

## Exercise 24.1: Six Common Elements of Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a natural outgrowth of being in relationship with others (romantic or otherwise). All of us do things that bug other people, and it is easy to slide from irritation into conflict. Our competitive training makes it easier to walk away from the relationship or go into full-on blame-seeking mode. A better option is to have real conflict tools.

An effective and complete conflict resolution process has **six common elements**,<sup>39</sup> which are designed to balance cognition, intuition, and emotions. You can use this list as a checklist both for current, alive conflicts, and for understanding what might have been missed that made old conflicts unresolvable. At each step it is important to get consent if you are involving another person directly.

1. **Authenticity.** Emotions do not equal logic and they shouldn't have to. What you feel is what you feel, and being able to own and acknowledge whatever that is can be a key to having things go well. It's important to understand that we are not talking here about unfiltered dumping on each other: connecting with and being able to express your emotions is needed to build understanding, but aggression is counter-productive and will reduce the likelihood of actually getting anything resolved.
2. **Encouragement to self-honesty and discernment.** When each person is encouraged to get clear about any roles they may be playing in the dynamic, as well as what they truly need to communicate, the whole thing goes better. Self-honesty is also related to our capacity for compassion with other imperfect beings, which almost always helps. If I can get honest about my own messy self and the ways I sometimes mess up, it can help me to be more compassionate about the ways others are similarly a mess.
3. **Sharing the story of the trigger(s).** What happened? What started your reaction? Sometimes conflict feels really "out of nowhere" to some people involved; the story helps connect the dots. We all have unhealed trauma in our systems, whether small or large. Most conflicts are either being driven by unhealed and unacknowledged trauma, or are made more difficult by the vulnerabilities that continue to live in us.
4. **What's at stake?** Why is this important enough to you that you are upset? In our experience, this is the least common element in conflict systems, and often the most potent. Something *matters* to someone, or there wouldn't be a conflict. If someone seems to be blowing something out of proportion, it may well be because there isn't awareness of what's at stake for them.

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39. Yana distilled this model from three primary sources: Marshall Rosenberg's widely practiced Nonviolent Communication (more recently rebranded as Compassionate Communication), Laird Schaub's work on conflict systems for meetings, and Dominic Barter's Restorative Circles work which stems from the larger Restorative Justice movement. All three of these models bring something unique into conflict work, and, in Yana's experience as a professional working with a lot of groups, all three seemed to be missing some key element or elements. Integrating these has led to a more complete and balanced system.



5. **Reflection and checking for mutual understanding.** Classic tools such as reflective listening or mirroring are really useful. The tools for Dialogue in this handbook are partly intended to help build skills for this step of this process.
6. **Pro-active options:** a request, an offer, a commitment to process, etc. The point of this step is restoration of relationship. This works best if it is concrete and measurable. It can be deeply disheartening to do all of this work, get to a better place with someone, and then later be unsure if anything tangible has happened to really change the dynamics or heal the damage the conflict created.

You can use this six-step model in multiple ways.

It can be a great diagnostic checklist if you've been trying to resolve something and it has stagnated on you or even escalated. Was one of these steps skipped? This is also a great way to use this for couples. Often one person in the partnership has been doing three steps, and the other partner four steps, and both believe that they are making a really good effort, but neither has the full package.

You can use it with an active conflict. Arrange for someone to be present who is a neutral party and can help keep you on track. Walk through the steps in order, checking for understanding each other as you go.

Use this as a guide for your own personal growth work. If you are good at some pieces, and not so good at others, lean in to learning the new steps so you can have them more readily accessible when you are in an active conflict.

Note: Notice that nowhere in this process are we trying to determine "the truth" of what happened. Truth-seeking and blame-seeking are two of the characteristics of our punitive legal system which rarely lead to actual healing. We often get stuck in trying to determine the truth when stories about what happened and how they were experienced are really different. Get into the story enough to understand why someone is reacting the way they are, but be wary of getting caught up in trying to determine what "actually" happened: it tends to be a black hole of energy and to not really lead anywhere good. A good test is: can you see how they are having the response they are having given that this is what they believe happened? Reach for compassion, not truth-seeking.