Inquiry: Re-Framing Conflict
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Conflict is a natural part of life. Every group and relationship experiences conflict, regardless of context, situation, or background. It's simply a part of being human. It happens between friends and lovers, in large and small groups, in international partnerships and global networks. On a daily basis, most people encounter various types of conflict, engaging in various strategies or styles for approaching conflict situations (see Conflict Styles).

While some conflicts may be uncomfortable and challenging, with a sense of stress, anxiety, frustration, or overwhelming emotion, not all conflicts have to be negative. Many conflicts can have positive or generative possibilities. Some of the best ideas, or the strongest relational bonds, result from conflict situations. Conflict can be rewarding, educational, collaborative, and contribute to positive inner transitions in both individuals and relationships. This may involve re-framing conflict as a beneficial learning experience, rather than something to fear.

This guide aims to help individuals and groups develop an understanding of conflict and ways to address it. There are sections on what conflict is, the benefits of addressing it, and ways to re-frame conflict and maintain effective groups.

1 What is conflict?

Conflict happens when two or more people have seemingly incompatible opinions, values, or needs. It happens in every kind and size of the group. It is natural, expectable, and inevitable. When two or more people get to know each other they eventually discover areas where they have different opinions about what's the best thing to do and how to do it.

Conflict is a natural part of being human - it happens in every shape and size of group

From a minor discomfort to a crisis

While differences of opinion are unavoidable, individuals can control what they do about differences of opinion. There is an art to navigating conflict - identifying it early enough and knowing when and how best to deal with it.

A series of minor incidents can build up over time and escalate into something major. A huge argument might appear to have come out of nowhere; but an increased awareness may reveal subtle clues, which can allow a conflict to be addressed earlier. It's like watching a pot of boiling soup on the stove. If you leave the pot unattended with the lid on, eventually the soup will scorch and boil over. If you notice when steam is starting to escape and turn the heat down, then you can enjoy a tasty soup and avoid a big mess.

The development of a conflict can be divided into five stages as it escalates from minor discomfort to a major crisis:

1 Discomfort	2 Incident	3 Misunderstanding	4 Tension	5 Crisis

From a minor discomfort to a crisis

1 **Discomfort**. A small sensation that tells you a conflict might be brewing. You might not be able to put your finger on any hard facts beyond a feeling of discomfort. It could be a small habit that you feel annoyed by.

Whenever the group goes to the pub, H directs the conversation towards talking about the next action. T leaves the pub early, wishing the group could spend time socialising and getting to know each other better.

2 **Incident**. A minor clue that acts as evidence of the growing conflict. It could be a short, sharp exchange, or a visible expression of the conflict.

The group is planning an action together, H ignores or counters T's suggestions about team building, which leaves T feeling frustrated. H notices T's frustration but doesn't do anything about it.

3 **Misunderstanding**. The situation has escalated to a degree that one or both parties have developed false assumptions about the other.

> *T thinks H doesn't care about helping the group to grow stronger. H thinks T is more interested in socialising than making real change happen.*

4 **Tension**. By this point there has probably been a communication breakdown and emotions are running high. It's harder to hold the conflict in, and it bursts through the silence. The clues here are much more obvious. This could be an argument, an emotional outburst, or out-of-character behaviour.

> *After the action, T calls a meeting to debrief. H quickly turns the discussion towards a potential next action. T shouts at H: "Just cool it! Let's just talk through how this action went before rushing on to the next one!" H looks stunned, opens their eyes wide, slowly shakes their head, and walks out of the meeting, slamming the door behind them.*

5 **Crisis**. This is the breaking point for the relationship. By this stage, all communication will focus on the conflict. The situation may get violent.

> *H writes an email to the group, saying "I'm leaving the group. See you around."*

Adapted from: Website: www.crnhq.org **Conflict Resolution Network** Ph: +61 2 9419 8500
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Activity: Try mapping the five stages of a conflict you have been involved in or know about.

2 Why avoid conflict?

There are many reasons why someone might avoid conflict. Typically, these are based on a personal history where conflict was either not encouraged as positive, or perceived as negative, resulting in beliefs like:
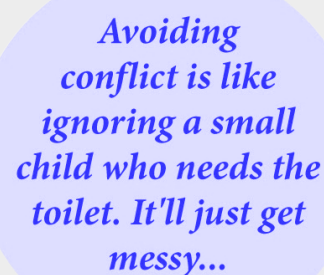
- people, in general, do not benefit from or need conflict, so neither does any specific individual.
- there will be bad consequences from conflict.
- relationships which include conflict are somehow wrong.
- conflict, like gambling money, involves a risky transaction; everyone could lose.
- conflict, or any attempt to mitigate discomfort or change undesirable behaviour, is either wrong or best kept to a minimum.

Some people have developed sophisticated ways of avoiding conflict: pretending it's not there, hoping it'll go away, changing the subject, calling it imaginary (see Conflict Styles). Conflict is typically stressful. It can cause old emotions, memories, habits, and behaviours to arise which may be uncomfortable. Avoiding conflict may have served someone well in the past, temporarily relieving stress or anxiety.   If an individual's life is already full of stress, avoiding a conflict can seem like the best option. (see Self-Care Physical & Sensory)

Ideally, groups can transition toward a culture where it feels better to address conflict than not to. Because this can involve disrupting habitual behaviour habits or patterns, it can feel uncomfortable at first. Try allowing those who may be unused to addressing conflict some time to practice -- not getting it quite right and trying again. During this kind of inner transition, a bit of patience, kindness, and compassion often help (see Feedback Culture, see Sharing & Celebrating Failing).

3 Why address conflict?

Avoiding a conflict rarely leads to a desirable outcome for anyone. At best, it can yield short-term benefits, like temporary stress relief. At worst, it can prevent a tense situation from resolving,
and enable individuals to remain stuck in old habitual patterns. Long-term, most conflicts benefit from being addressed. Avoiding conflict is like ignoring a small child who needs the toilet. It'll just get messy, creating more problems in the future that may be difficult to prepare for.

Avoiding conflict is like ignoring a small child who needs the toilet. It'll just get messy...

There are many benefits to understanding, addressing, and working through conflict.

Learning skills for working through conflict shows respect for other people's emotions and perspectives, which may be different from our own. Taking the time to communicate about difficult topics demonstrates care and compassion for others. It honours process and relationships as valuable resources worth investing time and energy in. ([see Task-Process-Relationship](#)). Addressing conflict can help to build stronger and more effective groups, and be part of a transition in a group's culture (see [Feedback Culture](#)).

Understanding conflicts and working through them can be a deeply empowering process for everyone involved. Navigating a conflict with honesty, authenticity, and vulnerability can not only lead to outcomes everyone can live with, it can also result in stronger connections between people, and be hugely energising for a group.

Ideally, this is part of transitioning toward a group culture where people can communicate honestly with each other, where everyone knows their own feelings, where there is a sincere desire to understand differences between people in the group, and to find solutions that are genuinely satisfactory for everyone (see [Feedback Culture](#)).

Groups that can address conflict in a good way will be better prepared to continue working effectively together long-term, and less likely to fall apart when conflicts arise. Addressing conflict can increase trust and clear communication, enabling groups to make better decisions that take into account diverse points of view. It re-directs the time and energy that is often spent on avoiding conflict.

Learning to address conflicts may be an important skill for coping with future uncertainty or disturbance. Transitioning toward a stronger and more supportive society will likely involve developing more such skills to work collaboratively.

4 Why do conflicts happen in groups?

It's not surprising that many people struggle to collaborate and to find constructive ways to address conflict. Many people who grew up in modern westernised society were likely taught that success, or even survival, required competitive behaviour. Many people have not yet developed the skills to engage with diverse viewpoints or opinions in beneficial ways. Conflict is likely to happen while unlearning old habits, and developing new skills and awareness to work together. Most groups have several common, expectable, and forgivable sources of conflict.

A Group Culture of 'Get the Job Done'

Most activists want to make change happen: to stop the damage caused by human systems and institutions, to create regenerative ones, and to get it all done As Soon As Possible! Activists can be very focused on accomplishing tasks, sometimes neglecting interpersonal relationships or inclusive and participatory processes. Ideally, groups can find a good balance between focus on Tasks, Process, and Relationships (see Task-Process-Relationship).

What feels like a good balance can vary by group. Some groups slightly emphasise Relationships, others emphasise Tasks, others may look for an even balance.

Group cultures that reward getting the job done may dismiss investing in interpersonal relationships as 'wasting time.' This can result in a 'task' skew, and poor communication, especially if people don't have space or ability to express feelings, concerns, or needs. In such group cultures, people are typically less able to hear the feelings, concerns, and needs of others, so conflicts are more likely to arise (see Burnout to Balance).

Ineffective Meetings

In many groups, conflict can arise around decision-making. What kinds of decisions are best suited to which form of decision-making? If group meetings too often end in unsolvable disagreements and inaction, people can get frustrated. If group meetings too often have no clear agenda, and discussions that do not lead to desirable outcomes, people may stop coming. Long-term, groups often benefit from developing the skills for holding effective meetings, so a group can move forward and take actions in an inclusive and participatory way.

Lack of Clarity

Lack of clarity about a group's aims can lead to conflict. Many groups form to address a handful of topics or issues. While a group remains small or homogenous, everyone may feel like the group's aims are clear. Once a group starts to grow, and new people get involved, diverse opinions can cause tensions to arise. This is a natural and normal feature of group development. A group typically benefits from clearly articulating the boundaries it is working within, or aims it's working towards, to prevent people from pulling the group in different directions. While newcomers can contribute fresh ideas and energy to a group, if they are working towards different aims, this can lead to conflict. Longer-standing members may fear 'mission-drift', or see the group's focus shifting away from their original intention.

Challenging societal norms

Norms are expected behaviors people abide by within groups. Norms may include how to dress, interact with authorities and elders, social roles, and verbal/nonverbal communication. For example: a conflict could arise from being too loud at a restaurant, or disclosing too much personal information, or questioning authority. Norms include both intentional and natural rituals, which may also become a source of conflict. Intentional rituals, like observing a national holiday or attending a religious service, may conflict with someone else's standpoint, an attitude to or outlook on issues, typically arising from one's circumstances or beliefs. Natural rituals, such as putting dishes in the dishwasher, or flushing the toilet after using, can affect the moods and emotions of others, and may also lead to conflict (Goffman, 1967).

Any transition will likely involve challenging societal norms and renegotiating how people work with and relate to each other within groups. What kinds of social infrastructures is the group transitioning away from? and towards? How can a transition involve various societal groupings, like race, class, and gender, relating to each other in new and positive ways? If a group aims to address complex historic societal issues, people will likely have some disagreements and conflicts whilst finding a way through it all.

Power imbalances in groups: the 'uneven playing field'

Most modern westernised societies are based on neither equity nor equality. This amounts to an 'uneven playing field', where some people are given more power by society than others. Two common examples of imbalances of power in groups are a privilege and informal hierarchies.

Privilege

Understanding privilege is an integral part of any inner transition or social change.

The mainstream norms of most modern westernised societies are typically determined by those in positions of dominance: white, rich, middle or upper class, heterosexual, male etc. Mainstream does not always correlate to a majority. For example there are many more poor people in the world than rich people. Yet a minority of rich people often have their interests recognised by societal institutions to the detriment of the majority of poorer people.

Every group has mainstream norms: those qualities, behaviours and values that are supported by the group, whilst other qualities and behaviours are pushed to the margins. For example, a group where there is a culture of noisy debate may have a few quiet people; or a group that is very orderly and polite may have a few people who would like to express strong opinions or emotions.

The mainstream of the group sets the tone and the communication style, and gets to have its preferences accepted by the margins. People in the mainstream of a group are often unconscious of their social power. Without genuine and continuous efforts by mainstream people to become aware of power imbalances, and to change their behaviour in relation to the margins, conflict can continue to arise (see NEON Guide to Power and Privilege).

Regardless of the body, skin colour, sexuality, gender or class, someone is born with, no one is responsible for the fact that society gives individuals varying amounts of privilege and unearned social power. However, individuals are responsible for what they do with this power, in intimate relationships, social change groups, and society more broadly.

Power imbalances around privilege can be very subtle, and difficult to point out or describe. The people most likely to notice power imbalances are the ones with less power in the group. Conflict can arise when there's a desire from some people in the group to address these power dynamics, but a lack of awareness or unwillingness to spend time on it from others.

For example, a woman in a group might say "I notice most of the talking is being done by men. I'd like us to address this." A response might come back "The men just have a lot to say at the moment. If the women want to say something, they should speak up!" The men in the group might struggle to understand their privilege and fail to address their behaviour, leading to conflict in the group.

We are responsible for what we do with the power that privilege gives us

Informal Hierarchies

A group might initially be formed by a few friends who develop the group's culture, its way of doing things. When new people become involved, the founders may assume that the group culture they created will suit the newcomers. For example, founding members may prioritise knowing everything that's going on in the group. While this might work well for a small group, as the group grows, it will be increasingly difficult for everyone, especially newcomers, to know everything going on in the group. A situation can develop where newcomers become familiar with only one aspect of the group, while the founders retain an overview of the group. This can create an informal hierarchy of knowledge, skills and power.

Informal hierarchies can also be created when people specialise in a certain area. For example, someone in the role of writing content for the website might develop a reputation for being good at it. If they get asked to continue in that role, they will continue to improve their skills, and the role will be increasingly associated with this person. When skills or information aren't shared, and roles aren't rotated, informal skills or knowledge hierarchy can develop in the group, which can lead to resentment and conflict.

5 Perception of Conflict

From a problem to an opportunity

Many people typically frame conflict as a problem. They assume conflict means a relationship must break-up, or someone has to lose, or opponents must make concessions. Groups can change how they perceive conflict as part of a transition in their group culture (see Feedback Culture). Though it may not feel easy in the short-term, conflict can be re-framed as an opportunity to make long-term improvements and positive changes for everyone involved.

Conflict as Destructive

Some people prefer to avoid conflict, perceiving it as destructive to interpersonal relationships. David Augsburger (1992) outlined four assumptions of viewing conflict as destructive.

1. Conflict is a destructive disturbance of the peace.
2. The social system should not be adjusted to meet the needs of members; rather, members should adapt to the established values.
3. Confrontations are destructive and ineffective.
4. Disputants should be punished.

When viewed this way, conflict is perceived as a threat to the established order of social relationships.

Degenerative conflict brings issues to light in a negative manner. Individuals view conflict as bad, make personal attacks, and are not able to accept responsibility for any part of the conflict. Individuals are quick to judge, emotions overrun the conflict, and solutions are limited or non-existent.

Conflict as Productive

Conflict can be viewed as a productive, natural component of human relationships. David Augsburger (1992) described four assumptions of viewing conflict as productive.

1. Conflict is a normal, useful process.
2. All issues are subject to change through negotiation.
3. Direct confrontation and conciliation are valued.
4. Conflict is a necessary renegotiation of an implied contract—a redistribution of opportunity, a release of tensions, and renewal of relationships.

From this perspective, conflict provides an opportunity for strengthening relationships, not harming them. Conflict is a chance for relational partners to find ways to meet each other's needs, even when those needs conflict.

For example: Even though the negotiation of tensions in a relationship may not be an explicit argument, the act of negotiating demonstrates the ability to use conflict in productive ways – both for the relationship as a whole and for the needs of the individuals involved.

Neutral conflict may postpone conflict for an indefinite period of time since timing can be critical to desirable outcomes. It may bring in a third party as an arbitrator, to negotiate compromises, where each party makes concessions and gains some but not all of their desired outcomes. Conflict is seen as a potential way to bring about limited desirable outcomes balanced by making concessions.

Regenerative conflict brings underlying issues and problems into focus. The conflict improves relationships and quality of life for all parties. Individuals consider a mutually beneficial timing and context for addressing the conflict. If they are overly emotional, they postpone the discussion until a later time. The conversation is calm and reasonable, exploring personal bias and responsibility, without any personal attacks. All parties suggest different solutions with unique perspectives. All suggestions are received openly and considered along with underlying needs. Everyone aims to identify the underlying issues of the conflict and determine solutions where all parties can get their needs met.

An individual's background or upbringing usually informs how they approach conflict. Identifying one's own conflict styles, needs, and others' needs can help to develop more rewarding outcomes. People from different backgrounds, with different approaches to communication, may have varied conflict management styles (see Conflict Styles, see Feedback Culture).

6 What is conflict really about?

What's really important to everyone involved in a conflict? Where can potential solutions be found?
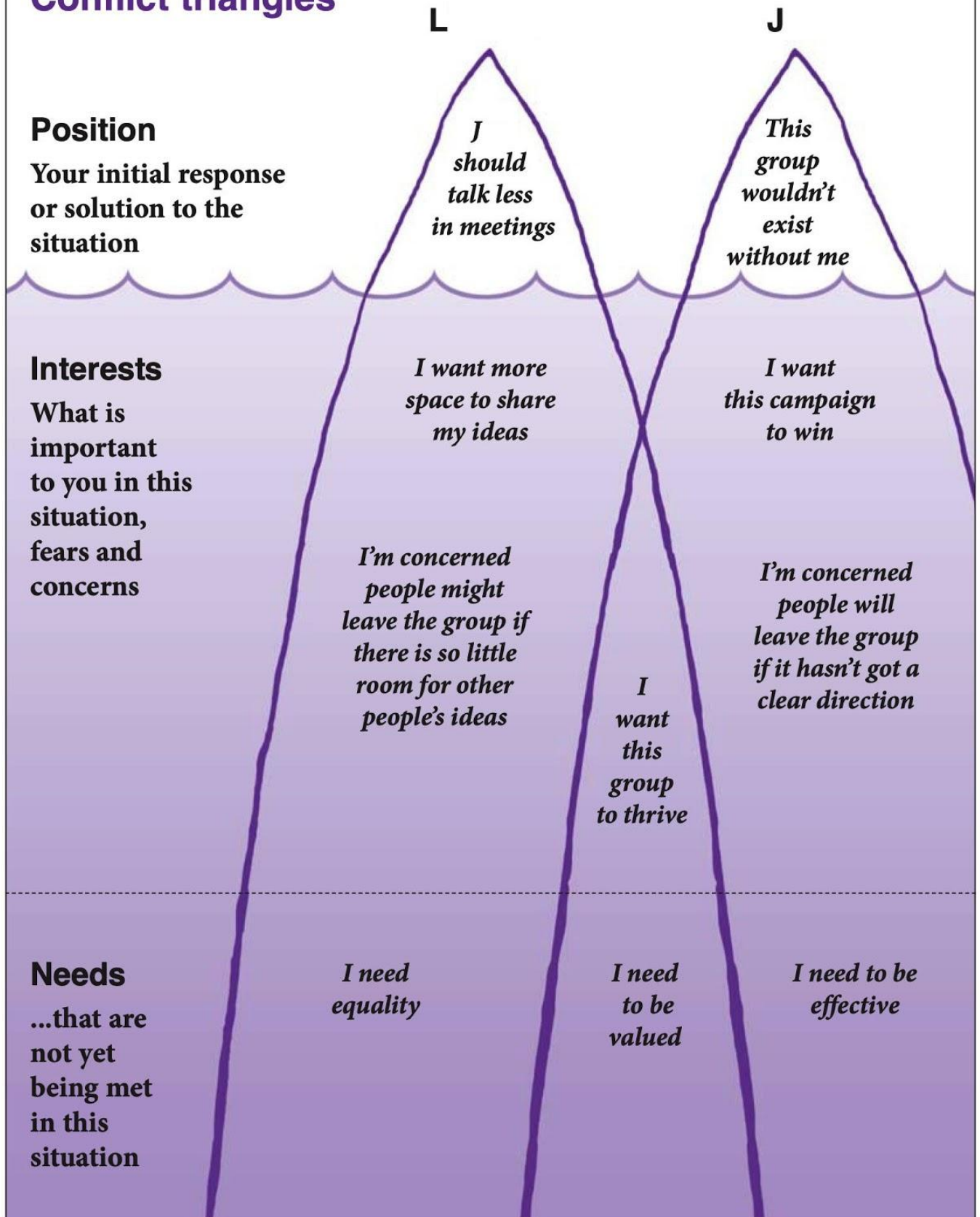
Getting to needs

An iceberg provides a useful analogy for looking under the surface of a conflict. One-tenth of an iceberg is visible above water, while nine-tenths are below the surface. A 'position' is like that one-tenth of the iceberg visible above water. A **position** is an initial reaction, response, or solution to the conflict.

Let's use an example of a conflict between two people in a group. **L** feels frustrated about the amount of time **J** takes to talk. **L**'s position could be an initial reaction, like 'you talk too much;' or a solution based on this initial reaction, like 'you should talk less in meetings.'

Immediately beneath the surface lie **L**'s **interests:** what's important to **L** in a particular situation, **L**'s concerns or fears about the issue. **L**'s interests in this example are: more space to share their own ideas; concern that other people might leave the group if **J** continues to speak more than others.

Even deeper are the underlying **needs;** meaning universal needs, the needs that all humans have. For example: respect, belonging, understanding.

Conflict triangles

L

J

Position

Your initial response or solution to the situation

J should talk less in meetings

This group wouldn't exist without me

Interests

What is important to you in this situation, fears and concerns

I want more space to share my ideas

I want this campaign to win

I'm concerned people might leave the group if there is so little room for other people's ideas

I want this group to thrive

I'm concerned people will leave the group if it hasn't got a clear direction

Needs

...that are not yet being met in this situation

I need equality

I need to be valued

I need to be effective

When someone's needs are met, they are well and contented. For help identifying needs, the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) has created [several lists of universal human needs](#) (see Compassionate Communication).

In this example, two of **L**'s needs might be to feel valued for what **L** brings, and for equality.

So how about **J**? As a founder of the group who is very knowledgeable, **J**'s position is "If I didn't put so much energy into this group, it wouldn't exist". **J**'s interests are to stay active in the campaign, and **J** is concerned people will leave the group if it hasn't got a clear direction. **J**'s needs are for effectiveness at work, and for their efforts to be acknowledged.

Activity: Position-Interests-Needs

1. Think of a conflict you are having or have had in the past.
2. Draw two overlapping triangles, as in the diagram. If there are more parties, draw more triangles.
3. Identify your own positions, interests, and needs, and those of the other parties. Can you find any needs that overlap? Have a look at a ['needs' list, like the one on the CNVC website](#). Even if you are guessing at the other person's needs, does it help you feel more empathy towards them?
4. Now you have more of a sense of these needs, do you have any ideas for moving forward that you haven't yet tried?

Go deeper for shared solutions

It can be useful to try to understand the perspective of the other person before suggesting solutions. Shared solutions can be easier to identify when interests and needs are acknowledged, to oneself and to each other. Even if people's needs don't overlap in a particular conflict, most people experience similar needs at some point. Knowing about each others' needs can help group members connect more deeply. When individuals become fixated on their position, solutions can seem impossible to find, and communication can break down.

In the example scenario, **L** has needs for being valued and for equality. To meet the need for equality, **L** could ask that the group improve its use of consent decision-making. **L** might also ask if **J** is willing to speak less in meetings, and give others a chance to speak. To meet the need for effectiveness, **J** might ask if the group is willing to develop a campaign strategy.

L and **J** have a shared interest in helping the group thrive, and a shared need for being valued. Awareness of this common ground can help them to understand each other and find a solution that works for both.

When conflict is re-framed as an opportunity to explore these deeper needs, individuals can learn to understand each other better. They may even come to respect each other more and value their relationship.

"Whenever you are in conflict with someone, there is one factor that can make the difference between damaging the relationship and deepening it. That factor is attitude."
~ William James

7 Responding vs. reacting

There's a difference between reacting and responding. A reaction is impulsive and instantaneous; a response is a considered, conscious choice of action.

Fight, Flight, Freeze, or Faint

The nervous system is hardwired to react to perceived threats; its initial reaction is controlled by the amygdala, the oldest part of the human brain. The choice for flight, to fight, to freeze, or to faint is beyond conscious control. This reaction occurs whether the threat is physical, like meeting a bear in the woods, or social, like in a conflict situation.

Many people experience emotional reactions during a conflict. Fear can cause a freeze; anger can cause aggression; overwhelm can cause a faint. All of these are examples of the amygdala affecting behaviour with the intention to protect. Individuals have no choice over these initial reactions. They do, however, have a choice over how to respond after this initial impulse.

Managing emotions during conflict

Most people in a conflict situation have experienced being overwhelmed by emotions like anger, hurt, or fear. While emotionally activated, most individuals cannot think straight (see Guide to the Nervous System). Strong emotions become triggers for reactions that can be damaging to relationships. Sometimes instead of reacting, individuals suppress their emotions in order to avoid conflict.

Effectively addressing conflicts will rely on transitioning away from either habitually reacting to or suppressing emotions; and toward being able to acknowledge and identify emotions while being sufficiently in control of them to be able to consciously choose how to respond to a situation (see Guide to Emotions, see Guide to the Nervous System).

The orbital frontal cortex of the brain allows individuals to regulate control over their emotions. As an adolescent's frontal lobe develops, they are increasingly able to reason more logically, and react less emotionally. As they mature, individuals learn the social norms expected of adults, like proactively managing emotions during conflict. This ideally leads to successful conflict management, more ethical behavior, effective collaboration, a greater sense of personal peace, and group harmony.

8 Improving communication

What practices can help to improve communication, reduce tensions, and address them before they grow into conflict?

Understanding conflict takes awareness, navigating it takes practice. Developing a new approach to conflict is like learning how to maintain a bicycle. If you regularly oil the chain and adjust the brakes, you can avoid major problems. You will need to learn the skills to do these things, and also the awareness of when they need doing.

Conflict resilience is based on a strong foundation of appreciation. In groups that have normalised regular appreciative feedback, strengthening and deepening individual relationships, conflict is more likely to be framed as generative. Groups transitioning toward a feedback culture may begin to view conflict as a form of constructive feedback, ultimately helpful for both individuals and the group as a whole (see Feedback Culture, see Offering and Receiving Feedback).

By strengthening connection and relationship, certain practices can help reduce tensions and even de-escalate early-stage conflicts – active listening, expressing empathy, maintaining connection, seeing from another's perspective, minimising assumptions and judgments. Other practices can help to repair ruptures in relationships and rebuild trust that may have been broken – clearly expressing feelings and needs, forgiving easily, restorative practices, like a Clearing procedure or reconciliation (see Clearing Procedure).

Improving communication focuses on changing individual attitudes and behaviour to reduce and address tensions before they become conflicts.

Maintaining connection

Some relationships benefit from regular attention. Regularly scheduled check-ups can make it easier to notice when something is slightly off. An annual tune-up often keeps things functioning smoothly. There are several practices that help to maintain the connection between members of a group (see Connection to Self, Others, & World)

Regular Check-in (frequent, 5 min)**:** At the start of most meetings, a round for everyone to briefly say how they are, and what's going on in their lives.

Regular Feedback (frequent, 5 min): At the end of most meetings, a round for everyone to briefly say how they are, and how they felt the meeting went.

Buddy Check-in (monthly, 60 min): An opportunity for two people to connect more deeply, 30 minutes for each.

Feelings meeting (monthly, 2 hr)**:** This can be a regularly scheduled meeting, or specially scheduled when tensions are running high in a group. Some groups invite an outside facilitator. The format can vary. For example: one round for a brief check-in, "what's going on in your life?" A second round for "what are you finding difficult in this group currently?" A third round for "what do you appreciate about this group currently?" (see Making Space for Uncomfortable Emotions)

Team Well-Being (monthly, 3 hr): 90-minutes for individuals to have a deeper check-in. 90-minutes to focus as a group on a well-being topic.

Annual retreat (yearly, 3 days): Relationship-building and team strategy gatherings with a focus on the larger needs of the group, areas of focus and responsibility, reviewing and re-assigning roles.

Curiosity: Keeping an open mind, minimising judgments and assumptions

Most people have biases and habitual ways of thinking, based on their background and understanding of the world. People typically approach new situations using knowledge from past interactions to help them understand what's happening and what to do about it. This can be a useful skill. Making interpretations about one's surroundings is often necessary for safety and survival. If you see a car coming towards you, interpreting and understanding that information quickly will allow you to make a decision about what to do next. And, people are not always correct in their interpretations.

For example: You see someone sitting quietly in a chair, head in hands, looking down at their feet. What do you assume is going on? You might think they're sad, or ill, or a bit tired and sleepy, or that they are meditating. It can be easy to jump quickly from the facts to making assumptions and judgments about what is happening. If you think they are meditating, you might leave them alone. If you think they are ill, you might approach and offer support. Two different responses based on different interpretations of what is going on.

While it's seldom possible for individuals to be completely unbiased, they can become more aware of their bias, and learn to pause before rushing to judgment or acting quickly based on assumptions. Part of conflict resilience is keeping an open mind about why someone has done something, cultivating an attitude of curiosity, and trying to minimise judgments. Especially in the early stages of a conflict, when it may be possible to clear up misunderstandings before they grow.

Broadening Perspective — seeing from another's point of view

Individuals have different experiences in life, which affect their values and opinions. Viewpoints that are very different can be equally valid. Interpretations of the same word can vary wildly. A word like 'blue' can form different impressions or images in people's minds depending on their past experience. What one person perceives may be very different from what others perceive. What someone has heard another person say may be very different from the intended meaning. It's helpful to develop an awareness that others may perceive things differently, even if they are using the same words or are in a similar situation. Seeing things from another point of view can help improve communication.

Expressing empathy

Empathy begins with an internal choice to see things from another person's point of view, to understand another side of a story. Empathising with someone is like standing in their shoes, understanding their feelings, perspective, and values. Empathy is being fully present to what another person is experiencing, and not focussing on the emotions that are triggered in you, or how you can fix the problem.

Empathy is not agreement, but rather a willingness to understand how things look from someone else's point of view. You don't need to understand all the details, or to have been in the same situation as the other person. For example, even if you have never had a child, you can still empathise with a parent. Empathy is not a selfless act, you benefit as well. When you empathise with another person's perspective, you feel more connected to them. Likewise, the other person becomes more open to hearing and understanding you. (see Empathy & Compassion)

Finding out what others are trying to say

Many conversations do not involve attentive listening. Often individuals are so busy thinking about their own experiences, or how to reply to someone, that they don't listen very attentively or discern what's important to others. Attentive listening occurs by paying attention to both what is said and how it is said.

Several common behaviour patterns reduce attentive listening. Emotions can overtake the ability to listen clearly. If dearly held opinions or views are challenged, individuals can stop listening and start planning a counter-attack. Or they might interrupt to tell a story, interrogate the other person, offer unwanted advice, or change the topic. These actions reduce connection with others, and can leave the speaker feeling they are not being listened to.

Improving communication and increasing conflict resilience are supported by listening attentively to understand others better. Again, an attitude of authentic curiosity can be helpful.

Active listening

Active listening involves suspending your own thought processes and making a conscious effort to understand another person's perspective. Active listening allows you to focus on the core issues and meaning of a person's message and to understand them better as a result. It goes beyond the content of what the person is saying. By actively listening you can come to understand how the speaker feels about the issue, as you tune into their underlying emotions, concerns, tensions, and needs.

Using body language, eye contact, and where appropriate, short questions or comments – you can show the speaker you are listening, help them formulate their thoughts, and reassure them that you respect and value what they have to say.

You can also show people that you've heard them properly by summarising what they have said and saying it back to them. This is a good way to check whether you've understood them properly, and gives them the opportunity to correct you. Listening attentively often includes both the heart and the head. Active listening helps maintain connection, strengthen a relationship, and deepen understanding of another person.

Clear Expression

Assertiveness

Being assertive involves expressing your own feelings, needs, rights, and opinions while maintaining respect for other people's feelings, needs, rights, and opinions. Assertiveness means encouraging others to be open and honest about their views and feelings, listening to them and responding appropriately, whether you're in agreement with these views or not. It is not the same as aggressiveness, or 'winning'. You can be assertive without being forceful or rude. Instead, assertiveness is stating clearly what you want and taking steps to get your needs met.

Expressing Feelings and Needs

Identifying and clearly expressing your own feelings and needs can help build connection with others, and make it easier for everyone to listen. (see a 'needs' list, like the one on the CNVC website).

It can also be useful to find out and respond to someone else's feelings and needs as a way to let them know they have been heard and to help reduce tension. Using active listening skills, you can listen for what the issue is, and their feelings and needs. These may not be framed in clear language, so it can help to look past the details of what they say and be prepared to guess at their feelings and needs. When guessing, try to empathise – put yourself in their shoes, be compassionate, and avoid prejudice or stereotyping.

You may not like or understand why someone is saying or doing a particular thing, but if you find out what their feelings and needs are, it opens up the possibility of understanding why they are doing it, and it allows you to develop a strategy together that can meet everyone's needs.

Forgiving Easily

In any transition that involves developing new ways of relating and communicating, it's easy to make mistakes or to get new practices wrong. Invite an attitude of what John Maxwell calls 'failing forward' - forgiving each other easily and often; sharing and celebrating mistakes and failures. If a group doesn't forgive each other easily, and learn to laugh at mistakes together, transitioning a group's culture can be more difficult.

Transitioning any aspect of group culture typically takes time and involves a learning curve. New practices can feel awkward at first, as there is a lack of experience in knowing how to do them 'well'. People will likely make mistakes. Celebrating mistakes, and forgiving each other easily helps to increase group resilience (see Sharing & Celebrating Failings, see Empathy & Compassion).

Restorative practices: Clearing Procedure

For addressing situations that are emotionally charged and tangled, helpful processes include a Clearing procedure, mediation, or another restorative process like those developed by Dominic Barter (see reference below). These can be good contexts for sharing difficult emotions, clearing tension, tending a relationship, or addressing a difficulty. Clearings can be wonderful opportunities to strengthen relationships, and they differ from offering feedback. A Clearing benefits from a structured and well-held process, whereas constructive feedback typically does not need this (see Offering and Receiving Feedback, see Clearing Procedure).

Thanks for Reading!

Understanding individuals' preferences about conflict can lead to greater empathy and harmony, while helping groups navigate conflict and achieve desirable outcomes. Transitioning toward conflict resilience will ideally reframe conflict from something scary and destructive, to something normal and productive.

This guide is intended as a starting point for conversations and to increase understanding for those who may have a different relationship with these topics. The approaches mentioned in this guide can be part of transitioning toward an understanding of human experience that will ideally foster deeper and more compassionate connections, for individuals, groups, and the entire world.

Text adapted from Seeds for Change Oxford, "Working with Conflict in Our Groups: A guide for grassroots activists," 2013, licensed under a Creative Commons BY SA 4.0 International License. Text adapted from Katherine Pine, Bryan Hayden, & Natasha Rascon eds., *Introduction to Public Communication, 2nd edition* (Chapter 2.4: Conflict Management in Today's Global Society)(2016), licensed under a Creative Commons BY SA 4.0 International License.

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