

NAVIGATING CONFLICT IN MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

What would we win if we addressed conflict skillfully and healed wounds in our social justice work? We've asked this question to countless movement organizations around the U.S., and heard their responses: sustainability, greater effectiveness, rest and restoration, more time and energy for the fight.

If we don't address the ways conflict is wounding our relationships and movements, our opposition can just sit back and watch us tear each other apart.

Conflict is not in itself bad, it is to be expected, especially in our movement organizations working against injustice. Consider someone hiking up a mountain: the activity of hiking inevitably puts the body under stress/strain. But it's when they are not moving up that mountain with strength and alignment that that stress and strain can turn into injury.

In this way, we want our organizations to be able to move through conflict with strength and alignment so we can be more effective at winning justice.

COMMON ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO INJURY

"JUST STICK SOME ICE ON IT"

We don't have time, so let's just bring the swelling down and move on without addressing the underlying issues that caused the pain.

"IT'S NO BIG DEAL"

I can bear it, let's continue in the same way and wait until a breaking point.

"THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO ABOUT IT"

Pain is so commonplace that healing feels impossible to achieve... unless **major** intervention happens. It's an unfixable problem.

"WE JUST HAVE BAD ANKLES"

These people fighting are the problem, not the conditions around them. This could look like asking two staff members in conflict to go to mediation without addressing the lack of feedback flow that supported the rupture in the first place.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT BEHAVIORS LEAD TO INJURY?

Disregarding past injury and state of the nervous system

It's not accidental that many people are drawn to work at movement organizations because of their personal experience with violence as part of a marginalized community. They bring into the organization both the deep wisdom and the trauma their life experience affords. When the work environment is not trauma-informed, this can result in a sense of hypervigilance at work, a persistent fight/flight state, engaging in blame and shame when others exhibit trauma responses.

Lack of awareness of the impacts of changing terrain

Imagine trying to move over a frozen lake the same way you would move through a sand pit. When the terrain changes, it's an opportunity for the organization to express its priorities, and that process can often lead to rupture. Here are some examples of changing terrain:

- Transitions in leadership
- Funding cuts
- Political landscape shifting due to elected officials/sector/municipal funds shifting

Assuming relational skills carry over to internal conflict work

Staff tend to perceive each other as skilled communicators and mediators in conflict because they see their co-workers make use of those skills in their external facing work. There is a common assumption that that skill easefully carries over to internal facing conflict at work. E.g. White staff might be great at giving clients critical feedback, but haven't built strength in muscle to give critical feedback to colleagues of color.

Dismissing or ignoring the initial signs of tenderness

Those most impacted by white supremacy are often the first to feel the impacts of misalignment, and organizations are often not set up to value these initial warnings. This could look like BIPOC raising frustration with organization policies, white people and leaders tamping down the pain and hurt.

Repeating inequitable patterns in policy

When an organization is not attuned to the way that systems of oppression are manifesting in workplace policies such as hiring, management, decision making, etc., over time, these patterns become "locked" into place and feel impossible to change.

Not making time for rest and re-fueling

When we are fatigued, we can't move with as much intention even if we want to. Organizationally, this could look like a constant sense of urgency, untenable work plans, and a lack of emotional support for staff who are doing intense front-line work.

Not taking the time to build alignment of workplace culture expectations

With many organizations that are composed of people who have some shared experience of oppression (e.g. queer people, trans people, Black people, etc.), it is common for the workplace to become unintentionally interwoven with ideas of home and family. The risk is not in the weaving of these ideas, it is in the lack of shared alignment and intention. If expectations of a co-worker are caught up in expectations of a kin, accountability becomes more challenging to define.

FOUR ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS FOR STRENGTH AND ALIGNMENT IN CONFLICT

We have identified these four systems that are key for strength and alignment in conflict through our decade of work with movement organizations. One way to think about them is as "muscle groups" that an organization needs to stay stable and aligned through stress. If one or more of these are shaky, it's likely to lead to greater rupture down the road.

FEEDBACK

Having robust feedback channels, especially across teams and hierarchy, is crucial in helping an organization pivot away from the protection of power and towards a culture of sharing power. Feedback channels can be containers for productive conflict that provide opportunity for organizational growth. Without sufficient and effective avenues for feedback, you can count on the friction surfacing elsewhere, uncontained.

PRINCIPLED DISAGREEMENT

We need disagreement to get to our best work and tap into the wisdom of the collective. When disagreement is mistaken for harm, it obstructs our ability to do excellent work. Doing this in multi-racial formations requires a high level of resiliency and trust that we can both hold the principles of racial, economic, and gender justice and disagree with each other. The assumption that having the same values means always agreeing is a set up for failure (and preventing people, especially BIPOC, from thriving).

DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING

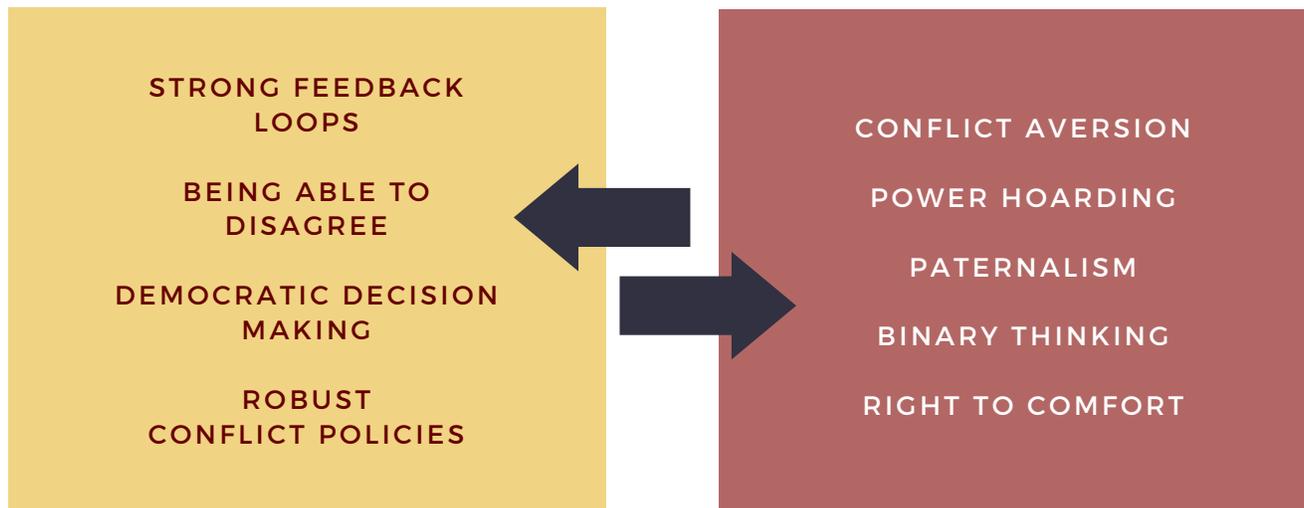
Democratic decision making supports us in reorienting the default flow of power by valuing outlying perspectives that might be quiet, particularly due to marginality and repression. When our decision making processes are transparent and invite meaningful input for those affected around resource allocation, priority setting, and strategic direction, we commit to surfacing questions and misalignment instead of silencing them and presuming sameness in opinion and approach.

CONFLICT POLICY AND PRACTICE

This is about setting up systems within the organization that make pathways, tools, and agency available for individuals and groups in conflict. Without this piece in place, people are left to fend for themselves without being resourced, and those most impacted by systems of oppression bear the brunt of that. Setting up robust policy and practice around conflict resolution in the workplace is an opportunity to ground the organization's response to conflict in principles, not panic.

WHY ARE THESE SYSTEMS USUALLY SHAKY?

Having strong feedback loops, being able to disagree, make decisions democratically - all of these systems are directly in opposition conflict aversion, power hoarding, paternalism, binary thinking, and other traits of White Supremacy culture* that pervade our organizations. Building strength tends to result in a healthy soreness - don't mistake this for injury. .



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

FEEDBACK

- Is feedback available in every direction in my organization?
- What are the structures in place that make the journey of feedback transparent: giving → receiving → reflecting → action? Which part of the journey are visible to my colleagues?

PRINCIPLED DISAGREEMENT

- How regularly do we engage in principled disagreement in my organization?
- What formal and informal workplace practices encourage people to be in principled disagreement? What about practices that discourage principled disagreement?

DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING

- Do we have a clear, understandable decision making process?
- How consistently is this decision making process followed? When and if it isn't, who isn't following it and what happens?

CONFLICT POLICY AND PRACTICE

- What policy and practices currently exist around conflict resolution? Does the policy and practice match?
- What are the resources available to staff when conflict emerges?

**Check out the work of Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones on White Supremacy Culture for more*