

Our Personal Approach to Conflict: Analysis and Reflection

Overview:

Understanding and naming factors that influence how we see and deal with conflicts helps us more effectively respond to them. It develops both our personal power and capacity as individuals and as a group.

Purpose:

This exercise gets people off their feet to think about how they personally relate to conflicts and the range of factors that influence how they engage and deal with them. It is best used after a climate of trust and openness has been established.

Time: 1 hour and 30 minutes

Materials:

- Chair
- Cards – three different colors
- One flip chart easel
- Newsprint
- Masking tape
- Colored markers
- Support material: “Some ideas on conflict” for reading and discussion at later session

Process:

In plenary:

- Introduce activity and explain its purpose.

Note: You might want to include some of the following ideas:

How we relate and approach conflict is related to many factors including culture and context and the ways that we have learned to 'solve' conflicts. It also has to do with our relationship to a particular conflict and the power dynamics that shape our ability and willingness to engage with it. The less power we have or perceive we have, the greater the risk that we shoulder or feel that we will shoulder. Therefore, an analysis of how power dynamics affect us is always critical, especially for women (and other marginalized groups),

so that we can develop effective ways to overcome them that support our strength and resilience.

- Place a chair in the middle of the room with a sign saying “**Here is the Conflict.**” Explain to the participants that they are going to position themselves physically in relation to the chair in order to illustrate how they situate themselves vis-à-vis conflict in real life (examples: distancing themselves, hiding from it, tentatively approaching it, facing it directly, etc.). *Note: It’s always useful to give a physical example of how you position yourself with respect to conflicts. This can be a way of helping people feel comfortable about how they do or don’t approach conflict.*
- Once everyone is in place, ask them to share why they positioned themselves as they did.
- Still in place, ask people to reflect on the factors and power dynamics that make them react in different ways to conflict. For example, *how has your family background, your life experiences, your gender, your culture, your social class, the political context affected the way you react to conflict?* After a few rounds of questions, have people return to their seats.
- Ask group -- what insights do they draw from the exercise so far? Clarify any misunderstandings or confusion. Quickly synthesize the factors/power dynamics that influence how group responds to conflicts, emphasizing those dynamics related to context, family, gender, class and cultural factors, and then move on to examine how conflicts impact them personally and their reactions.

Individual reflection:

- Ask participants to write their response to the following questions, using different color cards for each question. Emphasize that they should try to answer in just a couple of words or short phrases. (It can be helpful to have these questions posted on flip chart to help people focus.)
 1. *What happens to you after having a conflict -- its impact on you emotionally and its impact on your sense of power?*
 2. *In trying to address conflicts, what attitudes and behaviors have you found to be productive and helpful?*
 3. *What personal attitudes and behaviors have been destructive or potentially limiting in your experience?*

In plenary:

- Ask for people’s reflections for question #1. As they respond, collect cards and have a participant post them on wall. Affirm the range of emotions and different impacts on people’s sense of power.
- Ask for responses to #2 and #3. As they respond, collect cards and have a participant post them under Productive and Unproductive/Destructive category.

- Ask for group comments about the experience and knowledge and ideas they have generated. The following questions provide one way of debriefing the exercise:
 - What have you learned about how your own reactions, attitudes and behaviors affect your way of dealing with conflicts – both positively and negatively?
 - What do these reflections say to you about
 - § What happens to people when dealing with conflicts?
 - § How different people approach and handle conflicts?
 - § What seems to work, what doesn't?
 - What has this exercise said to you about the power dynamics (political context, gender, culture, class, age, family history etc.) that affect you in your approach to conflict?

- Summarize the group's key points from the discussion above, clarify any confusion or misconceptions,
 - Stressing the fact that these generalizations and reflections give us important insights but need to be placed in context since conflict and approaches to conflict are experienced and interpreted in different ways in different contexts and cultures and by genders. As has been clear in the exercise, while we may experience them one way, other people may experience and interpret them very differently depending on their own situation and background.

 - Closing with a reflection on the importance not only of understanding how we approach conflicts differently but the importance of being able to apply that knowledge to understanding other people's perspectives and addressing conflicts among ourselves. Since this ability to collaborate together and understand each other is key to building our strength and collective power so we can improve our lives and communities.

- For follow up reading and reflection, you can distribute - "Some Ideas on Conflict." And encourage participants to write down the central ideas that arise and resonate with them from the reading for discussion at another session.

Credit: Adapted by *Patricia Ardón* from an exercise developed by Philip Thomas and John Paul Lederach at the Propaz School in Guatemala.

SOME IDEAS ON CONFLICT

Conflicts are a part of life. They manifest themselves individually and collectively, and are inherent in diversity – in situations where people with diverse backgrounds and characteristics interact. Conflicts arise from contradictions caused by different interests and perceptions of reality, and especially and most importantly, **because of differentiated power often exercised by a person or group over others. This differentiated power exists and is replicated between genders, people of different social groups and ages, different cultures, different racial, ethnic groups and socio-economic classes... and also within these groups.**

Conflicts are manifested in everyday life. Sometimes they remain latent or "hidden" for a long time; at other times they come to the surface either violently or peacefully, but they always emerge in the context of relationships and individual, collective, political, and social dynamics. For women, approaching conflicts together is crucial for building collective power (*with other women and among ourselves*), and for moving us forward in the protection of our rights and gaining social justice for all.

For societies in general (especially for women, our organizations, and movements), conflict, when not dealt with constructively, can be destructive and harmful, and can diminish our strength and capacity to build harmonious, collaborative relationships and collective power. Some examples of this are:

- When we as women use conflict to discredit other women, reproducing the stereotype that say we're incapable of reaching agreements and/or lack solidarity among ourselves. These conflicts, if not faced constructively, divide, hurt, and limit our ability to work together for our rights.
- When conflict is settled in a way that prevents women from having larger leadership roles in our organizations, or when it's used to discredit our work or exclude us from spaces where decisions are made in our organization or group.
- When we stop raising our voices or stop acting against an injustice in order to avoid conflict. For example, when we know of a woman who is suffering from violence and abuse and, rather than support her, we distance ourselves.

In these cases, conflicts serve to reproduce the legitimacy and dynamics of patriarchal[1], sexist power relations that maintain gender inequality, violence against women, and discriminatory practices such as racism, homophobia, etc.

But conflicts can also be unique and enriching opportunities to address inequalities between men and women. They can help us become aware of and challenge violence, racism, oppression of some groups over others as well as unequal access to resources, and other forms of injustice in our society. These include:



- When we change the way we relate to others, improving our abilities to resolve problems together.
- When individually and collectively we challenge unfair and unequal structures and dynamics, we overcome fear and we dare to raise our voices and fight against injustices - from the injustice inside our families to those committed by governments and oppressive social and political institutions and interests.
- When we address conflicts in ways that help us confront the unfair and unequal relations we were taught at a young age and which society reinforces through family, school, church, etc.

For women in particular, approaching conflicts in our relationships can become very complex. In all cultures to different degrees we've been educated to suppress our desires and avoid raising or even admitting our needs so as to avoid confronting power inequalities in our relationships. The exercise and recognition of our power is equally complex for many women. That's why it's so important to see ourselves not only as individuals but in relationship to socially-created norms and dynamics since they shape our way of dealing with conflict.

While the dominant culture and its value system orients us to think in simplistic, "either/or" dichotomies (for example, good-bad, black-white), we know that conflicts expressed in relationships are neither one-sided nor linear. In conflictive situations, it's often difficult to decipher what's happening beyond a superficial level, therefore it's useful to analyze the different elements at stake in the conflict in a systematic and comprehensive way, both individually and collectively.

This means that we need to understand the origins of the conflicts among ourselves, the dynamics of power relations that have marked our lives, and how they influence our interactions with other women and others more generally. To envision and imagine our organization's and movements' futures beyond immediate conflicts, we must also go further and try to understand the different perspectives of each of the actors involved in the conflict. Further, we need to explore the way in which each person **lives and perceives** the situation he/she is going through, because these perceptions are also permeated by individual and collective experiences and stories.

NOT EVERYTHING IS WHAT IT SEEMS ...

Often at times of intensity or turbulent change, latent conflicts tend to emerge and express themselves in various ways. In those difficult moments it becomes even more important to examine our conflicts' roots and the elements that have shaped them, both looking at the past to understand our present and, at the same time, looking to the future to design strategies that will move us ahead.

Something to be aware of in approaching conflict is our tendency to attribute the "fault" to individuals rather than to the problems that arise from power dynamics and other social and



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political factors. For example, when we haven't expressed our discomfort or anger with a particular situation, the feeling accumulates within us. And, at critical moments or times of profound change, these emotions can erupt often directed at people in the immediate situation rather than at the deeper contextual problems affecting us. The immediacy of our feelings can even lead us to lose sight of what the problems were in the first place.

It's also important to consider how conflicts are expressed in different cultures, and how the ways of resolving and transforming them are different according to cultural variables and different contexts with different stories.

Conflicts often have their roots in structural conditions (unequal access to power and resources, expressed in gender, economic and political inequalities, etc.), but they can also be exacerbated, "recycled," and/or perpetuated by the perceptions that one party has of the other, by unequal access to information or through misinformation, as well as by hatred and enmities accumulated historically, over long periods of time or in violent contexts.

For all of these reasons, conflict transformation processes are intimately linked to developing a way of understanding and exercising power. This link helps us address conflicts in all their complexity and at different levels, taking into account not only structural aspects but also how power dynamics are expressed in relationships.

TRANSFORMING OUR CONFLICTS TO BUILD OUR STRENGTH

We believe that conflict can be either *transformed* to generate creative processes and positive changes through different forms of conflict intervention, or be recycled and perpetuated as destructive forces. We understand that solving problems generates new dynamics that present new challenges. In this sense, we believe that the resolution of a conflict through appropriate management is useful for clarifying and promptly solving a problem, but also importantly, to enable us to go further and focus on transforming *relationships* and building new forms of power *with* and *among* ourselves and others.

When we deal with conflicts from a transformation perspective, we begin from the belief that conflict offers an opportunity for transformation. . For example, a conflict may reveal the absence of clear mechanisms and procedures; it can also expose power dynamics that need to be addressed, as well as clarify the existence of diverse and divergent visions, values, ideas, motivations, and particularly interests, which must be taken into account.

If addressed in a constructive way, conflicts may help us to go deeper into the life of organizations or coalitions' such as decision making, real or perceived power asymmetries, and the structural ways in which we relate to one another.

If we understand that conflicts are a part of life and often part of certain growth and change processes, we can live with them - which means learning from them, making decisions, and



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trying to transform them creatively. Or we can live within them, and allow them to undermine our goals and relationships.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

At any level, all disputes and disagreements are located within a particular context. This context will have personal, cultural, and historical factors that will influence the relationships within the conflict, shape way authority is seen and experienced, and determine the behaviors we consider acceptable or non-acceptable. But in all cases and across contexts, we'll find shared elements of real or **perceived** power asymmetries and different ways power is exercised. In this sense, we can learn from past efforts and from other women; we can experiment with their practices and search for new ones, and we can learn to negotiate among ourselves without sacrificing fundamental common interests.

Dealing with conflicts constructively also implies a personal transformation, a reaffirmation of our autonomy, self-esteem, and the capacity we have to transform ourselves. It implies recognizing other women and their capabilities and knowledge, cultivating a greater appreciation of all women, and working from the profound conviction that together we can overcome and transform the conflicts we face in ways that strengthen us individually and collectively.

Some questions to reflect and analyze:

How do I relate to conflicts with other women? And men?

What could I do to improve my attitudes and behavior to increase my well-being and that of others in the organization?

How do I feel towards diversity? Is it easy for me to accept it? Why? Or Why not?

Is it easy to accept it in my organization? How can I contribute constructively to appreciating and working with diversity?

[1] **Patriarchy** literally means "rule of the father." Historically, patriarchy refers to systemic and institutionalized male domination embedded in and perpetuated by cultural, political, economic and social structures and ideologies. These systems explicitly make women inferior and subordinate and confer control and decision making on males while making values associated with masculinity the norm or ideal. Patriarchy has many particular forms in different stages of history and in different cultures. The concept, as it has been developed within feminist writings (because it has existed in anthropology far longer), is not a single or simple concept but has a variety of different meanings.



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