

Introduction to Working with Conflict



Conflict is usually defined as two or more people having a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one. It can feel difficult to be involved in a conflict, and difficult to see conflict happening. Emotions can be triggered that may interfere with our ability to understand each other, or respond appropriately.

At source, our conflicts may be due to how we deal with our [diversity](#), the way we understand or communicate those differences, and how they affect us. We sometimes forget quite how different people are: we come from different backgrounds, and have different experiences and needs. Sometimes we may be swayed by others, even adapt ourselves to become part of a group's 'mainstream', sometimes just to 'survive' or to avoid conflict. Conflict may also come from how we deal with differences in our power, or rank in both our [groups](#) and in life.

It can be hard to accept that conflicts are natural, especially as we have rarely been trained in working well with conflict. When we do try and sort something out, we may rely on things that worked well before, not realising that different circumstances this time may need different processes. If the last time our experience of conflict was that it was not managed well, we may be less inclined to even try.

Conflict can feel difficult, if not impossible, to manage. Indeed, for some, it can be so difficult that it compromises people's ability to cope, creating challenging or sometimes unmanageable stress.

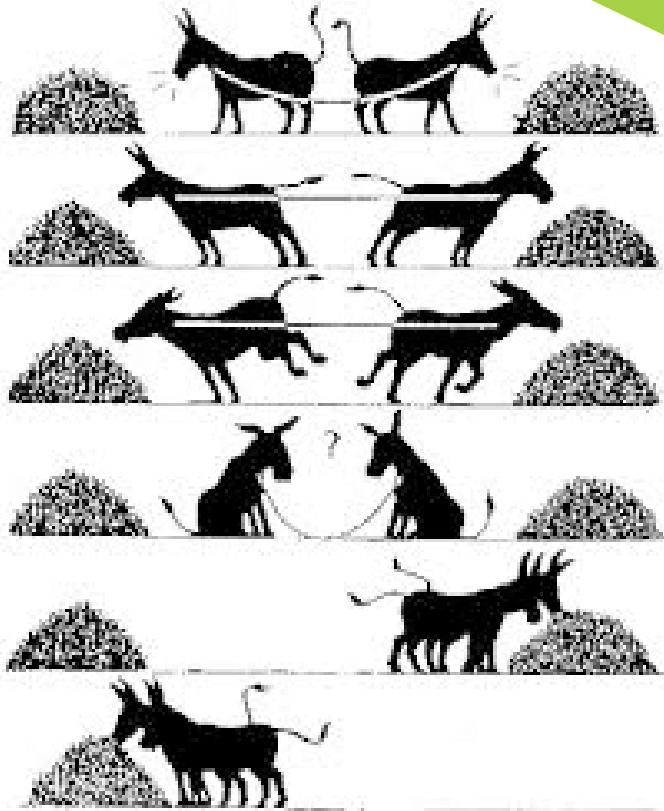
Options can seem limited or non-existent. People can stop being able to look after themselves, become depressed and unable to function. Similarly a whole group can become unhealthy, dysfunctional, engulfed by a conflict, or unable to manage its work. Eventually, people may become disenchanted or leave, or the whole group may fold.

But conflict can be useful. It can challenge our outdated or limited view of ways of working or expand our understanding of the world. It can be creative and help us to develop and adapt to new ways of working, or achieve change to something better. During conflicts we can learn about ourselves as well as other people, find skills and resources that we didn't realise we had, or develop new ones. People involved in conflict that's handled well can increase their confidence and become stronger.

Practical Tip: Rather than spend energy arguing which view is correct, assume that all views are correct. Use all available perspectives to better understand what you are looking at. Ask group members to say how it is for them, how things look from where they sit. Ask people outside the group, "What does it look like from out there?" Listen without judgement. If you are asked to give your view, offer it without expectation that it will prevail. Speak for yourself, from your own perspective. Humbly offer a piece of the puzzle to help create the larger picture."

Craig Freshley

What are the options for working well with conflict?



In Rhizome's experience, at a deeper level the majority of people involved in conflict seem to want conflict to be resolved collaboratively, to reach a resolution that works for everyone involved. Often this can be achieved, but occasionally a conflict, or part of one, may not be resolvable, usually for good reason. If this is the case we can try to understand the reasons for the impasse and work out how to live with something being unresolved, be able to understand better what this means for us, or even part company, hopefully on reasonably good terms.

Conflict between a few people can be resolved through processes like [mediation](#), conciliation, arbitration and adjudication. Rhizome has more detailed resources available, particularly on mediation and what might be involved in getting the best results when involved in mediation, as this is a process that integrates well with collectively-run groups. Rhizome's resources give information on different options to tackle conflict in groups yourself, and when involving mediators or facilitators may be the most constructive way forward.

Conflict in a larger group or between two groups of people can also be resolved through some of the processes above; however, it is impractical to have large numbers of people actively involved at the same time in such collective conflict management processes. A form of spokescouncil can be used to mediate in a large group, with spokespeople

representing groups. They then shuttle to and fro to ensure that they can effectively communicate and negotiate on behalf of their group. There are other creative ways of managing large group conflict. Here are three:

Constellations

Someone in a group proposes an issue. They ask other members of the group to stand in the Constellation as representatives. They may represent individuals, groups, countries, even concepts such as 'denial of climate change'. They arrange people according to what feels right in the moment. The representatives stand still and silent in their places; they do not act, strike a pose, talk nor role-play.

The facilitator may ask each of them to say how they feel being placed in relation to the others. The aim is for a healing resolution for the issue to be achieved by re-positioning the representatives and adding key members of the system who have been forgotten or written out. It occurs when every representative feels 'right' in their place, and the other representatives share that feeling.

Theatre of the Oppressed

There are different techniques for working with conflict that come under this banner. Forum Theatre plays out a scene, usually indicating some kind of oppression; during the replay, any member of the audience can stop the play, come up and take the place of one of the oppressed characters, and try out another way of behaving that might secure a better outcome. Cop-in-the-Head is used to explore internalised oppressions and Rainbow of Desire helps deconstruct the tensions in a relationship, linked in to the group's experiences.

Process Work and World Work

Process Work is an approach used to bring underlying issues to the surface to be able to address them. It sees conflict as an opportunity for growth and aims to develop compassion for all sides in a conflict. When it is applied to groups, as opposed to working with an individual, it is often called 'World Work'. It includes theory and practices for working with conflict, leadership and social issues, and is the basis of many groups' methodologies, including informing [Training for Change](#)'s anti-oppression work.