

# **CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT: A Simple Guide for Quaker Practice**

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Conflict is unavoidable and, when handled well, is the key to authentic community. Peace and Conflict go together. In fact, 'peace' is the harmony that occurs between times of conflict.

## **Constructive Conflict**

1. One that meets the **legitimate interests** of the people involved. Revenge, being superior and winning are illegitimate interests. Each person likely will not get his/her interest met in their preferred way, but must be able to live with the agreement or be willing to stand aside to let the community thrive.
2. One that **improves**, or at least does not damage, **the relationship**. All people have to work on this. If some simply cannot live with the best solution the community has embraced, then at times, people will leave the community. This departure is not to be taken lightly nor should it be used to abuse the community—with guilt, shame, etc.
3. One that is **timely**. Quakers take the long view: we would rather have unity than a quick fix. When time is used to let issues season, to seek divine guidance, to try to understand the real issues of the conflict, then the time is well used. If the protracted time is a way of avoiding conflict, then the underlying conflict worsens and becomes more difficult to solve. Check yourself to see how you are using time.

### **Conditions for Success:**

Know yourself—what triggers your old wounds, what you need most from others, what values you hold dear. As best you can, sort out your own interests through reflection, journaling and/or asking others to listen and help you figure out your interests—in the spirit of a clearness committee. Your clarity is contagious and helps others be clear. Start with yourself to manage conflict well.

When you are tempted to talk to others who share your views, make sure you do so in the spirit of clarification rather than building coalitions. It is also useful for members to remind each other to talk directly to people with whom they have issues so that we come into community clean—without hidden agenda.

When we are together, listen to others from the perspective of hearing and understanding their needs and interests. Reflect your understanding even if you do not agree. Clarity about the real issues is critical for unity.



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## **Four Key Skills**

### **Skill 1: Establish Common Ground**

1. Ground Rules.

It is essential that all are playing by the same rules so that issues are clarified and procedures are fair. Quakers have strong norms for meetings: some may need to be reminded of our procedures. All need to be using the procedures for the goals of understanding, generating options to meet concerns, and sustaining the community. I would recommend that the whole group, as well as the Clerk, be mindful of summarizing issues, naming what people have in common, and specifying what is at issue for them. **All** need to seek unity, not just the clerk.

2. Remember to say what commonalities you hear. During conflict, we usually focus on differences when we actually have much more in common.

### **Skill 2: Ways to Identify Interests**

Distinguish between *position* and *interest*. "Position" is a solution; "interest" is the underlying need or the real issue. As you initiate and respond to conflict, clarify your own interests as best you can and listen to clarify others' interests.

#### ***Kinds of interests include***

- 1) **Content.** Concrete, observable, and limited resources like time and money.
- 2) **Relational.** Intangible interpersonal needs like esteem, influence, affection, recognition, inclusion, trust. Sometimes we agree with a decision but have not felt included in the process so resist the decision. If the issue is a relational one, say so. "I agree with your decision but want to be included in the discussion before moving forward."
- 3) **Identity/Face-Saving. Be clear about how you see yourself (and/or want to be seen by others.)** When another, either overtly or covertly, communicates that you are not what you think you are, you likely will be defensive. The same is true for how you communicate to others. If I want to be seen as kind, and you communicate that I am uncaring, I likely will resist constructive conflict, albeit unknowingly. You may make up stories about how others see you, so those stories need to be checked out when they are impeding consensus. With courage you can ask: "How do you see me? What am I doing that is helpful and not helpful?" Ask the other to be open to feedback as well.
- 4) **Procedural.** How things are accomplished. Quakers hold sacred our processes that support our beliefs—taking the time for unity, using various



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methods such as threshing sessions, clearness committees, and worship sharing. When we think we have reached a decision without hearing others, for example, we likely will rethink the decision until we have been true to our process.

Often we engage in conflict without knowing what really is at issue for ourselves and others. Then, either unity cannot be reached or decisions we thought had been made, resurface. These are symptoms of “not talking about what we are talking about.” Relational and identity issues are the hottest ones in conflict and often are the ones more difficult to talk about. Below are some questions to help clarify the real issues.

### ***To identify interests, ask:***

- 1) What if? “What if we did \_\_\_\_\_? What would that mean to you?”
- 2) What will it take? “What would need to happen for us to move toward unity?”
- 3) Why not? “What blocks you from moving toward unity?”
- 4) What would be the perfect situation?
- 5) How do you like to be treated?
- 6) What problem(s) are we trying to solve?
- 7) What is your goal?
- 8) What concerns you the most?
- 9) When are you most irritated? most satisfied?
- 10) Describe a situation when things went well.
- 11) What do you want? What would it mean if you got it?
- 12) What are two other ways you can get what you want?
- 13) How do you want to be treated?
- 14) What would the other have to do to satisfy you?
- 15) What would help you feel good?

Ask these questions from a curious perspective. Your goal is to clarify interests. So paraphrase, guess, expand....until the other is heard. Expect the same courtesy.



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*You can also guess at interests by the following....*

1) **Word choices.**

Someone may ask “who is on important committees?” repeatedly if they have a desire to be seen as a respected member of Meeting. Reflect the underlying need.

2) **Triggering events.**

Often what happens prior to a conflict will give you clues about the underlying issues. For example, if a conflict erupts after a particular person has spoken, the issue may have to do with lack of trust of the person speaking rather than the content of the conflict. If you become aware that you are responding to a person more than the content, you may want to talk to that person directly, in private, to discover ways to rebuild trust.

3) **Repetitive patterns.**

There could be a pattern of having committees thoroughly examine an issue and bring their recommendation to business meeting, only to have another committee appointed to rehash the issue. Could the underlying issue be trust? Could it have to do with strongly held beliefs that no matter the recommendation, approval of capital expenditures are unwarranted? One of the unintended consequences could be that committees stop thorough investigations since they anticipate disapproval.

4) **Themes.**

Themes can be picked up through the kinds of jokes and stories told, the kinds of images and metaphors that emerge, the topics that generate the most energy or the ones that freeze the group. Sometimes risky conflict issues will emerge in indirect ways and you can help clarify the concerns by verbalizing the theme. “I notice that after a recommendation about supporting X group, there are several stories told about the history of Quakers. I am wondering what the stories tell us about our decision?”

5) **Nonverbal communication**, especially incongruent ones.

If a person is saying pleasant words while frowning, you can guess that there are other issues in the conflict that have not yet been addressed. “I notice that you are frowning. Is there an unspoken concern?”

6) **Multiple interests.**

Each of us has many interests in a conflict. I may want closure to a decision, but I am more concerned about the continued value ‘sermons’ offered in business meeting. With courage, I might say that I could listen more easily if critical tones changed to more accepting ones.

### **Skill 3: Ways to De-escalate Anger and Fear**

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It is difficult to clarify your own and others' interests when there is higher than usual anger and fear. Often these emotions need to be calmed, so that clarity can emerge.

- 1.) **Seek more information.**
  - Ask about specifics.
  - Guess about specifics.
  - Paraphrase the speaker's ideas.
- 2.) **Agree with the speaker.**
  - Agree with the facts.
  - Agree with the critic's perception.

Examples: "Sometimes I think you don't take me seriously. It seems that everything I say goes in one ear and out the other."

Specifics: "I'd understand what you mean better if you could give me some examples of when you think I ignore you."

Guess: "Are you talking about last business meeting when I ignored your recommendation without commenting?"

Paraphrase: "It sounds like you're mad at me because you think I'm just humoring you or something. Is that it?"

Agree with facts: "Well, I suppose you're right. Sometimes I don't pay attention to what you say. It's usually when I'm tired or preoccupied."

Agree with perception: "I can see how from your perspective how you could see me as authoritative when I speak a long time. Please give me more feedback so I can understand what blocks our communication."

- 3.) **Make reassuring comments...**
  - About how hopeful you are that the conflict can be worked out.
  
  - About the relationship: that you care about it and want to maintain it.
- 4.) **Role-taking.**
  - Ask the other to take your position: "What do you think I think?" "What do you think would happen to me if I did what you want?"
  
  - Take the other's position: "What would you do in this situation?"
- 5.) **Slow down the process.**
  - Talk more slowly.



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Wait longer before responding.

Write down what the other is saying so you have to think rather just respond.

### 6.) **Control the process productively.**

Set mutual ground rules: "I would like for you not to ignore my comments and I'll promise the same."

Admit error: "I think that decision **was** a mistake; I didn't anticipate the effects it had."

## **Skill 4: Ways to Fractionate and Reframe Issues**

### 1. **Fractionating**

In almost all destructive conflicts, issues get lumped together and tend to expand. Fractionating involves breaking the conflict into manageable units and generating ways of solving individual issues. Each can be agreed upon or agreements on each issue can be tentative to see how they affect succeeding agreements. In the latter case, the entire package is then considered and modifications in the individual agreements are made.

The primary skill in this approach is **fractionation** which allows you to take one issue at a time to work through the multiple bases of any conflict.

Some phrases that help you fractionate are:

"What part of that problem is most important to you right now?"

"That is certainly an important related issue, but we will have better luck taking them one at a time. What was the first one again?"

"We have many concerns on the table. We will go through them all. Let's start with the most straightforward ones first. Let's begin with getting more help on the fellowship committee."

"We have a bundle of issues before us. Can anyone see ways we can group these into three or four major issues to take one at a time?"

### 2. **Reframing**

To get more cooperation between people, it is often necessary to **reframe issues** in the conflict. Reframing can occur on many levels--from recasting language choices to redefining the nature of the conflict.



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### 1.) **Language Reframing.**

Avoid adversarial language by referring to conflicts as *struggles, problems, or discussions*.

Value-laden, negative judgments made by the disputants can be reframed. For example, one participant says, "why does John have to nit-pick our agreement?" You might respond, "John is going over the agreement with a fine toothed comb to make sure there aren't any difficulties that will cause a struggle in the future."

### 2.) **Reframing Positions into Interests.**

The previous information on position vs. interests will help here. Assume that most people start with a position, a solution, and we need to understand the interest to get true unity.

### 3.) **Reframing specific goals into super-ordinate goals.**

Super-ordinate goals are interests we have in common: a strong community, sacred space that is protected, unity more than speed.

### 4.) **Reframing from complaints to requests.**

"He betrayed me" to "I am hurt, want an apology, and want agreement on our minute."



## **Steps for Managing Conflict**

1. **Introduce the scene**  
What is our goal here? In what spirit are we beginning? What spirit is needed?
2. **Establish Commonalities.**  
What we all have in common.
3. **Establish ground rules.**  
A reminder of how we will proceed. Perhaps a reminder of the conditions in Quaker practices that support unity.
4. **Talk about perspectives and issues.**  
What is at issue and what are the perspectives of those involved? As you and others speak, remember to
  - ✓ Fractionate
  - ✓ Reframe
  - ✓ Affirm
  - ✓ Paraphrase
5. **Sort and Summarize**  
What are the issues that have been raised?  
Are the issues framed as interests and not positions?  
What are the commonalities?
6. **Resolve Issues** – the matrix below may help in resolution.



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## SORTING THE CONFLICT

1) <b>No Clash</b> : Similarities that both can have (respect)	1) Action Steps that obtain desired results. Each needs to say what behaviors are needed to signal respect.
2) <b>No Clash</b> : Differences that do not clash (decisions and relationships)	2) Action Steps that obtain desired results. We can hold both of these needs at the same time. We may need to talk about what behaviors support both.
3) <b>Clash</b> : Differences that do clash and are <b>problems</b> to solve (time and cost—if we wait, our costs will triple)	3) Set criteria for problem resolution and choose solutions that meet the most critical interests. Or there may be additional resources that help solve the issue. We may want the issue to season AND there may be an unexpected donor who can cover the additional costs.

### 7. Make agreements/decisions.

Agreements should be specific and time bound. Even if a decision is postponed, there should be clarity on when and where the issue will be addressed again.

### 8. Test the feasibility.

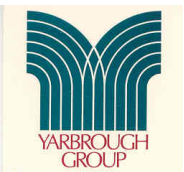
Are there reasons the decision will not work? Are there people who need to be included? Additional information? Resources?

If needed, refine the agreement.

### 9. Track agreements.

How will progress on decisions be tracked? The committee of origin? The finance committee? The Clerk? .And when will progress be reported to Meeting?

## CONCLUSION



## **CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT: A Simple Guide for Quaker Practice**

Managing conflict is not tidy. It requires self-awareness, a willingness and ability to speak your own interests, and a willingness and ability to listen to others.

Constructive conflict is the gateway for authentic, trusting community. When we build our resilience and faith in our conflict process, each succeeding conflict creates less angst. We know that we will make mistakes and that we can correct our course to move toward agreements that support our sacred space.

