



# TOOLS FOR ADDRESSING CHAPTER CONFLICT

*Prepared by: Prentis Hemphill with support from the BLM Healing Justice Working Group*

**BLACK LIVES MATTER**

# *UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT*

## **Context**

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When we understand the nature of conflict we can also understand that conflict between us, in our chapters, and within our network is an expected and common issue. Though many different ways of interacting often get conflated under the word conflict, we want to be clear on what conflict is and distinguish it also from violence and abuse, which we will talk about more in depth in a later tool.

In how we talk about addressing conflict specifically we want to be clear that none of guiding questions here are designed for instances of abuse. For our purposes here, we define abuse as a pattern of power and control over another through behavioral manipulation, coercion, and/or physical and sexual violence. Violence we might define as force both physical and structural that increase the probability of injury or death. For a toolkit to help address incidents of violence, you might use Creative Interventions toolkit, 'How to Stop Interpersonal Violence' (put a link in). It's a very comprehensive tool for approaching violence and designing and holding a community response. So we would land on a distinct definition of conflict as that which lives in the realm of disagreements, non-violent outbursts or behaviors, interpersonal disagreements.

Conflict can arise around political direction, ideology or places where we want others to

be accountable. We can be in conflict that feels personal, we rub each other wrong way. We can be in conflict around how a decision was made or how people in our chapters are stepping into leadership, are they disempowering or underaccountable. We can be in conflict along group lines, queer and trans people in chapters may feel invisible by members of the chapter. Conflict is vitally important for identifying where ruptures and misalignment live. For our collective culture, we want to get more practiced moving towards conflict well as opposed to avoiding it until situations become untenable or our organizing suffers. It's not easy, we may have few skills or experience to address it well, but with some grounding and some pre-thinking it's possible to develop a process that will support you in moving through it.

Some pitfalls: Conflict often has the ability to make us zero in or hyper focus on the moment. We can lose sight of our relationship with the other person(s), their history or even attempts in the moment to rectify or resolve issues. Conflict pushes many of us into our life or death thinking, usually as a result of trauma that taught us that conflict is dangerous or that those who we engage in conflict with will destroy us or devalue us if given the chance.

We also know that living in a police state that criminalizes dissent, that responds to mental health crises in our communities by incarcerating or even killing our family members and friends, that positions itself as an intervener in community conflict, abuse and violence impacts how we all engage in conflict. We may see few options for how to resolve conflict that don't include throwing each other way, trying to have power over by winning a disagreement, or we might even see conflict as proof of our own blame and lack of worth. All that we've internalized from systems of oppression show up to how we have conflict with each other.

### **A Note On Trauma**

We want to understand that trauma is an important consideration in our healing, addressing conflict or coming up with interventions. Trauma can impact both the reactions we imagine are appropriate for a given situation and our interpretation and experiences of others' reactions and responses. It can also impact our capacity to to intervene without getting triggered. Trauma is an incredibly rich and complicated issue to explore and we'll create a tool focused entirely on understanding and addressing trauma soon.

### **Practice/Discussion**

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- 1. Do you generally avoid or move towards conflict or arguments? Do you try to deescalate?**
- 2. When was a time you engaged in conflict and were able to come to more understanding in the end? What happened that made that possible?**
- 3. When was a time you engaged in conflict and were able to identify a boundary you needed with someone(s)?**

## Understanding Triggers

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Often we discuss triggers as anything that elicits an uncomfortable response. Feelings of pain, sadness, anger, even rage get talked about as indicators of triggers. These feelings, though uncomfortable, aren't necessarily indicators of that you're being triggered, but are often understandable emotional responses to conditions present in our lives and in the world. *A traumatic trigger is any stimulus that takes a person out of the present moment and into an unconscious reaction.* This is as likely to be triggered in conflict as it is in closeness or intimacy, so it's not necessarily safe to assume that all conflict will lead to triggering. This distinction is important as we start to understand collectively both the pervasiveness and specificity of trauma. Trauma is in direct relationship to time and our ability to access and live in our present moment, present relationships, present responsibilities. **If you are being triggered in conflict, this is an important indicator that you need support, either space from the situation or processing with someone you feel safe with.**

## Examples of triggers

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Someone grew up in home where a caretaker was volatile. To stay safe they would remain quiet, reading in their room, blocking out the noise until it was over. Now when they sense that someone might be angry (whether or not they are) or if there are people in the chapter engaged in conflict they will shrink, stop paying attention or drift away from meetings or responsibilities.

A person who, when they were younger, had no caretaker they could depend on. They learned to stay protected by anticipating and winning fights. Now in groups, conflict feels like a threat to their safety, it triggers the feeling of being unprotected and they often blow up whenever someone disagrees with them.

Without being aware of our own triggers, their origin, how trauma impacts our relationships, we may not be able to feel the difference between the options we had in our past and the options we have now to deal with conflict.

## Direct Communication

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For conflict that does not indicate more challenging issues like violence and abusive patterns, direct communication is often the most fruitful way of addressing it and intervening.

When we talk about direct communication we are talking about our ability to state our understanding of what happened, the impact it had on us and the requests or boundaries that have emerged as a result. We can show our emotion, our hurt, anger, frustration while not trying to take away another's dignity or humanity.

A couple things to note is that for many of us whose life experiences have impacted our ability to trust, we often think we are engaging in direct communication but our actual intention might be to prove our “rightness” or make the other person feel bad, guilty or as upset as we feel. Yes, we are addressing the issue directly, but underneath is the threat of a fight if there’s a hint of pushback or danger.

## **Restorative Justice/Transformative Justice**

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We share as a network a guiding principle around restorative justice, which at its’ very core asks us to rethink conflict. It asks us to see conflict, not necessarily as the splinters that lead inevitably to division, but to think of conflict instead as a generative moment, an opportunity to learn something about each other and the systems that we’ve created together in our chapters.

Restorative justice also doesn’t mean that all relationships can be restored after harm has happened. In fact, it could be argued that complete recovery of a relationship isn’t possible or necessarily desirable. We learn something new and useful every time we have conflict. Boundaries can and should be part of a restorative process and practice. Requests for someone to study, to seek support, to take time to focus on their healing can be powerfully restorative interventions. We may decide through a process to part ways, to make immediate boundaries and return to relationship after some time.

Conflict must also change us and it must change the way we work together. Inside of every conflict are the dynamics of what caused that specific rupture, but it also indicates for the chapter something that needs to be learned or shifted to avoid future conflicts, or to intervene sooner. A huge loss in group conflict is to stop at addressing the most immediate disagreement, every process should include learning for the collective.

Below is a tool we are developing to help chapters understand their current conflict and engage in ways of addressing it that align with our guiding principles.

## **Facilitating or Leading a Process**

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We’re all out here doing the best we can with our resources, our skills, and with love for our people and this movement. More often than not we move into leading processes, supporting people when the moment demands and because no one else is there to support. This is how a lot of us have learned valuable lessons around holding space and simultaneously how many of us can get in over our heads. Most likely, this will be an undertaking in which other conflicts or revelations might emerge. It’s not a destination, but a process in which we can each develop our skills and communication.

## Worksheet For Chapter Conflict

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This can be used by the entire chapter and shared with the decided upon facilitator or can be used as a process to help anyone think through conflict. This isn't a plan but some questions to help you think through how to develop a plan to address conflict. These questions can also help guide individuals wanting to think through how they might intervene in what's happening in their chapter.

### Assessing Now

- » How would you characterize the conflict? What would you say is the central conflict or incident?
- » What are the dynamics in the chapter that led to the conflict or impact ?
- » Are there people being harmed?
- » Would you characterize what is happening as violence? If so, you may need a more robust process. Please see Creative Interventions toolkit and reach out to BLM Healing Justice staff.
- » Who or what body has the power to impact the conflict?
- » What impact is this having on your chapter? Individual members, overall base, community?
- » What does this conflict bring up for you? Trust, confidentiality, political alignment, power?
- » Will your chapter make the time to address the conflict?
- » Are mental health issues a factor? What resources are available to address them?

### Who Can Help

- » Who in your chapter has the position and relationships, both distance and connection, to see multiple perspectives?
- » Is there a healing justice body in your chapter that can support that person figuring out how to address the conflict?
- » Are they willing to hold and lead a process or courageous conversation?

- » Are there any issues you would identify now on why the persons you identified might not be a good fit? Can these issues be addressed upfront?
- » Are there people outside of your chapter who could offer support in the visioning? Be specific about what role you'd want them to play and why. Ex. Community healers or practitioners, network staff, etc.

## Planning a Process

- » What are the goals of the process or conversation?
- » Have the goals been identified and agreed upon by the group?
- » Do the goals address the source of the conflict, the overarching dynamics, and the impact on the whole?
- » Are the goals restorative or transformative? Meaning, do they support learning, growth?
- » Is there one issue, moment or misunderstanding that needs airing out? Can it be addressed in a single conversation with next steps?
- » Are there several or subsequent incidents or larger dynamics that might point to the need for a process (several meetings both individual and as a group) over time?
- » Are there aspects of this conflict or each other's stories that are important to keep in some level of confidence?
- » Are there aspects that need to be shared with the community, with allied groups?
- » Have you made any attempts to hold a conversation? What were your learnings from that?
- » What is the impact of the process on the chapter? Are some people drifting away? Is there more that can be done to normalize the conflict and to get people to stay in if safety isn't a concern?
- » Where will the process or conversation be held? Is it accessible, welcoming, private (if this is a condition) and is it relatively neutral? *Finding a location could be a request of a support team.*
- » Who was invited, are they agreed upon and aligned with the chapter and network values?

## Next Steps & Follow-up

- » Are there clearly defined next steps?
- » Who do you need to support your chapters next steps? Other chapters, staff, allies?

### **What is Accountability? - From Creative Interventions**

In brief, accountability is the ability to recognize, end and take responsibility for violence. We usually think of the person doing harm as the one to be accountable for violence. Community accountability also means that communities are accountable for sometimes ignoring, minimizing or even encouraging violence. Communities must also recognize, end and take responsibility for violence by becoming more knowledgeable, skillful and willing to take action to intervene in violence and to support social norms and conditions that prevent violence from happening in the first place.

Accountability is a process. It involves listening, learning, taking responsibility, and changing. It involves conscientiously creating opportunities in our families and communities for direct communication, understanding and repairing of harm, readjustment of power toward empowerment and equal sharing of power, and rebuilding of relationships and communities toward safety, respect, and happiness.

