



Working with Conflict in our Groups

A guide for
grassroots activists

Every group and relationship experiences conflict, regardless of whether we are trying to bring about an anarchist revolution or play dominoes on the street. It's simply part of being human. It happens between friends, lovers, in affinity groups, in large campaigns, and in international networks.

This guide is aimed at people and groups working for social change who want to develop an understanding of conflict and how to deal with it. There are sections on what conflict is, the benefits of addressing it, and tools to work through conflict and maintain healthy and effective social change groups.



European Youth For Action

A European-wide network working to transform local and international communities in their approach to environmental and social justice.

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Notes:

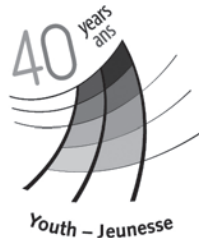
Seeds for Change

A UK-wide network of training collectives. We offer training and support for groups organising for action and positive social change. See our website for free guides on organising meetings and running campaigns.

www.seedsforchange.org



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Resources

Here are a few suggestions for resources on understanding and dealing with conflict.

Books

Everyone Can Win: Responding to Conflict Constructively - Helena Cornelius and Shoshana Faire. An accessible introduction to tools for improving communication and dealing effectively with conflict.

Nonviolent Communication: A language of life - Marshall Rosenberg. A good introduction to the ideas behind and tools for nonviolent communication (NVC).

The Mediator's Handbook - Jennifer Beer and Eileen Stief - A step by step guide to mediating a conflict.

From Conflict to Co-operation - Kate Whittle
A series of short illustrated booklets on conflict, communication skills, meetings and decisionmaking etc. Order hard copies from Coops UK or download from www.uk.coop/fromconflict2co-operation

Resource Manual for a Living Revolution: a handbook of skills and tools for social change activists - Coover, Deacon, Esser, Moore. Out of print, but available second hand (mainly through US based booksellers). One of the original and best texts on grassroots community building, social change organising and group-work techniques including dealing with conflict.

Online resources

Conflict Resolution Network
- Australian network of mediators and trainers, with loads of freely downloadable resources. www.crnhq.org

The Center for Nonviolent Communication
- has resources and more information on NVC. www.cnvc.org

Tree Bressen: Dealing with Conflict - <http://treegroup.info/topics/A7-conflict.html> and other articles on her site.

Rhizome – UK-based training collective, they've produced some great guides to mediation. www.rhizome.coop

Activist Mediation Network
- offer mediation and occasional training for groups involved in radical social change. www.activistmediation.org.uk

Introduction

Every group and relationship experiences conflict, regardless of whether we are trying to bring about an anarchist revolution or play dominoes on the street. It's simply part of being human, it's also a particular feature of living in a world which is more mobile. Humans used to live in largely homogeneous groups, whereas today many different world-views and cultures are present in our communities.

However, we haven't yet developed the skills to successfully hold this diversity. Add to this the fact that you probably grew up in a capitalist society, where you were taught that to do well, or even just survive, you need to behave competitively. Phew! So it's really no surprise that so many of us struggle to collaborate with each other to find a healthy way through conflict. Conflict is bound to happen while we un-learn old habits, and develop new skills and awareness to work co-operatively and challenge oppression.

This guide is aimed at people and groups working for social change who want to develop an understanding of conflict and how to deal with it. There are sections on what conflict is, the benefits of addressing it, and tools to work through conflict and maintain healthy and effective social change groups.

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Throughout the guide you'll find short exercises to help you learn skills and tools. The more involved we are with our own learning, the deeper the learning goes. So if you really want to learn this stuff, give yourself the time to try out the exercises.

What is conflict and why deal with it?

Conflict happens when two or more people have seemingly incompatible opinions, values or needs. It happens in every kind and size of group. It happens between friends, lovers, in affinity groups, in large campaigns and in international networks. Read the first sentence of this paragraph again and you'll see that it's unavoidable. When two or more people get to know each other they will discover areas where they have different opinions about what's the best thing to do and how to do it.

Conflict isn't a problem, it's an opportunity

Conflict doesn't mean that a relationship break-up is inevitable, or someone has to lose. It doesn't even necessarily mean making huge concessions for each other. We invite you to see conflict not as a problem, but as an opportunity to make positive changes that will make life better for all involved in the long run. That's not to say it's easy in the short term.

Understanding conflict takes awareness, working with it takes practice. Developing a healthy 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, but you will need to learn the skills to do these things, and also the awareness of when they need doing.

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

From a little niggles to a crisis

While a difference of opinion in itself is unavoidable, we have much more control over what we do about this difference in opinion. This is the art of dealing with 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. You might find yourself in a huge row, which appears to have come out of nowhere. By sharpening our awareness, we can pick up on more subtle clues, and deal with conflict early on. It's like watching a pot of boiling soup on the stove. If you leave the lid on, eventually the soup will boil over. If you turn the heat down when steam is starting to escape, then you could eat tasty soup and avoid a big mess.

Solutions to 'I' statements exercise from page 28

There are no right answers, but these are possible 'I' statements:

Situation 1. The meeting you are in is going very slowly, you are still on the first agenda item and the meeting is half way through.

I notice we have an hour left of the meeting, and we're on our first agenda item. I'm feeling anxious that we get through all the important agenda items - can we take a couple of minutes to check which of the remaining items are urgent for this meeting?

Situation 2. Your friend was supposed to meet you at 8pm to go to a gig, they arrive at 9pm and act as if nothing happened.

We agreed to meet at 8pm, and its now 9pm. I'm feeling frustrated, as I wanted to get to the gig on time. Next time we go out, could you let me know if you think you'll be late?

Situation 3. Your housemate said they would wash up after dinner. When you get up in the morning, the dirty dishes are still in the kitchen.

Yesterday you said you would wash up after dinner, and I notice the dishes haven't been washed yet. I'm feeling confused and annoyed, because I need more clarity, and I really value having a clean kitchen. Can you tell me why you didn't wash up?

If not, see if it helps to rate each of the solutions using this scale: 1. very useful; 2. lacking some elements; 3. not practicable.

Other questions to explore might be: Is it feasible? Is it enough to solve the problem? Does it satisfy everyone's needs adequately? Is it fair? Do you think you can live with it? Sometimes if the problem seems huge, you might not be able to find a solution for the whole thing, but you can solve parts of it. It doesn't fix it, but it helps make it more manageable.

Step 7: Implementing the plan

It can be easy to come to a decision and then forget to work out how you will make it happen. Questions to ask include: What has to be done? Who will do what? When will each task be completed? And then timetable in a review to check that it's all happening.

This tool is adapted from: Conflict Resolution Network, PO Box 1016 Chatswood, NSW 2057, Australia, Website www.crnhq.org Ph +61 2 9419 8500 Fax +61 2 9413 1148. Email crn@crnhq.org

When do you need outside help?

When do you need an external facilitator?

Your group might benefit from a neutral outsider, to help do the conflict mapping exercise or to support you to actively listen to each other.

Make sure everyone is happy with the person you're asking. Your facilitator might feel more comfortable doing the work if you can clearly define what their role is.

When do you need a mediator?

If you think the conflict might approach crisis point without some help, or if you're already at crisis point, we recommend getting support from a trained mediator.

The mediator's role is to support those in conflict to find a way through – mediators aren't there to offer solutions or tell you their opinion on the conflict. For mediation to work, all parties need to be willing to give it a go, and be genuinely interested in finding a solution that works for everyone.

In the UK a good first point of call is **Activist Mediation Network** (see the resources list). There are lots of **community mediation groups** around the UK who generally work with disputing neighbours, but will certainly have the relevant skills to help mediate other conflicts. Have a look on the internet for details of your local group. If you are willing to invest money in working through the conflict, then your options open up considerably. There are lots of **professional mediators** who work in a business setting, however some will have experience with working at a community level, and who knows, if they like what your group does you might get a discount.

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

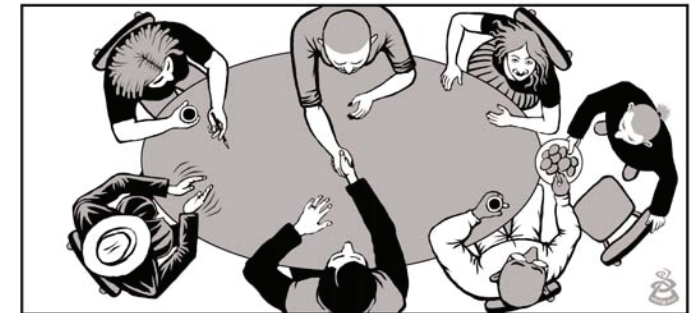
The five stages of conflict:

- 1 - Discomfort
- 2 - Incident
- 3 - Misunderstanding
- 4 - Tension
- 5 - Crisis

See overleaf for a description of the five stages.



*A nigggle became a silence ...and then a row!
It was a bad falling out - almost a fight.
But ...soon we all decided to talk it through.*



Now we're all very glad we sorted it out!



Last week we organised an awesome action!

Try this:

Plot a conflict you have been involved in or know about onto the five stages.

From a little niggle to a crisis

1 Discomfort

A little niggle 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, Sara directs the conversation towards talking about the next action. Tomas leaves the pub early, wishing they 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, Sara ignores or counters Tomas' suggestions about team building, which leaves Tomas feeling frustrated. Sara notices Tomas' 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.

Tomas thinks Sara doesn't care about helping the group to grow stronger. Sara thinks Tomas 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, Tomas calls a meeting to debrief. Sara quickly turns the discussion towards a potential next action. Tomas shouts "Sara! Just cool it! Let's just talk through how this action went before rushing on to the next one!" Sara looks stunned. She opens her eyes wide, slowly shakes her head, and walks out of the meeting, slamming the door behind her.

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.

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

Adapted from:

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Conflicting needs and concerns

- We often think it's dangerous to make visible any clash of needs between people, but concealing the problem is often more risky than exposing it. Revealing the problem often helps new options emerge.

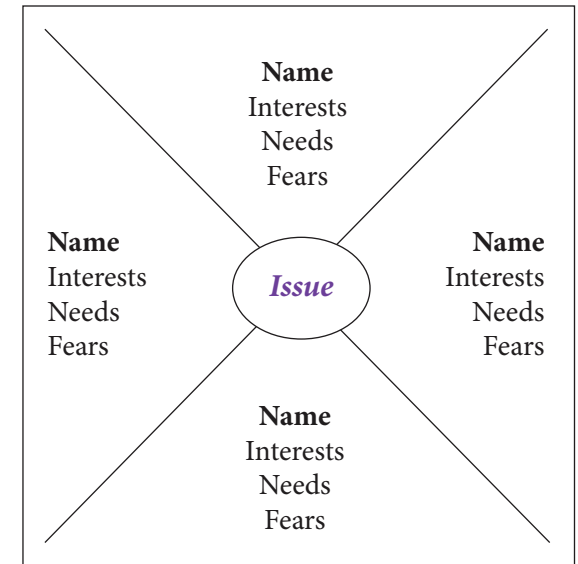
Step 5: Looking for new solutions

You've created the map and seen everyone's needs, now comes the creative part, looking for solutions that meet those needs. After the more analytical mapping phase you might want to play a game or move to a new room or change seats before you start this step. Use an ideastorm to collect ideas. This is a quickfire creative thinking activity designed to gather as many ideas as possible. It also allows people to spark off each other in an uncritical environment.

How to run the exercise:

1. Give people a few minutes to reflect on their own. Ask them to think of potential solutions that would meet everyone's needs.
2. Ask people to say their ideas for solutions that will meet everyone's needs. Let them know that all ideas are welcome, however silly they may seem.
3. Write all the ideas on a large sheet of paper (flipchart, wallpaper etc).

Conflict mapping diagram



4. Remind people that this isn't the space for critiquing the ideas – you're just gathering them now, and assessing them will happen later.
5. If the group runs out of steam, rephrase what you're looking for and give them a chance to come up with more ideas – there's often a second wind, so don't be afraid to ride out the silence.

Step 6: Choosing the most suitable option

When you have some possible solutions, bring the ideastorm to a close. Help the group find the best solution. It may already be clear that one solution fits the bill.

So if it's a problem with someone not doing their fair share of housework in your housing co-op or shared house, write down "household chores" rather than "Sam's not doing a fair share of the housework".

Step 2: Who's involved?

Decide who the people involved in the conflict are and draw lines on the paper so that each of them has a segment of the paper, e.g. in the above problem all the people who live in the housing co-op would be on the map. If the conflict seems to be between two members of the household, then give each of these people a segment of the paper.

Also give one segment to the other members of the coop together, provided they have substantially the same needs in this situation.

Step 3: What do they need? What do they fear?

Ask each person in turn what their wants, needs and fears are. Discourage others from interrupting. Write the wants, needs and fears down on their segment of the paper.

Sometimes it's difficult for people to change their perspective from their positions to think about their interests (what they want, their values, the things they care about) and needs, and they answer with solutions, "Sam should do more housework". Try asking questions like: "Your solution to the problem is to do... What needs of

yours will this meet?" to help people get to these underlying interests and needs. The answer might be a clean living environment. Getting to the level of needs can help us to see more easily that there is more than one solution to the problem.

The list of needs will be more helpful if the words or phrases are specific, so words like "respect" or "understanding" need to be qualified. Ask questions like "How will you know when you have respect?"

Fears are concerns, anxieties or worries that someone has that are relevant to the problem eg being judged or criticised, fear of failure, doing the wrong thing, loss of face.

Step 4: Reading the map

New perspectives - Invite everyone to look at the map and consider others' wants, needs and fears that they hadn't taken into account before. Mapping the needs helps us to see what it's like to be in another person's shoes.

Common ground - The map may also show where the common ground is within the group with some values and needs showing up in each segment. The map can also help start a conversation to build new areas of common ground, for example where one person has mentioned a need that others have not mentioned during the mapping, but can also share, e.g. a harmonious and happy household.

Why deal with conflict?

In the long run, there's no way round it. In the short term, humans have developed some very sophisticated ways of avoiding it. We pretend it's not there, hope it'll go away, change the subject, pretend we're imagining it. This method rarely succeeds at getting us anywhere other than stuck. Avoiding conflict is like ignoring a small child who needs the toilet. It'll just get messy, and create another set of problems to deal with that we may be even less prepared for.

So, at some point down the line we'll have to deal with it. Does this sound stressful? Can you already feel a bead of sweat quivering on your brow? Are you now considering avoiding reading this guide, to temporarily put off this stress? Hang on! There are immense benefits to understanding and working through our conflicts.

Learning skills for working through conflict shows respect. By stepping back to see another point of view, by taking the time to communicate about difficult topics, we're showing care and compassion for those around us. We're showing that relationships are important, they are a powerful resource, and worth investing our time and energy in. Dealing with conflict will help us build stronger groups and be more effective in bringing about social change.

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

Understanding our conflicts and working through them can be a deeply empowering process for everyone involved. It can be hugely energising to find a way to connect with people you have a conflict with, and find a way through the conflict that everyone can live with instead of pretending it's not there. Imagine you're part of a group where people 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.

Groups with a healthy approach to conflict will be better prepared to go the long haul together, and are better able to effectively bring about social change. Clear communication and trust for each other enable groups to make better decisions which

takes into account more points of view. It also saves the time and energy that is sometimes spent on avoiding conflict.

We can also see working through our conflicts as skilling ourselves up for an uncertain future. If we want to build a stronger and more supportive society for insecure times, we need to develop the skills to work collaboratively.

Why conflict happens in social change groups

There are some particular features of grassroots social change groups that are potential sources of conflict: a culture of 'get the job done'; having ineffective meetings and lack of clarity about aims; and the fact that we're challenging mainstream norms but don't start on a level playing field.

A Culture of 'Get the Job Done'

We call ourselves activists. We want to get out there and make change happen: we want to put a stop to damaging systems, we want to create sustainable ones, and we want to do it now!

Activists can be very efficient at getting the task done, sometimes to the detriment of investing time and energy in healthy interpersonal relationships, and creating inclusive and participatory work practices. An easy way to check whether a group has a healthy balance between this group maintenance and getting the job done, is to note how many 'task' roles, and how many 'maintenance' roles a group is fulfilling.

A healthy ratio will depend on the function of the group and the people involved in it. Your group might find equilibrium with an emphasis on maintenance roles, an emphasis on task roles or a 50:50 balance.

We tend to create cultures in our groups that reward getting the job done and dismiss investing in interpersonal relationships as wasting time.

Try this:

Have in mind a group that you are part of as you read the list of task and maintenance roles in meetings, see the table on the next page. In that particular group, which of the 'task' roles do you play? And which 'maintenance' roles? Does the group tend to carry out more of the task roles, or maintenance roles?

What would a healthy equilibrium look like in your group? What could you do to help your group reach this equilibrium?

Encourage the person who is listening and mirroring to avoid sarcastic tones, or adding in what they think the speaker means or any editorial comments.

Anna in our example, speaks about the issue, Bob actively listens and then restates as closely as they can exactly what Anna said. Anna says if anything was missing.

A simple step by step process for conflict resolution

This set of questions can be used in a whole group or between two people in conflict (with or without a facilitator) as a framework for discussion.

1. What do you see happening? (Observations)
2. How do you feel about it? (Feelings)
3. What do you want to happen? (Requests)
4. What can we agree to do about it? (Agreements)

Invite each person in turn to answer the first three questions, then you summarise and reflect back their answers to help the speaker feel sufficiently heard and to help the other person(s) really hear what is being said. Clarify if necessary, then ask to help them to explore possible solutions together. "What can you agree to do about it?" You could also add in a step for people to share their unmet needs - use whatever system works for your group.

Adapted from Tree Bressen, *Innerwork: Working on Your Issues with Someone (Whether or Not They Come Along)* <http://treegroup.info/topics/B15-innerwork.html>

Conflict Mapping

Use this tool when your group wants to get a clearer picture of the issues that are underlying the conflict situation. It helps your group to map out the underlying needs and fears of each person involved in the conflict and to find common ground. It encourages people to go below the level of their positions, to share their own interests and needs and to hear what others' needs are. It's a structured way of moving forward in a conflict that is much easier to facilitate than an open discussion, especially in a group where people are struggling to speak to each other in a civil way.

This tool could be facilitated by someone in your group, including someone directly involved in the conflict (as long as they feel able to stay neutral when encouraging others contributions), by a neutral friend or external facilitator.

Materials: a large piece of paper e.g. flip chart or a roll of wallpaper and some marker pens.

Step 1: What's the issue?

In the middle of the paper write down what the issue is. Aim for neutral and unemotional language and try to keep it an open-ended statement.

Tips for facilitating a meeting between people in conflict

- Stay as neutral as you can;
- Make sure everyone gets a fair chance to speak;
- Don't give advice or solve the problem, instead support those in conflict to find their own solutions to the problem;
- Facilitate good communication, encourage 'I' statements;
- Help everyone feel heard, encourage empathy and good listening;
- Help them identify feelings, wants and needs;
- Help them find common ground and ways forward.

Helping others listen

This is a useful tool if the people in conflict seem to be having trouble listening to each other in normal conversation or difficulty empathising with the other person's perspective on things. You might want to introduce this tool to the people in conflict as a way to help them gain a deeper understanding of the other person's point of view.

See page 21 for more on active listening.

1. Encourage Person A, or 'Anna' in the conflict to speak for a few minutes about the issue, and ask Person B, or 'Bob' to listen carefully, then summarise what he's heard at the end. If Bob interrupts, remind him that now is his chance to listen – his chance to speak will come after.
2. Bob actively listens and then summarises what he thinks he's heard.
3. Anna says if anything was missing from the summary.
4. You might also want to add any underlying feelings, wants or needs that you heard and think were missed by Bob in his summary.
5. Ask Anna if she wants to say more about the issue. If she does, continue the listening and summarising process. When Anna is done, switch and hear from Bob, whilst Anna actively listens.

Mirroring

This technique is similar to active listening, however instead of summarising, the listener repeats the exact words the other person has used. This can be useful when the person who is speaking is in a lot of emotional pain and you want to help the listener to really hear that or when the listener seems to disagree completely with what the speaker is saying and is having trouble listening, or has misunderstood what has been said.

Task roles in meetings

- Suggest agenda
- Identify issues for the group to work on
- Highlight task-based problems and solutions
- Request or offer facts
- Give opinions
- Identify issues and alternatives
- Explain and elaborate on ideas
- Pull together related issues
- Show contradictions
- Examine assumptions and ideas
- Suggest where to go next

Maintenance roles in meetings

- Be compassionate to others
- Express feelings and encourage others to express theirs
- Offer or accept compromise
- Suggest procedures for discussion
- Make space for breaks
- Joke and laugh
- Draw out silent members
- Name unspoken issues
- Summarise discussion
- Help to find areas of agreement
- Make group aware of direction and progress

Adapted from
Resource Manual for a Living Revolution

If a group rewards a 'get the job done' attitude, and dismisses investing in interpersonal relationships as wasting time, this 'task' skew can lead to poor communication. By poor communication we mean that people don't have space or ability to express how they feel, their concerns or their needs. It also means that people are less able to hear the feelings, concerns and needs of others. See chapter 5, on page 17 for more on effective communication.

Ineffective Meetings

Many people develop an aversion to meetings. When they have spent years in meetings with no clear agenda, and discussions going round in circles, you can understand why. For a group to sustain itself over the long-term, it's vital to develop the skills to both participate in and facilitate effective meetings. Facilitation is much more than letting anyone speak who has their hand in the air. It's about helping the group move forward with their task in an inclusive and participatory way.

Many grassroots groups practice consensus decision-making however without a clear understanding by all in the group of what the consensus process is about, and which decisions are best suited to other forms of decision making, conflict can easily brew up, as people find themselves getting bogged down in disagreement with no clear way of finding a solution. See the Seeds for Change website for more information on facilitation and consensus.

Lack of Clarity

Lack of clarity about a group's aims can lead to conflict. Many groups form because they're passionate about an issue. For a while this can be a good enough strategy, but when new people get involved, or after an initial achievement, if there are no clear boundaries that the group is working within, or aims it's working towards, it can lead to everyone pulling in different directions. New recruits might start working towards slightly different aims, this can of course be very positive as new people bring fresh ideas, it can also lead to conflict as longer standing members see their group becoming something very different to what they had intended it to be.

Challenging societal norms is no small task, and we don't start on a level playing field

Activists challenge many aspects of mainstream society. We challenge capitalism, we challenge racism, we challenge patriarchy. Challenging societal norms also involves re-negotiating how we work with, and relate to each other within our groups. For example, if we don't want to work in a hierarchy, then what kind of flat structure do we want? Or, if we don't want to have sexist relationships with each other, what would be a healthy way for women, men and gender-queer people to relate to each other?

These are huge issues, so no wonder we bump up against each other while we're trying to find a way through it all.

Power imbalances in groups

Two common examples of imbalances of power in our groups are privilege and informal hierarchies.

Privilege

The norms that operate in our society are those of dominant 'mainstream' groups: white, rich, middle class, heterosexual, male etc. The mainstream is not about numbers. Even though there are more poor people in the world, the rich have their interests recognised by the structures in our society to the detriment of the poor. Every group has mainstreams: those qualities, behaviours and values that are supported by the group, whilst other qualities and behaviours are pushed to the margins eg a group where there is a culture of noisy debate will have some quiet people or a group that is very ordered and polite will have some people who would like to express strong emotion. The mainstream of the group sets the tone, the communication style and gets to have its own preferences accepted by the margins. Mainstreams are often unconsciousness of their power in their groups. Without genuine and continuous efforts by the mainstream to become aware of these power differences and to change their behaviour in relation to the margins, conflict will arise.

Chapter 6

Taking effective action to deal with conflict in your group

In this section we suggest some tools and techniques to help your group resolve conflicts when things are hotting up between people and the conflict is approaching crisis. It has probably taken time to reach this stage, it will also take time to resolve it.

Informal Mediation

It can be really helpful to people in conflict to have a person who is outside the conflict facilitate a meeting between them.

Whilst we might not always be able to retain our cool or have the courage to speak up, having a supportive independent person present can really help us to listen better to the person we are in conflict with and give us courage to speak up about our own needs.

Mediation means coming between the parties in conflict and helping them to resolve it. You might mediate in a very informal way. For example, if a conflict or difference of opinion arises in one of your regular meetings, you might use your skills to help improve the communication between those in conflict without anyone noticing that you are 'mediating'. In a slightly more formal way you might organise a meeting with the small group of people most involved in the conflict where you are the agreed facilitator.

"Use the energy conflict generates to arrive at creative solutions."

Johan Galtung

Or you might facilitate a meeting of your whole group if everyone is to a greater or lesser extent involved in the conflict.

Are you the right person for the job?

At whatever level you take this role, there are some questions you might ask yourself. Do all the people involved in the conflict see you as a neutral person? Will the conflict bring up emotions in you that might affect your facilitation? Are you comfortable with other people expressing strong emotions? Can you avoid giving advice or trying to solve the problem for them? If you launch in with your own opinions and thoughts on the situation, you could well make things worse. Our experience is that even if you don't feel very confident of your mediation skills it can still be very helpful to those in conflict if you can help them create a space where they can really listen to each other.

Try this:

1. Identifying feelings and needs

It's useful to write an 'I' statement to help you pinpoint the exact feeling that the issue stimulates and to recognise the needs that are unmet. Then try to work out how you can meet those needs without the other person being involved. Or draw two conflict triangles, and try to identify both your own positions, interests and needs and those of the person you are in a conflict with. These exercises can help to develop an understanding of your own needs and also to see the other person's perspective.

2. Seeing the bigger picture

Sometimes we're so involved in a conflict, so attached to the outcome and to wanting others to behave in a particular way that we don't seem able to let go. One way out of this is to see if we can find a new way of looking at the problem.

Imagine that you are at the foot of a mountain, and all you can see is what's directly in front of you: a few trees, a mountain stream, a rocky track. As you climb, you can turn around and see that the few trees are, in fact, part of a larger forested area. A little higher you can see the farmland beyond the forest. Higher still, your view becomes more expansive – a town in the distance, a broad river...and when you reach the top you have a full 360 degree view. What does the problem look like now?

Maybe you can get a little more distance from the issue when you get this broader perspective on it. Perhaps you can see it more objectively? Or you can hold the outcome you desire more lightly? Or see that other things matter more than the opinion you are holding onto? Or now you can see what things you can change and what you can't?

3. Making an Internal Shift

Think of a conflict that you are or have been involved in where you felt a strong emotional reaction. Maybe it was anger, fear, anxiety. See the list of feelings on page 24. As you think about the conflict, see if you can feel what is happening in your body. Is your heart beating fast? Are you having hot flushes on your upper chest or the back of your neck? Is your belly tied in knots? Now stay with the feelings whilst you draw a picture of the feelings, or express them in noise, or act them out in movement. Give yourself the time and space to do this. Then sit and reflect on whether you noticed a shift in how you think about the issue now.

This exercise relies on the theory that if we have an experience that we are stuck with, we can create a shift by choosing to direct our experience into a different sense, e.g. visual, auditory.

Adapted from Tree Bressen, *Innerwork: Working on Your Issues with Someone (Whether or Not They Come Along)*
<http://treegroup.info/topics/B15-innerwork.html>

Regardless of the body, skin colour, sexuality or class we were born with, we are not responsible for the fact that society gives us varying degrees of privilege and unearned power. However, we are responsible for what we do with this power, in our intimate relationships, activist groups and society more broadly. Understanding privilege is an integral part of bringing about social change.

Conflict around privilege can be very subtle, and often hard to pinpoint. The people most likely to notice power imbalances are more likely to be the ones with less power in the group. The conflict arises 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 "It's nothing to do with us being men, we 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 gender privilege, and fail to address their behaviour in the group leading to conflict.

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

Informal Hierarchies

A group might initially be set up by a small group of friends who develop their way of doing things. When new people become involved the founders may assume that the cultures and practices they set for the group will suit the newcomers. For example, founding members of a group may develop a practice of knowing everything that's going on in the group, which might work well for a small group. However, as the group grows, it will be increasingly difficult for everyone, especially newcomers, to keep on top of 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, creating an informal hierarchy of knowledge, skills and power.

Informal hierarchies can also be created when people specialise in a certain area. For example, someone who writes for the group's website might develop a reputation for being good at this. If they get asked again 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, an informal skills or knowledge hierarchy can develop in the group, which can lead to resentment and eventually conflict.

Understanding conflict

Understanding what's really important to both you and the other party in a conflict is a great starting point to understand what the conflict is really about, and can help you think about potential solutions.

Getting to needs

An iceberg provides a useful analogy for understanding conflict. Only a tenth of an iceberg is visible above water, while nine-tenths are below the surface. In terms of conflict, our 'position' is the visible element.

Our **position** is our initial response or solution to the conflict. For example, there may be a conflict between two people in a group. One person, let's call them **Lindsay**, feels frustrated at the amount of air-time taken up by another member of the group, let's call them **Jon**. Lindsay'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 our **interests**. It might be what's important to us in this particular situation, or our concerns or fears about the issue.

In this example, Lindsay's interests are that she wants more space to share her own ideas, and that she is concerned that other people might leave the group if Jon continues to speak more than others.

Dig deeper and you'll discover the underlying **needs**. In this guide when we refer to needs we mean those universal needs, the needs that we all have, for example respect, belonging, to be understood. When our needs are met, we are well and contented. See page 25 for a list of needs

In our example, Lindsay's needs might be to be valued for what she brings to the group, and for equality.

So how about Jon? Jon founded the group and is very knowledgeable about the campaign. His position is "If I didn't put so much into this group, it wouldn't exist". His interests are to stay active in the campaign, and he's concerned people will leave the group if it hasn't got a clear direction. His needs are to be effective in his work, and for his efforts to be acknowledged.

2. Having the conversation

Ask the person concerned for a conversation and agree a time and a place which works for both of you. It might be tempting to talk when you've just had an argument, but chances are that neither of you will be fully open to listening in this state – so make sure you are both feeling relatively calm.

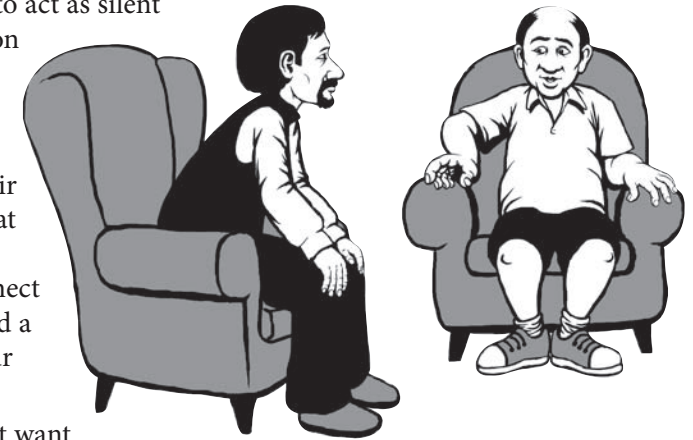
It may be that you would prefer to have a friend with you, to act as silent support. Offer this option to the other person too.

Explain your 'I' statement, and be prepared to listen to their response. Remember that to find a resolution, it's important that you connect with each other, and find a way to meet both of your needs.

If it's useful, you might want to make an agreement. It might be one or both of you agree to make a shift. Be specific about what you're agreeing to. For example, the agreement "Dave agrees to keep his music down when it's late, and if Mike still can't sleep he'll talk to Dave about it" is open to a lot of interpretation. A clearer agreement would read "Dave agrees to play his music at no louder than "volume 18" after 10pm. If Mike is unable to sleep after 10pm due to the music, he agrees to let Dave know either by text the same night, or by coming to his door the next morning."

"If Mike is still having sleeping problems due to the music in two weeks time then they both agree to meet again." Writing an agreement with this level of detail is especially useful if trust has broken down.

If you feel the fundamental problem is still there, or another one has come up, you can always ask to have another conversation.



What if you want to talk and the other person doesn't?

What can you do if you want to talk and the other person isn't willing to at the moment and may never be? Rather than get stuck going over and over the situation in your head and getting more and more tense and unhappy, there are some exercises you can do on your own that might help throw some light on the issue and bring some relief. Some of these exercises might feel a little unfamiliar. We suggest you just give them a go, and if an exercise isn't working for you, then drop it.

Try this:

Create 'I' statements from these examples: (Possible solutions on page 37)

Situation 1. The meeting you are in is going very slowly, you are still on the first agenda item and the meeting is half way through.

Situation 2. Your friend was supposed to meet you at 8pm to go to a gig, they arrive at 9pm and act as if nothing happened.

Situation 3. Your housemate said they would wash up after dinner. When you get up in the morning, the dirty dishes are still in the kitchen.

Talking with someone you are in conflict with

1. Preparation

Start by getting clear in your own mind what you want to say. What do you think the problem is? Is it a difference of opinion or priorities, a behaviour pattern or an individual incident which has upset you? Write an 'I' statement for yourself (see page 26) to help you be clear on the specifics of your frustrations, to clarify your own feelings and needs in this situation, and to figure out if you have a specific request for the other person.

What might be their positions, interests, needs and feelings? You could draw two conflict triangles as on page 13 to help you identify where your needs might overlap. Can you find some compassion for them – what might they be feeling? Check the feelings list on page 24 and the needs list on page 25.

Try this:

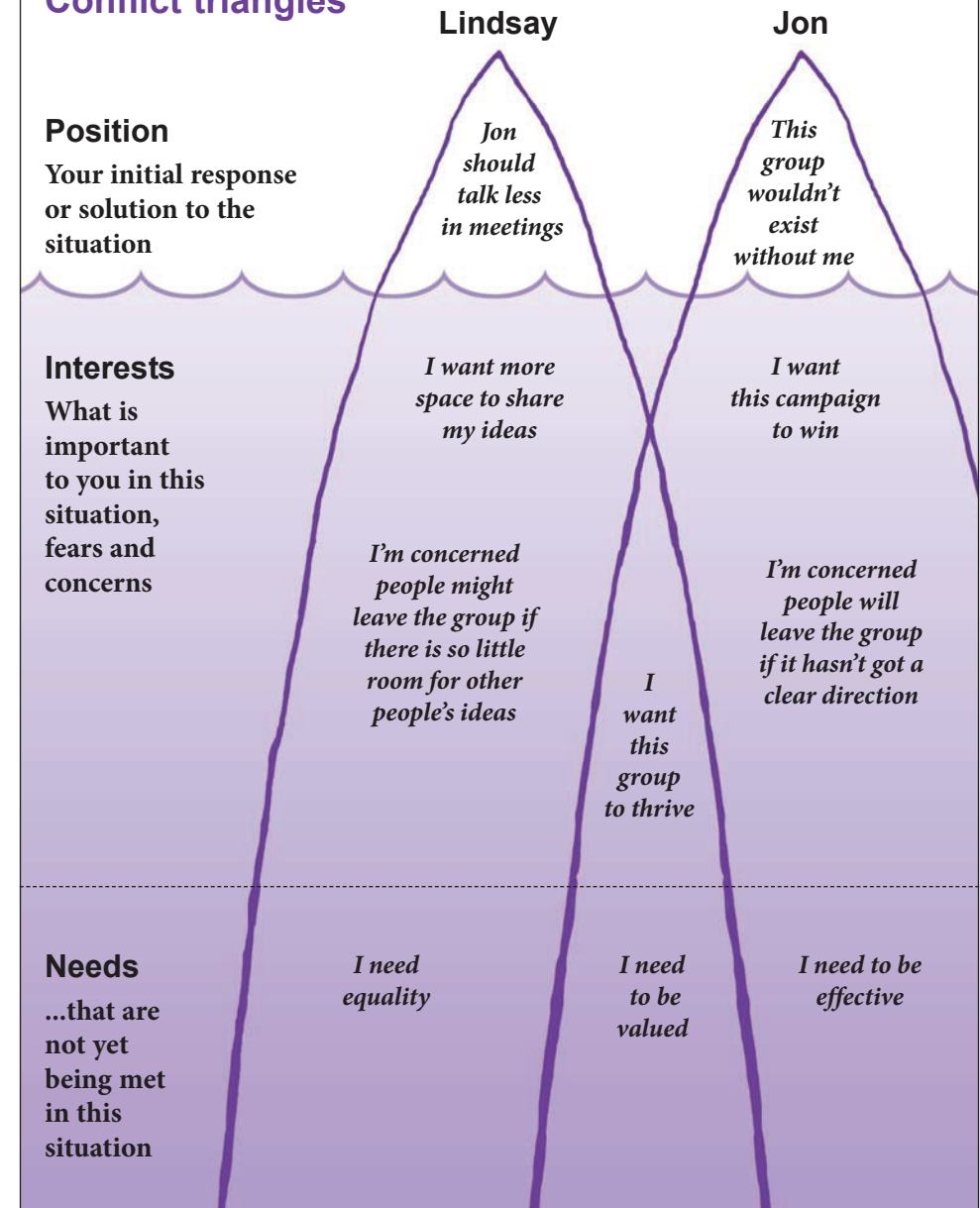
Think of a conflict you are / have been involved in and create an 'I' statement that includes all four stages:

When(behaviour that has triggered your upset)

I(response), because.....
(consequences of the behaviour to you) and I would like....
(preferred outcome).

Get ready to listen. If the conversation is just about you offloading your beautifully constructed 'I' statement, the other person might feel frustrated that they didn't get their chance to talk. They might talk to you in blame-language, so try to listen through that, and hear their feelings and needs. Remember our active listening tips on pages 21-22.

Conflict triangles



Go underwater to look for solutions

This exacerbates conflict, and makes it harder to resolve. Solutions seem to flow much more easily when we acknowledge to ourselves and each other what our interests and needs are. Even if the needs don't overlap in this particular conflict, we all experience these needs at some point in our lives, so knowing each others' needs can help us connect with each other. So often, people stay at the position level when looking for solutions. We can become fixated on our position, which can lead to a break down in communication and understanding.

In our example, Lindsay needs to be valued and she has a need for equality. To meet her need for equality, she could ask that the group improve their use of consensus decision making. She might also ask if Jon is willing to speak less in meetings, in order to give others a chance to speak (go to page 28 for how to approach this kind of conversation). Jon might ask if the group is willing to develop a campaign strategy. This would meet his need to be effective. It can be useful to try understanding the perspective of the other person before suggesting solutions – we talk about this more on page 17.

Try this:

1. Think of a conflict you are having or have had in the past.
2. Draw two overlapping triangles, as in the diagram on page 13. If there are more parties, draw more triangles.
3. Identify your own positions, interests and needs, and those of the other person. Can you find any needs that overlap? Have a look at the 'needs' list on page 25. 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?

Lindsay and Jon 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 them both.

3. Reason: "because..."

Explain what the impact of the behaviour or situation is on you, this can make it easier for people to understand your response.

Resist slipping in a blame or judgement of the other person, keep it about yourself.

"Because I'd like to learn how to fix my own bike" instead of "because you don't trust me with your tools". Also see the list of needs on page 25.

4. Clear request:

What you would like to happen

Be clear that it's not a demand. The other person may not be willing or able to meet your request, but when they are connected to what's important to you, they are freed up to think of something else they can do that meets your need and that also works for them.

"Would you be up for making more of an effort to arrive on time, and let me know beforehand if you're going to be late?" instead of "Don't be late again or I'll get really angry".

Example:

Blame statement:

"You never get to meetings on time, you just don't care."

'I' statement:

"When meetings don't start on time, I feel irritated, because I have a limited amount of time that I can stay. I would like it if our meetings could start at the agreed time. Can you agree to that?"

An 'I' statement ...is about being clear, and it's about finding a way to connect. An 'I' statement says how it is for me.

An 'I' statement is a conversation opener, an effective starting point for honest communication and for improving the relationship. Once you've delivered your 'I' statement, switch to active listening and find out what the other person thinks. Then using more 'I' statements and your active listening skills move on to start a dialogue about what options there are for resolution.

'I' statements

Use an 'I' statement when you want to let someone know you are feeling strongly about an issue. When we're unhappy or frustrated by the effect of another person's behaviour on us, our response is often to blame them. We use 'you' statements, like "You make me angry" or "You always keep me waiting." How does the other person respond? How would you respond? We often become resentful or go on the attack when we think someone is blaming us. When we become defensive, communication and connection usually breaks down.

An 'I' statement keeps the focus on your feelings, which is less likely to illicit a defensive reaction and more likely to promote effective communication.

An 'I' statement is not about being polite or nice, nor is it about being rude, it's about being clear, and it's about finding a way to connect.

An 'I' statement says how it is for me. Don't be tempted to disguise 'you' statements as 'I' statements, for example "I feel that you made me angry," or "I think you are inconsiderate". Using the word 'I' while actually laying blame on the other person, won't help you connect with that person.

Four steps to an 'I' statement

1. Observation of Behaviour "When ..."

A specific and objective description of the other person's behaviour or the situation that has triggered your upset. State the facts without opinions, assumptions, criticisms, judging, mind-reading or other behaviours that create defensiveness.

For example say, "When you arrived half an hour after the start time..." instead of "When you made everyone wait around for you..." or say "When you said 'I don't mind what we do...'" instead of "when you couldn't be bothered to take part in the decision..."

2. Response "I ..."

What was your response to this behaviour? It might be an emotion "I felt angry / hurt / irritated" , an action "I withdrew" or something you want to do "I wanted to scream/walk out".

Be careful to use words that don't imply blame, for example "I feel coerced" or "I feel ignored" imply you think someone is intending to coerce you or is ignoring you. Instead, you could say "I feel angry" or "I feel lonely" See the list of feelings on page 24.

Continued on the next page >

Chapter 4

Responding to Conflict

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 or Freeze

The most primitive part of our brain – the amygdala – controls our initial reaction to a threat. Whether we opt for flight, to fight, or to freeze, is beyond our conscious control.

This reaction kicks in whether the threat is physical, like meeting a bear in the woods or you are in a conflict situation.



So if you notice yourself impersonating a rabbit in the headlights when you meet a conflict, that is your amygdala protecting you. Likewise, if you get angry as soon as you can smell a whiff of a conflict, or if you bolt out of the door. Which is your most common reaction to a conflict threat? You have no choice over these initial reactions. You do however have a choice over how you respond after this initial split-second impulse.

Dealing with our emotions in conflict situations

We have probably all experienced at some time in our lives the sense of being overtaken by our emotions in a conflict situation, whether we're overwhelmed by anger or hurt or fear, we just can't think straight. Strong emotions become triggers for reactions that can be very damaging to our relationships.

Sometimes instead of reacting, we suppress our emotions because we want to avoid conflict. If we want to learn to effectively resolve our conflicts, we need to find ways to move from the habitual responses of either reacting or suppressing our emotions, to being able to acknowledge the presence of our emotions to ourselves and also to be sufficiently in control of them that we can make wise choices about how we respond to the situation.

Try this:

The aim of this exercise is to develop familiarity with the felt sense of emotions in the body and to use the breath to help release the tension and reduce the intensity of the emotions.

Find somewhere quiet and comfortable to sit or lie down. Close your eyes. Let your body relax and notice the sensations in your body where it rests on the floor or chair. Then bring your attention to your breathing, notice the sensations in your body as you breath in and out. Don't try to breath in any special way, just relaxed breathing. After a minute or so, check to see if you are holding any tension in your belly, your solar plexus (just below the ribs in the centre of your body), your upper chest or throat.

Notice whether any particular emotion comes to mind that is linked to this tension. Imagine now that you are letting your breath move through this part of your body. What happens to the tension? What happens to the emotion? Do you have a sense that the tension is released and the intensity of the emotion reduced? If locating the felt sense of your emotions seems to be working for you then you might like to practice noticing the felt sense of your emotions in daily life breathing through that part of your body and letting them go.

Universal human needs

MEANING

awareness
celebration of life
challenge
clarity
competence
consciousness
contribution
creativity
discovery
efficacy
effectiveness
growth
hope
learning
mourning
participation
purpose
self-expression
stimulation
to matter
understanding

PLAY

joy
humour

HONESTY

authenticity
integrity
presence

CONNECTION

acceptance
affection
appreciation
belonging
co-operation
communication
closeness
community
companionship
compassion
consideration
consistency
empathy
inclusion
intimacy
love
mutuality
nurturing
respect / self-respect
safety
security
stability
support
to know and be known
to see and be seen
to understand and be understood
trust
warmth

AUTONOMY

choice
freedom
independence
space
spontaneity

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

air
food
movement / exercise
rest / sleep
sexual expression
safety
shelter
touch
water

PEACE

beauty
communion
ease
equality
harmony
inspiration
order

Adapted from: (c) 2005 by Center for Nonviolent Communication Website: www.cnvc.org Email: cnvc@cnvc.org Phone: +1.505-244-4041

Feelings when our needs are met

AFFECTIONATE compassionate friendly loving sympathetic	CONFIDENT empowered proud safe secure	INSPIRED amazed awed wonder	PEACEFUL calm clear headed comfortable content fulfilled relaxed relieved satisfied tranquil trusting
ENGAGED absorbed alert curious fascinated interested stimulated	EXCITED energetic enthusiastic passionate surprised	JOYFUL amused delighted happy pleased	REFRESHED enlivened rejuvenated renewed rested
HOPEFUL expectant encouraged optimistic	GRATEFUL appreciative moved thankful touched	EXHILARATED blissful ecstatic radiant thrilled	

Feelings when our needs are NOT met

AFRAID mistrustful suspicious worried	CONFUSED ambivalent hesitant lost	EMBARRASSED flustered guilty self-conscious	SAD disappointed hopeless wretched
ANNOYED exasperated frustrated impatient	DISCONNECTED bored distracted indifferent withdrawn	FATIGUE burnt out lethargic tired weary	TENSE anxious nervous overwhelmed stressed out
ANGRY enraged furious resentful	DISQUIET agitated surprised uncomfortable upset	PAIN devastated grief lonely miserable	VULNERABLE guarded insecure sensitive
AVERSION disgusted hateful hostile			YEARNING envious jealous nostalgic

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Chapter 5

Good communication

Improving our communication

In this section, we'll explore what we can do to minimise conflict with others and deal with it effectively before it escalates. We will be looking at tools and skills to improve communication that will help to de-escalate a conflict.

Conflict in the early stages can be de-escalated by rebuilding connection and relationship. Active listening, developing empathy and seeing things from the other person's perspective are key skills for rebuilding connection. Clear communication and holding back our assumptions and judgements will also help us rebuild the relationship. The focus is on changing our own attitudes and behaviour so that we can improve our communication and address the conflict.

Empathy and connection

When we empathise with someone, in effect we stand in their shoes, we understand their feelings, their perspective and their values. Empathy begins with an internal choice to see things from a different point of view, to understand another side of a story. 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.

*Standing
in someone
else's shoes*



Empathy is not agreement, but rather a willingness to fully understand how things look from someone else's point of view. We don't need to understand the details. We don't need to have been in the same situation as the person we're listening to - so for example, even if we have never had a child we can still empathise with a parent. Empathy is not a selfless act, we benefit as well. When we deeply understand another person's perspective on something we feel more connected to them, and the other person becomes far more open to hearing and understanding us.

“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

Broadening our Perspectives - seeing things from another point of view

We have all had different experiences in life, which impact on our values and opinions. Others may have viewpoints that may be very different to our own, and yet are equally valid.

Imagine the colour blue - what is the first image or thought that comes into your mind? Perhaps the image or thought that came to you was of the sea or the sky, or perhaps you thought about a favourite piece of clothing or another object. Words like 'blue' form different impressions or images in our minds depending on our past experience. What I perceive may be very different from what others are perceiving. Extending this concept to our interactions with others, it's helpful to develop an awareness that others may be seeing things differently, even if we are using the same language or are in the same situation. Similarly our thoughts about what we have heard another person say may be very different to what the intended meaning was. Being willing to see things from another point of view can help us de-escalate conflict.

Two ways of maintaining connection between members of a group

Check-in: At the start of a meeting, have a go-round for everyone to say how they are, and briefly what's going on in their lives. This can help group members connect with each other.

Feelings meeting: This is a meeting in its own right. It can happen regularly, or when tensions are running high in a group. You could do this in three rounds. Start with a check-in, "how are you, what's going on in your life?" In the second round ask "what are you finding difficult in this group currently", and in the third ask "what do you appreciate about this group currently?"

Try this:

Active Listening - practice in threes. You'll need two friends to practice this. Each take a role - speaker, listener or observer.

1. The speaker speaks for about 2 minutes on a topic of their choice, the more controversial the better!
2. The listener actively listens and then summarises the key ideas and any emotions they observed, as succinctly as possible (1 minute).

3. The observer also actively listens and gives constructive feedback to the listener on their summary and anything they missed.
4. The speaker then has a chance to say how it felt and to comment on the listening.
5. Keep switching roles until everyone has had a chance to try each role.

Expressing Ourselves

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 our own feelings and needs can help build connection with others, and make it easier for everyone to listen.

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 defuse tension. Using our active listening skills we can listen for what the issue is, and their feelings and needs and what they want. These may not be framed in clear language, so we need to look past the details of what they say and be prepared to have a guess at their feelings and needs. When guessing, be sure that you try to put yourself in their shoes first, so you can stay compassionate and avoid stereotyping.

We may not like or understand why someone is saying or doing a particular thing, but if we find out what their feelings and needs are, it opens up the possibility of understanding why they are doing it, and it allows us to develop a strategy together that meets everyone's needs and moves us to resolution of the conflict.

Tips for actively listening

Create a safe atmosphere for both you and the speaker. Find a suitable space and minimise distractions (turn off mobile phones, televisions, computers etc).

Be clear about your limits from the start – if you've only got a certain amount of time, say so. If you're expecting a phone call you have to take, let them know in advance.

Make the mental space. Don't think about what you want to say in response. If thoughts keep popping up, simply let them go and continuously re-focus attention on the speaker.

If strong feelings come up, acknowledge them to yourself. Try not to let these emotions interfere with your ability to hear the other person.

Focus on the main ideas, the essence of what they are trying to convey, rather than the details of what they say. Look for what is unspoken - emotions, intention or meaning and needs.

Ask questions to help draw out the speaker's thoughts. Clarifying questions or open questions are best e.g.: how did you feel about that?

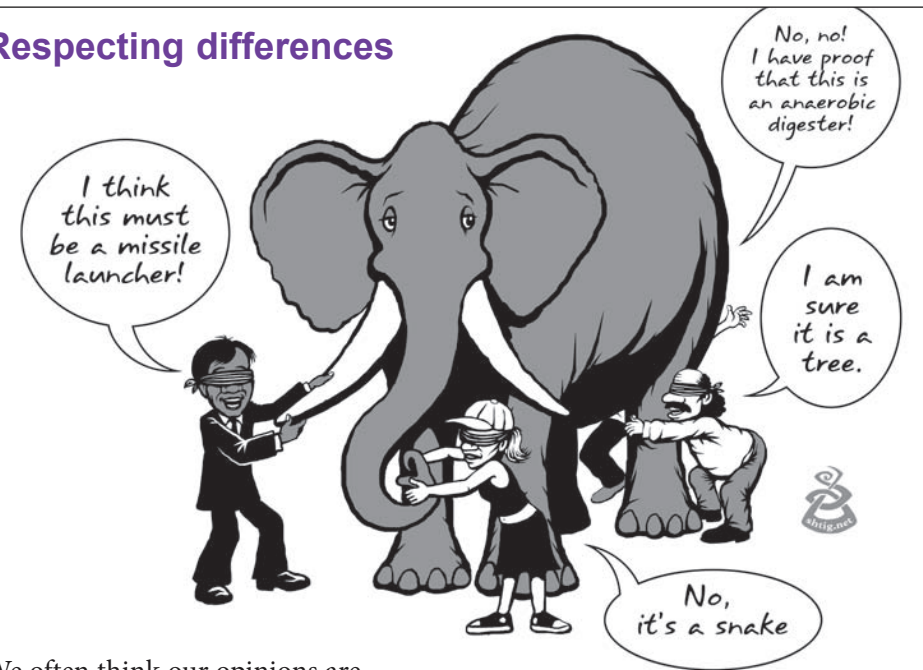
Don't respond with your own story, or give opinions or advice (when they've finished you might have a chance to say your piece).

Show that you're listening. Signs of listening include maintaining good eye contact and occasionally nodding your head to show interest and support. If you are feeling hurt by what is being said, you may notice your body language is giving off different signals. Be aware of this. Avoid signs of impatience such as looking at your watch.

Summarise briefly what they have said. The aim is not to repeat word for word what they said, but to show that you've understood any key concepts and recognised any emotions they've expressed. Offer the summary tentatively – use phrases like: "what I hear you saying is... is that right?" "would it be fair to say that you feel..." If you restate in bold terms such as: "so you feel that..." and you're wrong, not only do you show you haven't been listening, but you risk offending the speaker by misrepresenting them.

Finally, active listening needs practice: the more you do it, the better you'll be able to do it.

Respecting differences



We often think our opinions are right and others' opinions are wrong. It can be more helpful to focus our attention firstly on finding areas of overlap, our common ground with others, or opinions that are complementary. From this place we can more easily consider our differences and then develop solutions that show respect for those differences.

The story of the blind-folded people and an elephant illustrates this point: each person took hold of a different part of the elephant. The one holding the trunk concluded the animal was a snake.

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The one holding the leg thought it was tree; the one touching the elephant's tusk claimed it was a missile launcher; and the one behind the elephant was convinced it was an anaerobic digester.

Each of them assumed their experience was the true representation of an "elephant". They could not understand why the others were describing something which sounded so very different. Each person's viewpoint is a part of the whole, if we listen to and respect each viewpoint, we'll have greater insight into the big picture.

Keeping an open mind and holding back on judgements and assumptions

You see someone sitting quietly in a chair, head in hands, looking down at their feet. What are your assumptions or judgements? Maybe you think they're sad, or that they are ill, maybe you think they are just a bit tired and sleepy or that they are meditating. We jump really quickly from the facts - someone sitting in a chair head in hands - to making assumptions and judgements about what is happening. This is a useful skill. If we see a car coming towards us, we want to interpret and understand that information very quickly so we can make a decision what to do next. Making interpretations of our surroundings is necessary for our safety and survival.

We don't go into every new situation as if it were a blank slate; we use knowledge from past interactions to help us understand what's happening and what we should do about it. The problem is that we are not always right with our interpretations. Going back to the person sitting head in hands, if we think they are meditating we will leave them alone, if we think they are ill we might go over and offer support. Two very different responses based on our interpretation of what is going on.

Trying to hold back our judgements can be really helpful to prevent conflicts escalating.

Whilst it's not possible for us to be completely non-judgemental, trying to keep an open mind about why someone has done something and trying to hold back our judgements can be really helpful to prevent conflicts escalating. Especially in the early stages of a conflict, we have the possibility to nip things in the bud and clear up misunderstandings before they grow bigger and become entrenched.

Finding out what others are trying to say

Much of our day to day conversation does not involve deep listening. We might hear the content of what people say, but are so busy thinking about our own experiences or how we are going to reply that we don't listen attentively to others, so we don't pick up on what's really important to them. Hearing becomes listening only when we pay attention to what is said and also to how it is said.

There are some common behaviour patterns that reduce our ability to listen. We allow ourselves to get so emotionally wrapped up in what is being said that our emotions overtake our ability to listen clearly. We don't like our opinions and views being challenged, so we stop listening and start planning our counter attack.

Or we jump in with our own story, interrogate the other person, offer unwanted advice or change the topic. These actions close down connection with others and leave the speaker thinking we are not really listening – and they're right! Recognise yourself here? You're not alone, it's something we all do. But if we're serious about wanting to communicate more effectively, to really get to understand those we are working or living with, and resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise, then practising and developing our active listening skills will really help.

Active listening

Active listening is about suspending our own thought processes and making a conscious effort to understand another person's perspective. Active listening allows us 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 we can come to understand how the speaker feels about the issue, as we tune into their underlying emotions, concerns and tensions.

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

We can also show people that we've heard them properly by summarising the core of what they have said and offering it back to them. This is also a good way to check whether we've understood them - if we get it wrong it gives them the opportunity to correct us. When we're listening well, it's with the heart as well as the head. Active listening helps open the door to connection and deeper understanding of the other person.

Active listening



Jim: "It would be much better if some people stopped taking on so much of the work. Our group would be so much better if other people had a chance."



Maeve: "Are you talking about me? How dare you! I put so much of my life into this group, and this is all the thanks I get!?"

or



Maeve: "It seems pretty important to you that more people take on the work in our group – is that right?"