

This interactive session will offer simple tools and frameworks that can help equip us to navigate conflict more successfully while managing our own stress and anxiety. Participants will leave with ideas for engaging productively before, during, and after potentially difficult conversations with diverse stakeholders, in communities, and within our own organizations.

Difficult Dialogues – Navigating Conflict More Successfully

Introduction

Who's in the room?

Why did you choose this session?

My introduction and background

Show of hands – how many people like conflict?

Navigation as an intentional metaphor

- Journey vs. Battle
- Not win or lose, but travel through.
- Has stages and unfolds over time.
- Something you can prepare for and influence but not completely control.
- There's more than one way to go, and potentially many destinations, but the goal is to be somewhere different at the end than you were at the beginning.

Conflict can be like encountering a sinkhole or obstacle

Choices:

Ignore– Nope, not really. This actually changes our route and takes energy.

Avoid

Pro- Can conserve energy and social capital, can be neutral or even empowering.

Con – Avoided conflict often becomes latent, ends the relationship, or leads to triangulation in an attempt to stabilize.

*Notes/Outline for Difficult Dialogues: Navigating Conflict More Successfully
at 2023 Philanthropy WV Annual Conference*

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An alternative option is to POSTPONE, rather than avoid.

Another alternative is to genuinely LET IT GO, which works if the issue is not so much a conflict as a personal frustration.

Appease or Accommodate

Pro – seems easy, discharges some anxiety, can be expedient.

Con – Conflict is latent, the relationship doesn't deepen, miss out on a chance for positive outcomes and learning, and may put you in conflict with your values.

Good if:

- Short Term
- Low Stakes
- You can find a genuinely good alternative route or appeasing now will give you leverage later
- Power dynamics make this unsafe

Engage and Repair

When you can't or don't want to ignore, avoid, or appease, you will need to find a way through. This can be a bridge, or a full-scale repair.

Dynamics/Dimensions to consider:

- Can you clearly define the conflict?
- Issue-based or personality-based (probably both)
- Power dynamic and systemic factors
- Potential for future relationship
- Risk and Reward
 - Worst Case Scenario
 - Best Case Scenario
 - BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement)
<https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/batna>
 - Boundaries (What *you* will or will not do in a situation)

Preparation:

Context: A little bit of neuroscience and psychology

- Your brain does not want you to be happy; evolution favors pessimism
- Our body perceives conflict as a threat to our survival, and we can't access our full rational brain when in fight or flight mode.
- In the absence of information, our brain makes assumptions (ladder of inference)

The bad news: We can't eliminate conflict and we can't avoid discomfort.

The good news:

- We don't have to believe everything our brain tells us
- We can regulate our nervous system and shift into our rational brain
- We can tolerate discomfort – emotions pass through in 90 seconds if we don't reactivate the stimulus (spiralizing, ruminating, and gossiping all reactivate us)
- We can check our assumptions and ask questions
- We don't have to know how to resolve the conflict when we begin.

When facing conflict, we can prepare for the journey (not the battle).

Armor is helpful in a battle and really UNHELPFUL for a journey.

We will have a lot more fulfilling experience if we are willing to work on getting it right rather than being right.

Self-Regulation (including sleeping, eating, breathing)

Openness (honesty and also open-mindedness)

Curiosity and Clarity

Kindness (assume positive intent)

Self-Compassion

Case Study/Practice

Suggested questions to explore before. This is to spur reflection, not a required or exhaustive list.

What is the conflict in no more than three sentences?

What kind of conflict is this?

What are the issues, what are the personality factors, and what are the power dynamics?

What do I want?

Do I know what a satisfactory resolution would look like for me? Who can give me that—am I confronting the right person or party? Is it realistic that I could get what I want from them? How will I know if it has been achieved?

How important is it?

Is the source of the conflict non-negotiable (involving my identity, values, self-worth, morals, health, etc.)? Is there any element on which I could compromise? Is this urgent? How important is the relationship in comparison to the issue at hand?

What am I afraid of?

Is this outcome rational/likely based on my experience with this person? Am I making any assumptions that may not be true about how they will react? Is a negative outcome something I could prepare for? Is the party with whom I am in conflict someone that I work with long-term, and/or who has power over my ability to do my job? What is my risk-management strategy?

What part of this is mine?

Do I have past experiences, self-doubt, or outside factors that are influencing my reaction to this person or situation? Are there practices I could engage in to build my resilience or better prepare me to navigate this situation? How can I take care of myself (sleep, exercise, nutrition, social support, etc.)?

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What is the BATNA/WCS?

What is my best alternative if I can not resolve the conflict or get what I want?

What is the worst case scenario and how would I deal with it if that happened?

What are boundaries or options that are within my own control? What, if anything, is my “nonnegotiable”?

<https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/batna>

What information do I need and how could I get it?

Do I understand where the other person is coming from? What is confusing or seems irrational to me about their behavior or perspective? What story am I telling myself about the situation that may or may not be true? What questions or information might help me understand it better? What questions do I need to ask this person directly? Is there a trusted person I could ask for more information or for a “gut check” without compromising integrity or triangulating?

What is my next step?

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Tips, Tricks, Techniques

Before Conflict Occurs:

Relationship Building (Gottman relationship percentages)

Identify Conflict Norms (talk to people not about them, trust what people say and say what you mean, etc.)

Practice Small – Encourage Dissent

During a Conflict:

Observe and Reflect – check your assumptions

“Circle Back”

Validate

Define objective criteria (Hard on issues, soft on people)

Ask questions to understand both the issue and the person’s reactions (What am I not seeing? Why is this important to you?)

Center the problem and be on a team

After a Conflict:

Acknowledge and appreciate the other person for participation

Tell the story to yourself and your support system to affirm your identity as a person who can successfully navigate conflict

Document – journal and reflect

Report positive outcomes and share credit for success – follow up with notes, decisions, etc.

Questions, Feedback, Final Thoughts?

Thank you!