

Conflict: Fight, Flight or Opportunity?

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CANBRIDGE

a process collective

(Consensus And Network Building Resolving Impasse
and Developing Group Effectiveness)

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1. What this workshop is; what it isn't

There are many books and workshops that focus on how to avoid conflict or how to contain it once it occurs. Basically they offer ways to make it go away. This is not that kind of workshop.

There are many books and workshops about communication styles that will reduce the risk of triggering others' upset. This is not that kind of workshop either.

Despite all that we may do to be clear, direct, and sympathetic in communications, and all we may attempt to stay on the road to good, productive conversations, we all occasionally find ourselves in the ditch. This workshop is about *that*—what happens when conflict is already in the room—and the opportunities that presents.

2. What is conflict?

A. Definition

People mean different things by conflict and it's important to frame the conversation. For purposes of this workshop, I'm defining conflict as the dynamic where there are at least two different viewpoints and at least one non-trivial emotional charge.

B. Meaning in the Group Context

Many people view conflict as a barometer of group health: less conflict = greater health.

☞ **Top Secret:** Change your mind about that! Think of conflict as natural and a positive, rather than a negative indicator of group vitality.

In fact, if conflict is *not* regularly surfacing you either have a dead group or are not dealing with serious issues. (Show me a group that claims to have no conflicts and I'll show you a group that's not paying attention.)

Paying attention though, does not get you out of the ditch. It only informs you that you're in the ditch. You also need to have an idea about how to work with conflict constructively, and that's what this workshop is essentially about.

The main challenge for groups around conflict is not whether it is occurring; it's what you do with it when it does.

C. Ways Groups Unconsciously Hamstring Themselves

The basic model for problem-solving meetings is to work as much as possible in the rational realm. However, as humans, we absorb, process, and pass along information in a wide variety of ways. Our palette is much larger than just the rational—including emotional, intuitive, tactile, and spiritual. If we fail to welcome that wider vocabulary in the room, we grossly limit how we exchange information.

Information flow can be greatly enhanced if groups regularly offer a variety ways to access the conversation.

☞ **Top Secret:** Learn the skill of understanding and responding to another person's statements from their frame of reference and using their preferred vocabulary, rather than automatically placing their comments in your frame of reference and insisting they join you there. Others will be amazed at how brilliant you've become!

D. Working with Emotional Input

By definition, we're talking about upset as part of the dynamic of conflict. Most groups do not have agreements about what to do with emotional input, and most groups have problems with it. Often, emotional charge is accompanied by aggression.

- It's possible to welcome feelings and object to aggression—though this calls for appropriate process agreements and skilled facilitation.

☞ **Top Secret:** Learn the skills needed to back up any process agreements; it's a set-up for failure and frustration if you expect the group to do things it hasn't yet learned.

- When a group has a history of negative experiences when feelings get strong, they get tense whenever someone gets upset and the next poor experience is largely a done deal. (What you expect to see has a lot to do with what you get.)

3. How Conflict Impacts the Group

The Distress/Distortion Graph

As distress rises, so does distortion. The greater the distress, the greater the likelihood that the person will mishear what's said or misinterpret what it means. In the extreme, nothing will get through accurately. While minor distress only causes minor distortion (and typically doesn't need group attention), everyone has a threshold above which distortion is no longer trivial and it becomes a problem for that person to participate accurately in the conversation. Worse, that person's distress may trigger anxiety in

others that distracts them from focused attention on the issue as well, and it is hard to do good work. [In the drawing I created to illustrate this, that line was red, and we used the phrase "above the red line" to refer to people being upset to the point where non-trivial distortion was occurring.]

Regardless of where the distress came from (we're not doing therapy here or trying to heal anyone), once it's linked with nontrivial distortion it's worthwhile for the group to stop and name it (by which I mean acknowledging what's going on *to the distressed person's satisfaction*). After that, the group faces a choice point: attempt to work the tensions through to resolution, or set it aside and resume work on the topic at hand. (Note: for the first choice to be a reasonable option, the group needs to have an understanding about what working tension to resolution looks like [see section B below] and you have to have the skill to be able manage that process.)

When to Work Conflict in Plenary

Here are screens I recommend in making that assessment:

- o Is this an isolated example or a pattern (if the latter, it may be valuable to work it through for the purpose of changing the pattern in the future; think of it as a strategic investment).
- o Are there a number of others in the room for whom this dynamic also applies and who would therefore likely benefit from working the tension on the spot (that is, this applies to many more people than just the immediate players).
- o Is it possible to actually do solid work on the topic without resolving the conflict? Sometimes it isn't and if it's important to make progress on the issue you'll have no sensible choice but to work through the conflict first.
- o Does the group need to do it in plenary to develop its capacity to do it in plenary? When first learning the process, it may make sense strategically to do a few live examples in plenary that might otherwise be good candidates to handle offline, for the purpose of developing the group's confidence in doing it as a group. (If your first attempt at the plenary level is thermonuclear, you may be swamped by the enormity of the issue rather than by faulty process.)

4. Why work on it at all?

A. Why *Not* Work with Conflict?

- People get hurt
- Group energy gets fragmented
- Valuable group time is lost if there is no forward movement
- People may shut down if conflict erupts, squelching creativity
- People feel bad when they get upset

☞ **Top Secret:** It makes good sense for a group to fear conflict if they have a history of bad experiences. Don't expect that to change on a dime. If you offer alternative experiences the group will learn different expectations.

B. Reasons to Work with Conflict

- There is energy in emotions; if the group can find a way to welcome that input, it can harness the energy to focus on the issues. In fact, successfully working with conflict builds community and connection like nothing else.

☞ **Top Secret:** Strong feelings act as a kind of virtual earwax; if the speaker does not feel heard there is risk of major distortion in what they hear. In the extreme, they may not hear anything, and are lost to the group as a contributor to the consideration. This is why it's generally best to acknowledge distress whenever it occurs, *once it reaches the level of significantly distorting what's happening*. **Caution:** while acknowledgment is almost always a good idea, deciding whether to delve into the distress in the moment may or may not be a good idea.

- There is information in emotions; if the group can find a way to welcome that input, it has more to work with.

☞ **Top Secret:** Don't be glad there's upset; be glad there's a chance at the information.

- For the person upset, there is the chance to look at your buttons and the filters you are using to screen information. It can be invaluable to see how your emotional reactions are different than others, and to use the occasion to reflect on how well they serve you.

- If others are upset with something you've said or done, it's feedback on how you're perceived. It's important to understand the trigger so that you can be more effective.

☞ **Top Secret:** Most of us have been culturally conditioned to resist critical information (and defend ourselves as a knee-jerk response). Even though

we need a constant flow of information for growth—and critical reflections are almost always more valuable in this regard than favorable ones—there is a pervasive tendency to shoot the messengers (or at least shoo them). While better communication styles (e.g., using "I" statements) help make critical feedback more palatable, we'll never eliminate raw statements. Can we afford to not hear them?

5. Why work in the dynamic moment?

The rational mind is an amazing tool, allowing us to infer and speculate about patterns, about cause & effect. At the same time, it is a silken trap, with strands so fine we seldom see them. The mind's constructs affect what we see and how we understand it. When in a rational framework, it is hard to see a non-rational one. The reverse is also true.

One of the standard techniques for managing conflict is to suggest a break, for cooling off. One reason for this is to avoid aggressive, damaging exchanges. Another is that upon quieting down and reflecting, people sometimes make shifts that allow them to let go of their reactions and return to the conversation with a different idea about how to proceed.

One reason to *not* take a break is that it is sometimes possible to see an unhelpful pattern in the heat of the moment—when rational constructs are weakened—that will be invisible after the cooling off (and our minds have had an opportunity to fabricate an understanding about how bad things have been done *to us*, rather than *by us*).

☞ **Top Secret:** Do not attempt this kind of investigation (of patterns in distress) without securing express permission to do so when people are *not* in distress. Without permission, the proffered insights may be perceived as a condescension (attempts at practicing pop psychology without a license), or worse, a witch hunt.

6. Why work on it in group?

A. Why *Not* Work on Conflict in Group

- Some people struggle to talk in front of a group (stage fright) and they'll be more relaxed one-on-one, perhaps with the help of a third party facilitator.
- Parallel to the first point, yet somewhat different, some are embarrassed to reveal tender feelings in front of a group, and will feel safer talking in smaller numbers.

- The distress of a few—and the way they express it—may incite distress in others, effectively polarizing the whole group.
- For some, it is much easier to change their mind or their position if they have not spoken in front of the group; once they've made a statement "in public," they tend to see change as a sign of weakness, or even a loss of integrity.

☞ **Top Secret:** If you have such a person in your group—it's a relatively common personality type—a good strategy is to delay asking for their opinion until others have spoken first. This type is generally more flexible up until the point they have stated an opinion in group, and you want to make sure they've had every opportunity to be persuaded by others' input before they speak.

B. Why Explore Conflict in the Whole Group

- The larger the group, the more chances there are members who are not protagonists in the conflict. These non-belligerents can play a crucial role in safeguarding a constructive process.
- ☞ **Top Secret:** If someone is in distress they are much more likely to have a constructive response to a suggestion from a neutral party than the same words coming from someone associated with the trigger of the distress.
- With more people in the room there will probably be more perspectives on what is happening, which means more information to work with, and enhanced prospects for a good solution.
 - It tends to be much more beneficial to group energy if everyone works through an issue together, rather than having the protagonists report back on a resolution which was developed outside the group's view.
 - It is not unusual for the same conflict to touch multiple people, and then the progress of a few can help the whole group work through a conflict more quickly.
 - When dialog gets stuck, non-belligerents can play an important role in translating what one protagonist says into a framework the other can understand.

7. Method for working with conflict

Step 1. What are the feelings?

- Acknowledge the emotional experience of everyone who is a major player in the conflict. Stay with it until everyone feels heard (as opposed to agreed with). **Hint:** you may need to ask each player what “feeling heard” looks like to them; answers may vary.
- Focus on one person at a time until everyone has had their say. Other things being equal, start with the person in the greatest distress and work toward the person least triggered.
- Summarize the common ground and note the differences. Resist the temptation to try to fix it, or talk anyone into changing their feelings.

Step 2. What’s the story?

- Give each person the chance to tell their version of what happened and what their reaction was. Discourage attempts at solutions at this stage; that comes later.
- As with the prior step, summarize the common ground and note the differences.

☞ **Top Secret:** Groups often get hung up (or even polarized) by the efforts of protagonists to get group members to take sides and decide who was “right.” Resist the temptation to determine Truth and seek Relationship instead, emphasizing the ties among protagonists and building a bridge between them.

- Steps One and Two can generally be done simultaneously, just be sure not to let someone slide over naming their feelings as they get engrossed in their story.

Step 3. What’s at stake?

- Let the answers here be wide open: it could be as grandiose as “world peace” or as mundane as “second helpings of dessert.”
- Sometimes a major element in conflict is a gross misperception of what another wants, and that can be revealed at this stage. The objective here is to find out why this conflict matters for all the players.

Step 4. What do you want to do about it?

- While similar to the last question, this is an action statement, and only comes after the prior three questions have been addressed. Now, finally, we are getting to problem solving.

☞ **Top Secret:** If the responses here are still coming out with emotional charge then it's a sure sign that you went through the previous steps too quickly and someone didn't feel heard or respected; go back and do them again.

- Note that the framework here is what do *you* want to do, not what you want *others* to do. It generally works better if each person starts with what they can unilaterally contribute to forward progress, and build from there.

- Unlike Step 3, here you are looking for measurable commitments. Thus, don't settle for, "To feel better about what we're each doing to help the group." Insist instead on something like, "To meet every Wed evening at 7 pm, right before the group meeting, to share what we've each done in the prior week to follow through on our group commitments and to talk about anything extra we've done."

☞ **Top Secret:** By making the answers to Step 4 measurable, it gives each protagonist concrete information with which they can contradict negative feelings about the other protagonists (that is, despite a tendency to indulge in bad feelings about the other person, they have the chance to resist going there by reminding themselves that the other person actually did the thing they said they'd do).

8. Hints for facilitating conflict

- It is easy to get stuck looking only at positions. Yet positions are derivative, not fundamental. Look for the interests and values that underlie positions and try to put together different positions that take into account everyone's interests.

- Look for misunderstandings about what one person is saying to another, and spend time clearing those up. Look for ways to recast a statement into a frame of reference that may be more accessible to the listener.

☞ **Top Secret:** Information is concentrated in the resistance. Understanding all you can about someone's resistance is often the key to getting the conversation unstuck.

- When stuck, try shifting formats. If open discussion isn't working, try a sharing circle. Or perhaps breaking into small discussions groups before returning to plenary. Occasional use of guided visualizations can be startlingly effective at transcending energy blocks.

☞ **Top Secret:** If facilitating a session where conflict is expected, come prepared with different options for engaging the topic, so you are ready with an alternative if blockage occurs.

Keep in mind that there is a wide range of formats, and what may be comfortable to one party may not be to another. Try to offer choices so everyone has something that feels familiar—or at least non-threatening.

- Consider if family of origin or cultural differences are gumming up the works. For example, among Afro-American, Hispanic, Italian, or Jewish families, normal conversation may be high-spirited, with many talking at once. Among families from northern European cultures, normal conversation means one person speaking at a time, in well-modulated voices. In the former, speaking calmly and slowly means you're not feeling well. In the latter, interrupting with animation means you're angry or out of control. There is no right or wrong here, but your group may unwittingly be favoring one style over another, effectively (though unintentionally) shutting down a chunk of your group. Pretty expensive.

Think about how you can mix up meeting styles to allow everyone in the group at least some of what they're comfortable with.

- When conflict is stubborn to resolve, there are multiple possible explanations, including:

- not having looked deeply enough into underlying factors

- a shift in underlying values such that all parties no longer belong in the same group

- mental or emotional instability among one or more protagonists (careful here: this happens much less often than amateur psychologists diagnose it!)

9. Options when upset

As a way to better understand the dynamics of distress it can be helpful to be aware of the choices available when upset occurs. There are four—all of which have their place.

- Exit

In minor cases, this may mean leaving the room. In major cases, it may mean leaving the group.

- Let It Go

No one can actively process every potential conflict that comes along; if you attempted it, you be exhausted by noon! You have to make choices about what matters enough to explore further, and what you can let go without leaving a residue. **Note:** you haven't successfully "let it go" if there

is a build-up of resentment; it will only pollute and distort future interactions, which can be very expensive.

- Try to Get Others to Change Their Behavior

Once we've chosen engagement, this is typically our first and favorite choice. It even works sometimes! For example, when the other person cares more about the relationship than what they were doing or saying. That is, they're willing to change simply because you'd prefer it. Even if the relationship does not have high value, sometimes people are willing to change their behavior just as a kindness—they are not attached to what they were doing and don't want to upset others. However, it is important to note that success with this approach is completely outside your control—it depends on the compliance of others.

- Change Your Feelings

This is a profound and under-used option. I do not mean, "Oh, you don't like it? Get over it." I'm talking about something much more profound. You have the chance to inquire about the roots of your reaction and determine if it is in proportion to what happened and whether your reaction serves you (it may or may not). Having completed that initial internal inquiry, the next step is looking at whether it serves you to stay in a reactive state if the behavior doesn't change. The beauty of this option is that it is entirely within your control.

☞ **Top Secret:** Some people don't see this as an option; for them they must either learn to let go or remain at the mercy of what others will give them in the way of relief—a highly disempowered position.

10. Why work unilaterally?

While it's generally more pleasing to negotiate a mutually satisfactory solution to conflict, what if that isn't on the menu? There are still powerful things that can be gained by looking at what you can accomplish on your own, examining your actions and responses. This is not about abandoning your interests or changing your values; it's about making conscious decisions about whether it serves you to continue with the same reactions in the face of unchanging behaviors.

☞ **Top Secret:** A common difficulty in protracted conflict is when all parties insist that the other make the first de-escalating move. There is a pervasive notion in Western culture that making the first conciliatory gesture is a sign of weakness. This one ridiculous idea is probably responsible for more unresolved grief and tension than any other.