communities, nonprofits and social change groups
www.aorta.coop

Further relevant workshops with Yana Ludwig include: longer versions of Getting In and Out of Conflict, Building the Skills of Cooperative Culture, (Guerilla) Consensus, and workshops on Racism and Classism in Community (taught with partners). See her website: www.YanaLudwig.net