

# NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS, NAVIGATING CONFLICT

## [4 - 6 HOURS]

### OVERVIEW

Some of us are good at starting relationships, others are good at maintaining them, and some of us struggle with relationships and connection, period. There is a rightful emphasis on “relational organizing” these days. Relationships are critically, vitally important, and we need to make sure they are authentic, can withstand challenges and discord, and are not performative or transactional. Real, hearty political relationships take time and attention to build. **Of course, where there are relationships we know there will also be conflict. Not only is it inevitable, it's healthy:** the question is how we deal with conflict once it arises. Included in this section are a variety of exercises for groups to use to reflect on their individual relationships to conflict and what agreements and protocol approaches they have at their disposal to address conflict.

### GOALS

- To establish a shared baseline of understanding of how conflict impacts our work
- To reflect on and share our individual patterns, experiences, and approaches to conflict and trauma, and to discuss how that plays out in groups
- To strengthen our muscle of discernment and diagnosis of individual patterns and collective dynamics
- To determine shared commitments and practices for navigating conflict

### TIME NEEDED

This content could be done over the course of a day or spread over multiple days

### MATERIALS NEEDED

Flip charts, tape, markers, scenarios (1/breakout), **Conflict Reflection** (p. 116), **Principled Struggle** (p. 124) and **Conflict Worksheet** (p. 117)

### READINGS/ RESOURCES

- Imago Dialogue
- *Fumbling Towards Repair, A Transformative Justice Workbook* by Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan
- *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne marie brown

### NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS FRAMING

When we lean into relationship in an intentional way, we can build more stable organizations. At Auburn Lives of Commitment, an annual ceremony honoring spiritually rooted movement leaders hosted by Auburn Seminary, Stacey Abrams said, “When we think about belonging we often think about how we fit in, but our responsibility is to invite others to be there with us.” In other words, **how do we reframe our attention to belonging to focus on the belonging of others?**

Deliberately nurturing relationships is a feminist practice, a leadership skill, and critical to organizing and building robust teams. Our relationships are not just personal relationships but relationships on behalf of and in the service of the group.

**Solo reflection:** Bring to mind some of the groups you've been a part of where the collective relationships have felt most nurturing. Take some time to write about those experiences. *What in particular made them so nurturing for you? How were you treated? How did support show up practically?*

**Small groups:** Share your reflections in a small group. Write them up on a big piece of paper as you go. After everyone has shared, ask: *Can any of these examples of nurturing support be grouped or categorized together?*

**Consider:**

- **Attention to small details** (including regular check-ins about how you're doing, folks following up with you)
- **Feminist policies** (like childcare support and rotation of roles)
- **Transparency** (including everyone in the group knowing how money is spent and who makes what decisions)

**Share out as a full group and discuss:** What are other ways we can be nurturing relationships more in a political, collective way? This does **not** mean we need to all be best friends or have pajama parties, rather that we really know and fortify our relations with each other. These practices and tools can be social, such as monthly dinners, or functional, like making sure everyone knows who they can talk to if conflict arises. They can also be more spiritually-oriented, like making time for quiet reflection (not just always doing doing doing).

**Embodied Reflection:** Bring the group to stillness. Ask people to bring back to mind one of the examples of nurturing collective relationships that you considered at the beginning of the session. *Can you picture the physical space that you're in? Who else is there? What is happening to make you feel supported? Now note: How does that feel in your body? To your heart rate? Where are your shoulders? How is your breath?* Sit with this feeling awhile. As we move into the section on conflict, you can use this feeling of being nurtured as solid ground to return to.

## BREAK

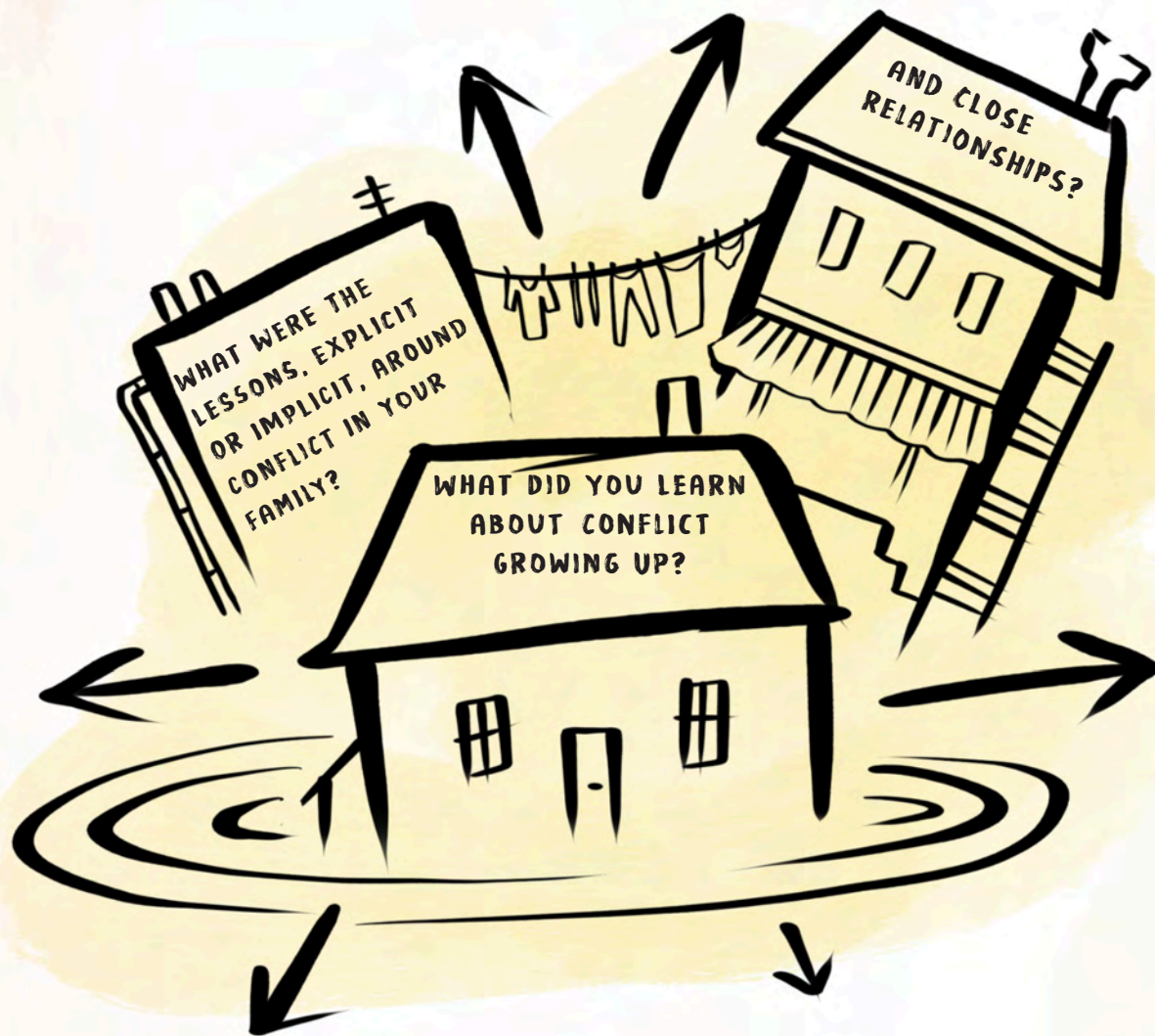
## NAVIGATING CONFLICT I FRAMING

It is hard for us to keep our agreements with each other, with so much broken between us. We splash and lash. Sometimes even more so in democratic groups, where we have direct access to each other. Black Lives Matter Global Network talks about the importance of turning up on the state – **not each other**. We believe it, **but how can we do it better?**

Conflict is inevitable, and how we deal with it matters. Let folks know you're going to spend time looking at conflict, both interpersonally and communally. Say: we will look at our own individual patterns and training, consider how conflict plays out in groups, and identify ways we can fortify or build muscle for different ways to address conflict.

Invite participants to meditate on and write about early experiences and current practices around conflict on p. 116.

# CONFLICT Reflection





HOW ARE  
YOU MOST  
COMFORTABLE  
IN CONFLICT?



HOW ARE  
YOU  
LEAST  
COMFORTABLE?



# CONFLICT



WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN  
WORKING ON GROWING  
AROUND? AND HOW  
HAVE YOU BEEN DOING  
THAT? (GET SPECIFIC)



HAVE TO  
ADDRESS  
CONFLICT?  
WHAT, IF  
ANYTHING,



HOLDS US BACK  
FROM USING THEM?

Share the following quotes or do a body scan exercise to begin:

"All groups have conflicts. Conflict is not a sign of a group's failure, but a necessary and potentially healthy aspect of its growth. Groups conflict because needs, directions, and dynamic forces are not always in harmony. Through open conflict, needs can be balanced, changes made, and new directions forged. Conflict is not the same as violence." – Starhawk, *Truth or Dare* (p. 258)

"You know as well as I, Old Wife, that we have not been scuffling in this waste howling-wilderness for the right to be stupid. All this waste. Everybody all up in each other's face with a whole oote who struck John – you ain't correct, well you ain't cute, and he ain't right and they ain't scientific and yo mama don't wear no drawers and get off my suedes, and he hit me, and she quit me, and this one's dirty and that one don't have a degree, and on and on ... But, Old Wife, we gonna have to get a mighty large group trained to pull us through the times ahead. Them four horses galloping already, the seven trumpets blasting. And looks like we clean forgot what we come to do, what we been learning through all them trials and tribulations to do and it's now. Come in here after abusing themselves and want to be well and don't even know what they want to be healthy for."

–Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (p. 46)

**Pair share:** Have folks pair up with someone they don't know very well in the group to share their journal reflections.

**Bring back:** 1) a lesson from growing up, 2) a place were you are comfortable, 3) a practice you been cultivating.

**Full Group:** Have pairs share back. Scribe folks' responses into three columns (one for each question). Then, have a broader discussion about what holds us back from resolving conflict. Prompts to guide the conversation could include: *What are we so afraid of? What are the consequences of not resolving conflict? What is the difference between how we handle our personal business and how we handle group conflict? Why are lines so blurry?*

**Consider:**

- Social pressures, exclusion, bullying, exile, or being alone again
- Sometimes the "personal is political" means everyone's personal business is open to discussion
- Naming discomfort or disagreement as trauma or violence
- Fear of messing up or not doing it right
- Waiting for someone else to fix it
- Underdevelopment – we've only ever done it the way we did it

**Groups often break down when one of these three areas isn't clear:**

Scribe these up if it's useful, or adapt this to your team (for example, work in small groups if the group too big).

- **We're unclear on purpose:** What are we doing? Why? If you aren't clear on this you shouldn't be a group.
- **We're unclear on roles:** Who is doing what? Why? Everyone on the core team should have a role. A common recipe for disaster is people in a group not doing anything but still leveraging their opinions.
- **We're messy in our relationships:** Gossip, side talk, and interpersonal dynamics ultimately impact the group.

**You can add an explicit layer of conversation about power and culture:**

- White middle- and upper-class domination in society and in organizational culture means **passive-aggressiveness** and **conflict avoidance** are often mandated, enforced, and rewarded.
- We need **constant vigilance and an analysis of power** that is interpersonal, structural, and factors in other forms of power and the way they manifest.
- Leftist political culture means that inside of movement **some people are given immunity** to act or speak however they want because of multiple oppressed identities. Bottom line, though, **this ultimately harms them and the group.**

## **WHERE DOES CONFLICT SIT IN THE BODY?**

*How do you respond to conflict when you are inside of it, causing it, or witnessing conflict around you?*

We have survival strategies that we have learned to sustain and protect ourselves from conflict in our lives. On a physiological level, the body responds immediately to traumatic incidents and events. Our nervous systems are trained to respond to situations differently depending on current triggers and our previous experiences of trauma.

**On a psychological level, the body and mind have four distinct responses to traumatic events:**

- **Freeze**
- **Appease**
- **Flight**
- **Fight**

**Dissociation**, an adaptive process of psychological detachment from reality, is a part of all of these responses. Without judgment, work to identify what these look like in individual and collective bodies. This can be done in a big group, in small groups, or in an around-the-world format, with time at the end for everyone to look and discuss.

- **What does freeze look like individually? Collectively?**
- **What does appease look like individually? Collectively?**
- **What does flight look like individually? Collectively?**
- **What does fight look like individually? Collectively?**

Invite participants to break into groups based on which of the above responses they most identify with. In the small groups, have people work together to make a collective shape/tableaux or physical gesture that best describes what this response can look like. *How can they show the response with their bodies?*

Ask the groups to keep track of who they worked with and the results of this activity for later.

## NAVIGATING CONFLICT II FRAMING

While our nervous systems have been wired over tens of thousands of years to react to perceived threats with fight/flight/freeze/appease, **there are practices and tools we can adopt and nurture within ourselves and our groups to override these survival responses.** Being attuned to the dynamics of the wider environments we're working in – whether that's what's going on within our own organizations, communities, or within social justice movements more broadly – can also offer useful perspective and help us depersonalize what's happening around us.

Recall adrienne maree brown's assertion that "the 3 things that are tearing our movements apart are 1) ego, 2) we're all lying, and 3) we don't know how to address conflict."

- *What are peoples' reactions to that?*
- *What do you think she means?*
- *How do these three things show up in our organizing?*

Engage in a full group discussion, or start with the small groups folks are already in and then move to the full group. For the purposes of this conversation, we're looking at **the ways ego keeps us in competition with each other**, seeking – even subconsciously – accolades and recognition for our work or our opinions and prioritizing the individual over the collective. **This leads to puffing up: lying about our achievements and "metrics."**

**Often what gets us to this place is a real or perceived sense of scarcity and a competition for funding** or other resources. Failure to address 1) ego and 2) lying is often a primary source of conflict that we then fear and don't know how to address.

## BUILDING SHARED COMMITMENTS

**Pair share:** Thinking about everything we've discussed to date, share a time when you were part of a conflict and you wanted to intervene constructively or take a particular action but **didn't**, and a time when you wanted to do something to address it and you **did**. *What was the conflict about? What was it really about? What did you do that was different?*

**Full group:** Bringing it all together, **what are some of the practices and tools that we can use to address conflict instead of avoiding it?**

**Consider:**

- We can take responsibility for our own actions.
- We can develop personal practices (such as breathing, or writing down thoughts before speaking) and weave those practices into group culture.
- We can lean into nurturing relationships, investing in each other so we have reserves of goodwill.
- We can get rigorous about naming the behavior of the person, not the person, when we have beef.
- Similarly, let's name the impact of another's behavior on us instead of assuming someone's bad intention (for example, "When you did X, I felt Y," as opposed to, "I know you were trying to make me feel Y!").

- We can have a practice of getting events clear in conflict (versus just living in a sea of feelings).
- We can keep away from buzzwords (like “accountability”), and instead get clear and specific.
- We can take breaks! And use them to help emotions settle and support everyone to do their best.
- Recall that building trust – and rebuilding trust – takes time. Trust is not a given, *and* trust can be rebuilt!
- We can commit to never dragging each other online.
- We can practice rigor around confidentiality by avoiding side talk and gossip and bringing our beef up directly.
- We can be mindful of timing by acting swiftly to address issues rather than letting them fester.
- We can ask for facilitative help in navigating conflict when we need more support.

## SCENARIOS

Return folks to the small groups they were with for the fight/flight/freeze/appease enactment. Then, give each small group a scenario to workshop, and ask them to create a shape with their bodies that illustrates it. Next, using the ideas for navigating conflict that have been discussed (or new ideas!), have folks consider: *What is needed here? Is it a group conversation? Is it a one on one? A series of interventions?* Then have each group build and embody a new shape that reflects how their situation might be handled. Use one or more of the following examples, or make up your own. We don’t recommend workshoping an active conflict in the group at this time.

**Scenario 1:** Someone with a lot of social power (experience, relationships, and esteem) continually drops the ball on work that they sign up for or is part of the role they agreed to. When approached, they get defensive and take things personally. Then, they get a new boo, and the boo starts coming to all the meetings and is granted extra access. The new boo even weighs in on existing conflicts in the group in ways that leave people uncomfortable and negatively impacts the work.

**Scenario 2:** Someone no one really knows pops off on Facebook, dragging both the group and individuals in the group for being exclusive, elitist, and “dangerous.”

**Scenario 3:** You have a multi-racial group. A white/light-skinned person is told they are racist and their presence is “traumatizing and triggering” people.

**Scenario 4:** Younger and newer members confront older members of the group, saying that their lack of attention to gender pronouns is causing violence and trauma to them.

**Scenario 5:** New members of a group come in with a lot of energy and criticism of the group’s existing work, pushing to change the group’s focus from A to B and stating that if the group doesn’t change its focus it is bad and hates trans people.

Close with a group discussion. *How did the way your body changed shape change the way you felt? What are some ways to turn these embodied experiences into protocols or recommendations for your group?*

**HOMEWORK:** Have folks fill in the worksheet on navigating conflict (p. 122).

# Navigating CONFLICT...

**"ALL GROUPS HAVE CONFLICTS.**

**CONFLICT IS NOT A SIGN OF A GROUP'S FAILURE, BUT A NECESSARY AND POTENTIALLY HEALTHY ASPECT OF ITS GROWTH. GROUPS CONFLICT BECAUSE NEEDS, DIRECTIONS, AND DYNAMIC FORCES ARE NOT ALWAYS IN HARMONY. THROUGH OPEN CONFLICT, NEEDS CAN BE BALANCED, CHANGES MADE, AND NEW DIRECTIONS FORGED.**

**CONFLICT IS NOT THE SAME AS VIOLENCE."**

**- STARHAWK, TRUTH OR DARE (P. 258)**

**WHAT IS YOUR SELF-WORK AROUND CONFLICT?**

**WHAT DO YOU NEED TO PRACTICE OR TRANSFORM?**



**WHAT'S YOUR GROUP WORK?**

**WHERE DO YOU COLLECTIVELY NEED TO CULTIVATE BETTER PRACTICES?**

**GO BACK TO THE PREP QUESTIONS YOU ANSWERED FOR THIS SESSION (P. 115). FROM THE EXPERIENCES YOU DESCRIBED...**

- **WHAT CAN YOU BRING FORWARD?**
- **WHAT CAN YOU LEAVE BEHIND?**
- **WHAT CAN YOU TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OR SET DOWN?**

**WHEN IS A TIME YOU HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN A GROUP CONFLICT THAT WAS RESOLVED OR SETTLED IN A WAY THAT YOU WERE PROUD OF? WHAT'S YOUR DIAGNOSIS OF WHAT ELEMENTS WERE PRESENT TO ALLOW RESOLUTION?**

**WHEN IS A TIME YOU HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN A CONFLICT THAT YOU AREN'T PROUD OF, OR IN RETROSPECT FEEL YOU WEREN'T BRAVE ENOUGH IN? WHAT'S YOUR DIAGNOSIS OF WHY THAT HAPPENED, AND WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU HAD DONE DIFFERENTLY?**

# **PRINCIPLED STRUGGLE**

## **BY N'TANYA LEE**

**WE STRUGGLE FOR THE SAKE OF DEEPENING OUR COLLECTIVE  
UNDERSTANDING AND GETTING TO GREATER UNITY.**

- 1. BE HONEST AND DIRECT - WHILE HOLDING COMPASSION**
- 2. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN FEELINGS AND  
ACTIONS**
- 3. SEEK DEEPER UNDERSTANDING (ASK & READ FIRST)**
- 4. CONSIDER THAT THIS MAY/MAY NOT BE THE CONTAINER TO  
HOLD WHAT YOU NEED TO BRING**
- 5. SIDE CONVOS SHOULD HELP US GET BETTER UNDERSTANDING,  
NOT CHECK OUT (TEST: COULD I BRING THE ESSENCE BACK  
TO THE GROUP?)**