

Managing Conflict creatively: Exploring responses within + beyond the group

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snapshot

Preparing and practicing your options for communicating clearly and handling conflict skillfully will help you build capacity to be more effective facilitators, organizers and activists.

introduction

Engaging in nonviolent action will not shield you from conflict. In fact, as nonviolent activists working to confront injustice and inequality, we can anticipate difficult communication at best and outright aggressive attacks at worst, so for our effectiveness and our safety, it's important that we are ready to respond skillfully.

This isn't just about conflict with our opponents, either. In a meeting, at a demonstration, in a training, at home: conflict can and will arise in our work of challenging and changing unjust power structures. Preparing and practicing your options for responding in alignment with your values will help you build stronger organizations, stronger relationships, and more effective actions and campaigns.

Responding creatively and effectively to conflict requires some specific skills and a whole lot of practice. There are many manuals and trainings that focus on different aspects of handling conflict from interpersonal, to intra-organization, to formal mediation or negotiations. The activities below offer a sampling of this work in relation to nonviolent action trainings and activities. See Further Information for more in-depth materials.

The activities below map out a diversity of effective approaches to help a group prepare for responding well to conflict, which means moving beyond fear of engagement—freeze (not being able to move), fright (acting out of fear), flight (running away), or fawn (appeasing)—to appropriate action.

All approaches start with assessing the situation, asking, "What kind of relationship are you trying to establish in the moment with the person in front of you?" Whether it's your coworker, your sister, the police officer, the legislator, the passive ally, the bank manager, the security guard—make your choice about how to proceed based on your objective or goal for this mini-relationship.

For each of these role playing exercises, be ready to spend significantly more time debriefing than in the actual role plays!

Here is one of many worthwhile mnemonic tools that can be useful to share with participants in introducing these activities: the **ABCs of Conflict Response**. While this was developed to support effective conflict response in the streets, it works well in many other situations as well:

- A** — Assess the scene, identify the conflict: What is happening? What can you do? What are the risks?
- B** — Breathe or ground yourself: return to focus and calm, count to 10, remember why you are there.
- C** — Choose if you will get involved, and how. See D and E below for your options:

D — De-escalate: Use the 6 D's from [De-Escalation Tips and Tools](#), or other de-escalation practices. OR...

E — Escalate — but only if this will help you reach your goal! We all know how to do this.... But be careful, as an escalating conflict can lead to violence.

A final note: **Practice!** The good news is that everyone can choose how they respond to a conflict situation, and can become adept at de-escalation if they so choose (most of us already are experts at escalation!) As a facilitator/trainer, you can support this by building plenty of practice time into the agenda.

key concepts

- **Escalation:** To escalate is to increase the extent, volume or scope of possible conflict. Responses likely to escalate a conflict include increased speed, higher volume, less space, inappropriate content, wrong person, erratic behavior, physical touch, stepping into personal space, use of weapons, etc.
 - **De-escalation:** To de-escalate is to lessen the extent, volume, or scope of possible conflict. Key tactics include: lowering volume, slowing pace, increasing space, using trusted messengers, appropriate and sensitive language, compassion, active listening and engaging in dialogue or discussion.
 - **Dialogue versus Debate:** Generally, dialogue is an interaction based in learning and collaboration, with an open minded approach, and it supports deescalation. Debate is often about winning, can be combative and closed-minded and lead to escalation.
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further information

- Here is more information on [Understanding Fight, Flight, Freeze and the Fawn Response](#).
- To learn more about dialogue, mediation and negotiation, visit the U.S. Institute of Peace page on "[Mediation, Negotiation, and Dialogue](#)" for readings and free online self paced courses.
- For handouts and other resources, visit [Conflict Resolution - crc-global.org](#)
- For an overall view of the conflict resolution field, Wikipedia's [Conflict resolution](#) entry is quite useful.
- [Working with conflict](#) in our Groups is a guide for grassroots activists from Seeds For Change.
- Handouts on de-escalation, assertive intervention, and action roles & street smarts:
 - [Assertive Intervention/De-escalation Tips](#) Handout from BeautifulTrouble
 - [Affinity Groups Action Roles/Street Smarts/Personal Prep](#) Handout from BeautifulTrouble
 - [The CLARA Method of De-escalation — Boundless Love Project](#)

<u>ABCs of Conflict Response</u> A — Assess B — Breathe or ground C — Choose D — De-escalate OR... E — Escalate	<u>SIX D's of Assertive Intervention:</u> • Direct intervention • Delay • Distract • Delegate • Distance • Document	<u>CLARA Method</u> • Center • Listen • Affirm • Respond • Add
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training activities list

<i>Exercise</i>	<i>What it is</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Energy Level</i>
Hassle Lines	A hassle line is a short roleplay done in a line with participants facing each other, useful for quick intense exploration of conflict behavior and intervention.	15-45 min	High
ACTIVE LISTENING	Explore Active listening as a critical tool for activists and organizers	10-45 min	Low
ACTION ROLE PLAY	Action role plays are a direct and powerful way to support group learning as well as practice or rehearse for more effective actions.	45-60 min	High
EARLY WARNING, EARLY RESPONSE	In-depth guided process that supports preparation and response to upcoming potential conflict scenarios with UCP (Unarmed Civilian Peacekeepers), most effective when paired with practice role plays.	30 min-2 hours	Low - High
Documentary & Discussion activity	Use these short video segments with actual footage of historic nonviolent resistance movements to spark discussions on handling conflict.	45 min	Low

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