

Framework to consider Conflict Workshop

Conflict may arise when two people cannot find agreement or a way forward on something that matters to both of them,

There are many causes or types of conflict.

Misunderstanding. There may be conflict because there is a misunderstanding on one or both sides as to what the other person is saying and or intends.

Attitude or communication style. A communication style which is perceived as disrespectful, whether intentional or not, may provoke a “pushback” which is unrelated to the topic at hand.

Worldview or lens. Because of life experiences and enculturation, the two people may have very different perceptions and understandings which are not easily understood by the other person who lacks that experience.

History of mistrust. Unresolved feelings from the ways previous interactions were resolved may carry over to the current disagreement.

Fear-based. Even when there is not interpersonal history, one or both’s fear of potential negative outcomes from the “wrong” decision can cause conflict over the unwillingness to move forward quickly.

Moral conflict. When one or both see their position as the only “Right” way to proceed that promotes goodness and avoids harm.

Behavioral conflict. There is conflict that can arise from behavior that is independent of any decision-making. Behavioral conflict occurs when one person’s behavior is perceived by another as disruptive, abusive, disrespectful, intrusive or disturbing in a way that causes discomfort. This behavior may be intentionally confrontational or intimidating or may reflect a cultural norm for language and body posture that have a different cultural interpretation by some people than the person intends.

Conflict is a part of life just as disagreements are part of life. Within a spiritual community, we may have expectations about self-examination and awareness of one’s impact on others but we all have flaws that get in our way. The discernment process asks us to invite Spirit to assist when disagreement and conflicts arise, to suspend our desires in order to truly hear what the other has to offer as their truth and understanding. We may not always be able to shift our own view enough to see things through another’s lens, but we can incorporate that truth into the discernment. This process of suspending judgement may go a long way to get through the first three types of conflict and if we can truly suspend our judgement, may help us to hear without prejudice those with whom we have had conflict in the past.

The other types of conflict – fear based, behavioral, and moral conflict are more difficult to resolve. One has some control over one’s own fears, and one’s spiritual work may at least allow one to recognize when one’s fears are impacting a situation, but not everyone is successful at that. Owning and expressing the fear, however, can be helpful in finding a pace and path that allows forward movement. Similarly, behavioral conflict resolution requires both deep introspection and a willingness to engage in a conversation which itself can evoke fear. When there is “something about that person,” or even a named difficulty “they are always dismissive of other people’s points of view,” to explore those feelings in a non-confrontational way, perhaps with a third party present, can feel scary, but can break down hardened opinions that prevent accurate hearing. Behavioral patterns, even tone, can be deeply ingrained in how we move through the world. They are not easily changed, even if we want to, but loving conversations can help people better understand how such behaviors get in the way of effective communication.

To resolve moral conflict requires grace. Moral conflict most often arises when there is not a clear choice between a harmful path and a non-harmful path. It more often arises when there is both good and harm in all the choices and one is asked to assign values to both the good and harm in order to weigh them. A historical example among Friends has been the peace testimony and its extension to a prohibition to the taking of a life. Yet there have been Friends who have felt called to fight in armies because they perceived the call to stop evil, even through the use of violence, to override the immorality of killing. When one feels called to moral action, it is hard to accept with grace that others feel you are NOT following the leading of Spirit, and indeed, it may be the others who are not hearing Spirit’s call.

Special Situations: existential threats and withdrawal/separation. There are systems for ranking the severity of a conflict which can be extremely helpful for choosing the right response, particularly at the group or community level. Certain behaviors or actions such as assaults of all kinds, thievery, and intentionally disruptive behavior threaten the existence of the meeting. Without action, people will leave and the community may never be healed.

Separation has occurred many times in Quaker history and may be the only way to restore “peace,” but it is a demonstration that the process of spirit-led seeking has failed. Because we are imperfect, separation may be the only way forward at that moment.

Queries for two small group discussions. Part 1 uses questions 1-3, Part 2 uses 4 -6

1. Do I recognize the “triggers” that put me into the conflict mode of fight or flight?
2. How have I used spiritual tools to help reduce my own fear in conflict situations?
3. How does being part of a Quaker meeting change the nature of conflict? Or does it?

4. When conflict has arisen in my meeting, how has it been resolved?
5. If resolved, did hard feelings linger? Were any attempts made to resolve those feelings?
6. What role did you play in resolving the conflict? What else could you have done?