

The Practice of Conflict Resolution

My wife, Amy, and I once worked with a couple in which the woman was suffering because her husband had fallen in love with another woman. We assisted them in processing their conflict.

The husband sat silently, and the woman said, "I feel depressed and rejected." We asked her to say more about her feelings, and, to our great surprise, she said that she actually understood her husband. He smiled, and she said that she loved him and wanted to support him in his need to grow and find out more about himself.

He remained silent while she was taking his side in the conflict. Therefore, we recommended to her to take his side even more congruently by standing next to him and speaking for him. She imagined her way into his feelings and, as if she were him, explained that he wanted to break out of his lifestyle, that his existence had become meaningless. He nodded in agreement, still saying nothing.

Suddenly the woman stopped and said that she no longer felt like supporting her husband. She said she felt detached and neutral. "So be neutral," we advised. "Be completely neutral. Step out and look at yourself and your husband." She left his side and stood up, looking at him and at where she had been sitting. She began to laugh and said she saw that she was supporting him more than she was supporting herself.

This insight provoked the woman to step back into the conflict, this time taking her own side. She said to her husband, quietly at first,

but then with increasing vehemence, "Who cares what you are feeling? I hate you for neglecting me." She hesitated, turned to us, and said she felt more than she could say. We recommended that she use her whole body. She suddenly banged on the floor and screamed, "You lousy baby. I'm fed up with mothering you. What you need is a really strong reaction, and I'm going to give it to you!" She stood up and moved toward him, threatening him with her fist.

Suddenly the man spoke for the first time. He broke out in an enormous smile and said, "You are the gorgeous spontaneous woman I married. You're the person I've been looking for!" The woman yelled at him in a mixture of anger, fury, and delight. The mood had altered dramatically as their anger and fighting turned into love. They embraced each other, and Amy and I left the room. We had all had enough for the first round.

I have witnessed thousands of hours of conflict between individuals and organizations around the world, but the above story exemplifies several aspects of conflict resolution that I want to highlight in this chapter. First, the story shows that in some conflict situations, world-work procedures that require only one of the parties to have awareness are needed. Second, the crucial element in resolving conflict is people's awareness of their momentary state in the conflict. Are they on their own side, the other's side, or just neutral?

Finally, I want to show in this chapter that just about every person and organization goes through the same stages of development during conflict. In the type of conflict situations described here, I assume that the facilitator is not a neutral third party, as Amy and I were in the above-described situation, but is a member of one of the conflicting parties. Furthermore, I assume that this member has achieved a level of personal development recommended in the previous chapters.

The conflict resolution methods I describe are useful for long-standing conflicts in couples and groups of all types and cultures. They even apply to long-standing conflict in which one or more of the parties refuses to negotiate with the other party. (Frequently, one member of a dispute refuses to sit down at the table with the other party. Most negotiating and conflict resolution procedures require all participants in the conflict to be present.)

After studying some of the typical conflict resolution sessions I have experienced in many parts of the world, I have been able to outline several stages of conflict resolution. First, I will describe these and ways of working through them. I plan to encourage anyone involved in

a conflict to work with it. A disadvantage to writing out stages of conflict resolution is that they may be taken as a program for doing conflict resolution. I hope that the reader sees these stages as guidelines meant to increase awareness in conflict, not as rules to apply mechanically.

The central, guiding awareness question in conflict is, "What am I feeling and doing, and in which stage of conflict am I?" All the interventions that I recommend are derived from momentary feelings and the stage of conflict. Use and develop the following recommendations to awaken your awareness and to discover the stages you and your partners are in.

The idea is to practice using your awareness in a conflict situation with the help of the following material in order to enter the conflict, help complete the stage it is in, and move it toward resolution.

Though the interventions in this chapter have been found to temporarily resolve even long-time conflicts in groups, there are a few limitations to their efficacy.

1. **Awareness.** For a group to resolve its conflict, there must be a few people in a hundred who are trained in these conflict resolution procedures. These people must be able to maintain some degree of objectivity, be able to work on themselves rapidly in public, and be aware of the field concepts of the work.
2. **Personal development.** The facilitators must be capable of deep democracy—of remembering and supporting all sides of the conflict, even when they are one of the parties involved. This means that the metaskills described in previous chapters must be as present in conflict as the skills I describe here.
3. **Time.** The conflict resolution procedure presented here will help to resolve even violent conflicts within several hours. However, resolution is a process, only one state in an evolution. Creating useful experiences from long-standing tensions cannot be done in the large group alone; it requires resolution and work at many levels, including working with individuals and small subgroups of the larger group.
4. **Self-help.** Complete resolution means that the group has changed and developed the ability to work with its own conflict. It can take months for a large group to reach a stage of completion in which its own natural leaders step out of their own troubles and begin to learn methods of conflict resolution.

Conflict Resolution Stages

1. Avoiding vs. Understanding

The first stage of conflict resolution is to do what most of us do when confronted with conflict: avoid it. Forget the conflict. Try to ignore it and act peaceful. If that does not work, and it usually does not, the following ideas may help get you over your desire to avoid conflict.

Self-Discovery You are not alone in wanting to avoid conflict. Most of us tend to avoid it. However, the potential for growth and self-discovery lies in conflict. That conflict is a chance to get to know the previously undiscovered sides of yourself. It may help your fear of and discomfort about conflict change to excitement about personal growth.

Conflict Is Normal Everyone experiences inner and outer conflict at one time or another. It is a normal occurrence, a sign of your tendency toward self-balance and of development and growth.

Conflict Is Multileveled Conflict is not only an expression of your own troubles, complexes, or personal psychology. Conflict is also a combination of your own internal tensions, your relationship troubles, and group and world problems. In the case mentioned above, the woman's conflict involved her own personal development and relationship but also the current development and change of men and women around the world.

Conflict Can Create Community In the above example, the couple itself was awakening and changing. When we work on conflict in groups, a useful attitude is that a group needs conflict in order to understand itself. Conflict may be the field's way of getting to know and appreciate its parts and of realizing its full self.

Perhaps you will find the courage to enter conflict if you understand that your personal role in the conflict is really that of a time-spirit in the global field. Regardless of what the nature of your role may be, filling it consciously is a means of helping the field know itself.

2. Noticing

After first trying to avoid the conflict, the next stage of conflict work is to notice the conflict. Sometimes conflict is not easily noticeable; sometimes it is not overt. The following are some typical signs and signals of conflict:

- verbal disagreement
- lack of overt communication
- remaining separated by space or time
- gossiping about the opponent
- having bad dreams or fantasies about the opponent
- being suspicious or mistrustful of the opponent

3. Determining Malignancy

Some conflicts are minor, others severe. Conflicts like that of the man and woman described above, which threaten to destroy one's home life, business, family, and so on, are malignant conflicts.

If you notice conflict, when will you work on it? Why work on every conflict? If a conflict is malignant, it should get our full attention. Whether or not a conflict is malignant is an individual matter; it need not be agreed upon by consensus. Here are some of my ideas of what makes a conflict malignant and in need of work:

The problem is festering, producing bad feelings, and increasing over time.

People have been gossiping for a long time. The gossip is malevolent and includes an increasing number of people.

The problem never resolves itself and ruins the atmosphere to the point that people try to stay away.

You avoid the problem because of hopelessness or lack of courage.

More and more people are involved in the conflict.

4. Making a Conscious Choice to Get Involved

If you are going to try to resolve the conflict, then you should prepare yourself. The moment to enter a conflict is the one you choose. People who enter conflicts without preparation may do well, but those

who make conscious decisions about entering a malignant conflict inevitably are more successful and gain more from the experience. Furthermore, if others are involved, never press them to be present. They, too, need time to prepare.

Awareness and Courage The best preparation is awareness. Awareness may be more important than courage in conflict work. Courage makes you feel strong and thus tempts you to win and overpower others even when you are afraid. Improving awareness of your feelings detaches you from the pressure of winning and losing and gives you a more generous and stable attitude from which to work.

Fear If you are afraid, try to determine why. Are you afraid because the unknown excites you, or are you afraid of losing? Fear polarizes you into being weak or strong. Check out your motives. If you want to become aware, strength and weakness become irrelevant.

If you continue to be afraid, find out what you are afraid of. If you are afraid of your opponent, ask yourself whether you are afraid of your own anger or power as well. We frequently fear others' violence and rage because our own power is inaccessible to us. Some fears are due to our unknown powers.

In conflict resolution seminars that we have given, the following exercise has been useful for those preparing for a conflict. Imagine a conflict you wish to clear up. Think about the conflict and ask yourself the following questions:

What is your reason for not entering this conflict? If you are afraid, imagine what or whom you are afraid of and experiment with being this thing or person.

Is your fear due to loss of awareness during fights? Do you become unconscious, dizzy, or moody? What mood specifically do you need to be more aware of? How can you remember this mood and use it better?

5. Addressing the Conflict Partner

If you have noticed and prepared yourself for entering a malignant conflict, you may now find yourself ready to address the problem. Ask yourself whether you are ready.

Set It Up If you are ready to enter the conflict, set it up. Do not just jump in, but rather try creating a ceremony, a conflict ritual.

Remember the martial arts attitude of exactitude and awareness. Set up a time and place on which both parties agree. If you simply start in right away without consulting your opponent, the two of you will end up fighting about the resolution methods and never get to the issue. If your opponent will not appear, then you can work on the problem internally. Remember, conflict is a field phenomenon, and only the times can indicate when to deal with the tension internally, in relationship, or in a group process. In any case, let us imagine your partner is ready to come to the table.

You may want to make a note of the following steps and use them when you need them. You can even share this with your opponent, since there are no secret strategies in this work; the goal is awareness, not winning.

Address the Problem When you address the problem, state your motivations for trying to resolve the conflict. You could even mention that you hope for peace or that you are disturbed by the coalitions and groups forming around the two of you. This is the time to speak about your goals and motivations for working out the conflict.

Ask your opponent if she would be willing to address the problem. Do not just raise the conflict issue but ask if she agrees to work on it. If she refuses to do so, ask her if she has an idea how to resolve the conflict. If her solution is not useful to you, ask her if she would consider the help of a facilitator or outside agency. If she refuses all your approaches, then take the conflict internally and try to solve it there. Again, not everything must be worked out directly; some problems are matters for inner timespirits.

6. Processing Awareness

Let us assume that you and your partner are ready to proceed in your conflict resolution. The next step is to develop your awareness of where you are in the conflict process. A conflict has several states. Are you neutral, on the other person's side, or on your own side?

These questions are for you alone, not for your opponent. Only require yourself to be aware; do not require that your opponent change or become aware. Insisting that your opponent change or do something might be an inflated and unrealistic supposition.

Like the woman in the example above, many people find themselves siding with the opponent. If you are feeling protective of your partner, regardless of your reasons, then be protective. Do not worry

about your motivations here. You might find yourself supporting the opponent because you are afraid of losing her friendship. Support her congruently.

Perhaps you are in a neutral position. Do you feel apathy, coolness, indifference? Perhaps you are really very detached about the conflict. Go ahead and express your neutrality.

Perhaps your awareness tells you that you are possessed by your own side. If this is the case, then you should begin by stating your own side.

7. Taking Your Own Side

Many skip this stage of conflict and immediately take the other person's side or express their neutrality. However, at one point, regardless of what else is happening, you will find yourself needing to take your own side.

Know Your Feelings Many of us need to learn how to know what we are feeling. State your feelings directly. Be exact about your emotional experience. If you are upset, be upset. Do not hide it. Show it, express it, and then let go of it when it is finished. Be as real as possible about your needs, pain, fear, anger, hurt, or jealousy.

If your partner is afraid of emotions, then try expressing them in other channels. This means that rather than moving or yelling if you are angry, express your anger or hurt in a picture, for example. Try reporting to your opponent about your state using images.

Remember the Timespirits It is helpful to remember the field; what you feel may be a part of our whole world. It may be a role, a timespirit in a field that is not sufficiently expressed; in such a case you are doing something for everyone.

Work on Your Altered States Perhaps you have been avoiding taking your own side because you are afraid of your own rage, hurt, disappointment, or love. These procedures will not work unless you also study the feeling states that you tend to repress.

Take a moment and consider which feelings come over you in a conflict: fear, anger, hurt, sadness, and so on. Try feeling those emotions and expressing them to yourself. Discover them and the edges you have to them. Try to accept these states.

It is important to find out about the edges you have against these emotions. Which emotions can you express? With which do you not want to identify? If you do not like some of your states, it is important to admit it. If you try to inhibit some of your emotions, or if you try to hide your dislike of them, your partner will notice and attack you for lying or being dishonest.

Taking your side can have many forms. One way of taking your side is to report on the inner experiences you are having. If your emotions are not clear, then you should work on yourself in front of your opponent. Ask yourself out loud what you notice, what feelings, images, and experiences are happening in you. Then follow these experiences and report on them as they arise.¹

8. Deescalating to Neutrality

Notice Your Feelings of Discomfort After you have taken your side and expressed your feelings completely and honestly, you will probably begin to feel uncomfortable in your position, maybe because you feel sorry for your partner, maybe because you sense that you are being too one-sided, or maybe because you notice that you no longer fully agree with yourself.

Some people feel uncomfortable just having strong emotions in the first place. Cultural norms repress emotion, particularly conflict, and make us feel guilty for broaching the subject. If you feel guilty for having brought up the conflict, do not press yourself to go further. Withdraw.

Notice Your Own Deescalating Signals and Follow Them Let yourself change. Once you take your own side, chances are you will begin to deescalate. Deescalating signals are those signals of withdrawal, such as quieting voice, moving away, looking away, or simply losing interest. If you find yourself moving away physically, then do it with awareness. Do not continue to act angry or hurt if you are not. Once you have taken your side, watch your tendency to stay attached to anger and hurt. If you are attached to these feelings, then go ahead and take your side, but then let go and step back to the neutral position.

When people get stuck in their viewpoints, it is usually because they either have not completely expressed them or have become attached to and identified with them and have lost awareness of their deescalating signals.

9. Being Neutral by Nature

Some people will find themselves in the neutral position. There are many reasons for being in the neutral and detached position. Some people are neutral by nature. Often you find yourself feeling detached because you have burned up the emotions that were typical of you before. When you find yourself feeling detached, step out and admit it; otherwise, your partner will notice and accuse you of being aloof.

Neutrality is still a position within the relationship field. If you become neutral, then step away from your position. Literally step away physically so that you do not identify with the space or feeling you were occupying before. Look at yourself and your opponent from the neutral position. Remember the woman in the example earlier? After she had taken her husband's side, she looked at herself and saw what needed to come next. So step out of your role, take a good look at your partner and yourself, and give a report of how you and your partner look.

As you step outside, try to have a look at yourself in your previous position. Describe yourself to your partner. Tell your partner how you see yourself now, what you see from the outside. Perhaps you become aware of yourself, of how you are trying to grow, of what you are attempting to do in the relationship. Communicate this to your partner. Try to give her a picture of where you are now, as if looking down from a mountain peak.

Risk looking at your partner as well. Perhaps you have a recommendation for her. Do you think she could do something to get her point across better? Would you like to help her in some way? If you feel she needs help, then this is the moment to leave your neutral detachment and to get back in the conflict. This time, however, take her side.

10. Taking Your Partner's Position

Taking the opponent's side will work as a conflict resolution procedure only if it is genuine. Many of us take the other person's side when we do not genuinely feel it. Either we are conforming and adapting too quickly, or we are acting benevolent and superior. If you cannot take your partner's side congruently, then try to determine whether you are still on your own side or if you are feeling neutral.

Have Compassion Perhaps you are feeling compassionate toward your opponent. If this is occurring, not out of a sense of duty but as

something genuine, step out of your side and ask if you can be of help. Use your compassion to help your opponent express his position better.

Read the Signals Taking the other's side means more than just being compassionate. Observe your opponent. Look at how he stands, how he looks at you, and try to imagine the feelings he is having. Help him to express them.

Do not use this opportunity to mimic your opponent. Do not provoke him but use your awareness and your compassion to discover and feel who he is. If you find yourself provoking or mimicking him, then provoke directly; don't mimic.

Check the Feedback The measure of how well you are doing is your opponent's feedback. You have successfully read into your opponent's signals if she sits back and relaxes or is touched by and thankful for what you are doing. However, misreading your opponent's signals can also turn into something useful. If you are wrong about what you imagine your opponent to be feeling or thinking, then you should ask her to correct you.

There are important psychological reasons for taking your partner's side. We come into conflict with others because of parts of ourselves that we, like the opponent, are unconsciously upset about. After all, we would not be in a conflict if a part of ourselves did not agree with the opponent.

11. Cycling

After having used your awareness to take your own side, your partner's side, and the side of neutrality, the conflict either ceases or cycles and enters a new level. Perhaps you or your opponent apologizes for having been hurtful. New issues, new reactions, or new feelings come up. At this stage of the conflict, the work continues as before. Use your awareness, go inside, and find out what your feelings are and what side of the conflict you are on. If you do not know your feelings or feel unconscious or incongruent, step into the neutral position. Take a good look at yourself from outside and advise yourself from the neutral position.

Lack of Expression The conflict may be incomplete because you did not fully express the feelings on your side, or perhaps did not completely understand your partner's position.

12. Leaving the Field

Retreating If you have adequately found out which side you were on, expressed that side, and followed all the changes, you may find both yourself and your opponent automatically retreating. This is a subtle moment to notice. Use your awareness to see if there is a slight moment of relaxation, a flicker of a smile, a small sigh of relief. If so, let go and leave the field.

This is an extremely important moment in a conflict. It is easy to miss signals of deescalation because most people avoid conflict for so long that when they finally enter it, they become addicted to the state and resist leaving it behind. Notice your deescalation signals and then forgive your opponent and yourself as well.

Learning Perhaps both you and your opponent are excited by something you have learned. If so, try to identify what you learned about your partner or yourself. Is this a situation where you can share what you have learned about yourself?

Your Opponent Wanting the Chance to Experience Your Side Your opponent may want to learn more about you. Until now we have assumed that you are the only one interested in conflict resolution, because requesting that both people be willing to work on the conflict would have placed an unnecessary restriction on the work at an early stage. Yet your opponent might want a chance to find out more about you and about the conflict. This could be the moment when real sharing can begin.

Becoming a Teacher Sometimes your partner may even want to learn from you about conflict resolution. Now is the moment for you to stop being an ordinary participant in a conflict and to share your knowledge of conflict facilitation.

13. Working in a Group

The simplest situation is one in which the sides of the conflict dissolve, and all is well. A common situation is when friends or neighbors continue to discuss the conflict even after the two sides have completed their personal work. This means that the timespirits are still around, not

that the two conflicting positions have more work to do. The conflict is now a community or field issue asking to be addressed through group-work. This is the moment for setting up roles and asking the group members to fill them until the conflict is resolved in the community.

14. Working Individually

If conflict resolution between warring parties in the large group-work does not create resolution, then the problem may be approached through individual work. Everyone concerned must consider the conflicting sides as two inner parts of themselves that are asking for an individual resolution. This would be the moment to change levels in the group process and to invite everyone to work individually to find personal answers to collective problems.

Summary

1. Process conflicts when they arise. Do not wait until they become unnecessarily polarized.
2. If you avoid conflict because you are hopeless or afraid, remedy this by training yourself in conflict work.
3. Use your awareness to find out which position you are in: on your own side, on your opponent's side, or in a neutral position.
4. If you get stuck on your side, you may not have been able to complete the real feelings you have, or you have been hurt by the other person and cannot express your hurt and anger.
5. If you feel neutral, do not merely stay in that position to avoid the conflict or to act superior and detached. Use your neutrality to help both yourself and your opponent by observing the conflict from the outside and making recommendations.
6. The things that your opponent accuses you of are, even to a minor extent, your own double signals, feelings, and emotions that you have or have had. Do not forget that your opponent is also a part of you that is upset about something in you.
7. No one wins a conflict unless both feel understood and enlightened about the theme or the nature of the other. Enlightenment is a field experience; unless all feel enlightened, no one feels enlightened.

Conflict Resolution Exercise

1. Choose a friend to help you with the exercise.
2. Describe a real conflict with a real opponent you have in your life right now.
3. Have your friend play the opponent.
4. Take your own side strongly.
5. Notice when you are uncomfortable with your position and either become neutral or take your opponent's side.
6. Go back to your original role and notice if things have changed or continue until the conflict disappears or until both sides feel they have won.
7. Add new methods and steps to the work and write me about it.

NOTES

1. See Mindell, *Working on Yourself Alone*, for a description of innerwork methods in relationship conflict.