

COMMUNITY ALPHABET

TENSION AND CONFLICT



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NADACE VIA

WHAT IS TENSION AND CONFLICT?

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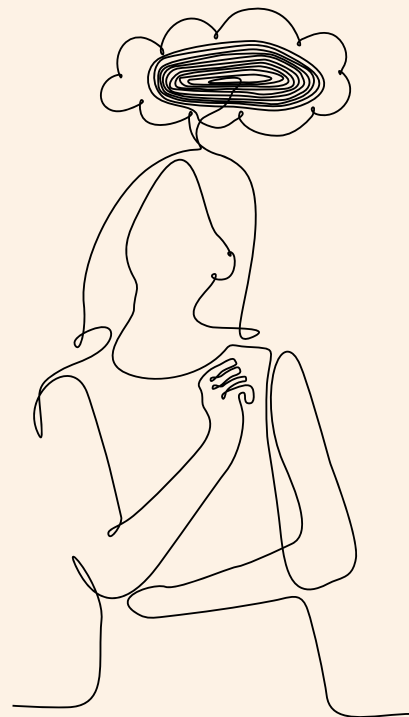
Situations of tension and conflict are **natural parts** of all social contexts.

They happen when people have **goals and wishes that collide**, and can show up in teams, groups or communities, or between these and external stakeholders.

Tension and conflict in itself is **neither good nor bad**, but how they are handled matters a lot.

Tension and conflict that is ignored or handled poorly can escalate and deepen and have strong negative effects on the people involved.

Tension and conflict that is handled constructively can, on the other hand, help us understand each other's differences and needs, deepen relationships and inspire creative problem solving.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think of a situation when a conflict contributed to something positive in your life. What do you think made the experience a good one?

WHY IS DEALING WITH TENSION AND CONFLICT IMPORTANT FOR COMMUNITY BUILDERS?

Communities, as all groups, are made up of diverse people.

If we mean to be **truly inclusive** in our community building, we can also count on tension and conflict arising, as different values, perspectives, ideas and priorities rub against each other.

Tension and conflict can be **uncomfortable**.

- They arouse the **nervous system** and make us more likely to react with strong emotions.
- They can make us **hold on to our own perspective** and make it more difficult for us to see the perspectives of others.
- They can make it **harder for us** to act calmly and strategically, and to communicate and listen well.

Having tools to understand situations of tension and conflict, make strategic decisions on conflict management and communicate with clarity and compassion can help turn situations of tension and conflict into opportunities for learning and growth.

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

How do you react in situations of conflict or tension? How does it feel in your body, and how do you usually deal with the emotions and thoughts that come up?

HOW LEARNING ABOUT TENSION AND CONFLICT CAN HELP COMMUNITY BUILDING

*“We had a long tension - about 6 months - in our team. We were stuck and we couldn’t move forward. Then we had a team building – with a circle to share feelings, problems – this resolved lots of bad feelings....the steps on how to communicate your feelings were useful. There was no judging. **We were able to share feelings and see how others see the different mechanisms within the group and what motivates them, which makes you more empathetic.**”*



*“I hate conflict situations with violence and open aggressivity, but it's impossible to avoid them completely. But **now I feel confident to set the rules of communication and conflict dealing.**”*



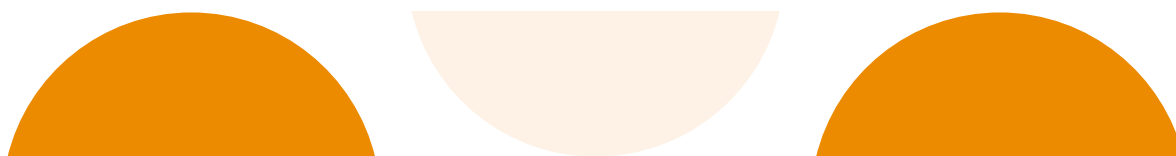
*“I had a strong conflict during carrying out my project. Interactive pairwork practices and learning about the importance of communication helped me a lot to understand the situation better. Also, sometimes I had conflicts within myself. **Learning more about how to identify my own strategies and different situations may help me handle conflicts within and outside of me in the future.**”*

UNDERSTANDING TENSION AND CONFLICT

The first step to managing a conflict better is to understand it better. It's important to know at least:

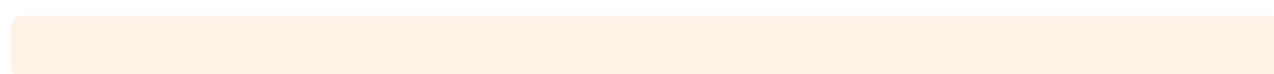
- **who** is involved, both directly and indirectly
- **what** are the causes and drivers of the conflict
- **how** those things interact with each other¹

It's also important to understand the **power dynamics** between different actors and perspectives. You can read more about power in the [Power dynamics and bias thematic bloc](#).



Finally, all efforts to understand situations of tension and conflict need to take into account that in these situations, **reality often looks different from different perspectives**, and our emotions, values, needs and fears are an important part of the equation!

Therefore, it's important to always try to understand the views and perspectives of others involved in the conflict, even if you don't agree with them.



¹ [Reflecting on Peace Practice \(RPP\) Basics. A Resource Manual](#) (Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2016).

A CLOSER LOOK AT ACTORS

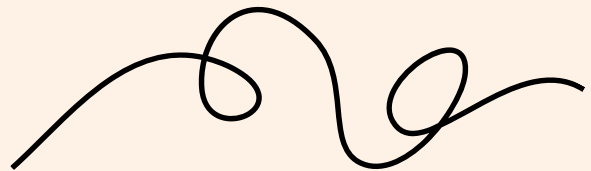
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The people who have opposing goals are the **central actors** of any conflict. But conflicts often also involve **outside actors** with a high degree of interest or influence in the conflict, through their power over the issues at stake, their relationships with the central actors, or both.

To identify the most important actors in a conflict, you can ask yourself what actors would be able to have a **strong influence** on the way the conflict plays out. These actors are important to finding a good way to manage the conflict.

When conflicts escalate, it's common for the central actors to tell their stories, look for support and ask others to **take sides**, which can pull more people into the conflict.

To manage a conflict sustainably, relationships need to be restored not only between the central actors and those directly influential, but also between these larger groups.²



CONFLICT MAPPING EXERCISE

Drawing a map of the conflict can help you get an overview of the actors in a conflict, together with their relationships and power dynamics. See this [exercise](#) for a guide.



² Craig, Colin. *Navigating Conflict and Change - DPC Handbook* (Dialogue for Peaceful Change, 2023).

CAUSES OF CONFLICT

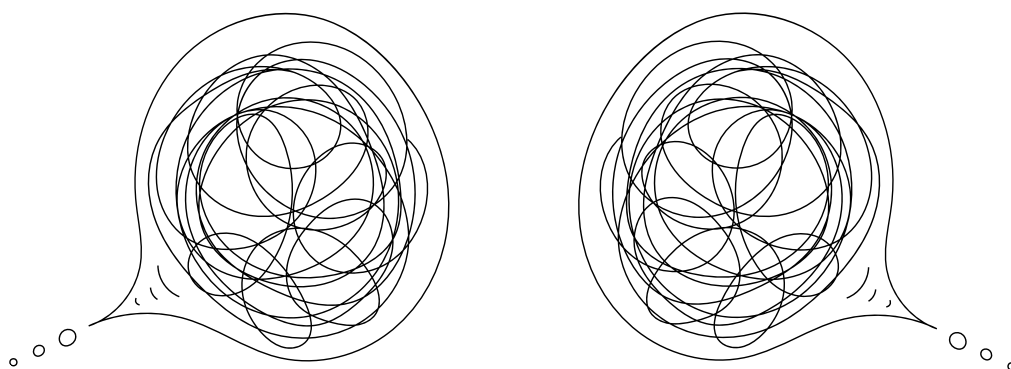
There are many ways to understand the **causes** of conflict. One typology comes from mediator Christopher Moore.

- **Data**, or rather a lack of information, inequalities in the access to data, or different interpretations of data, can drive conflict. These conflicts can be helped by transparency and trying to find an agreement on the interpretations of available information.
- **Interest**: The interests are the “whys” behind people’s positions. If we understand why people want what they want, it’s easier to find solutions than if we’re stuck talking about positions (see more on page 10).
- **Values**: Values go deeper than interests, and are embedded in culture, personal beliefs, religion and other systems. Working to help people understand each other’s perspective is an important aspect of conflict management in these situations.
- **Structure**: Power imbalances, time constraints, externally imposed rules and other structures can make conflict more likely. These conditions themselves may be hard for the central actors to resolve, but gaining a better understanding for each other’s needs and positions is a first step.
- **Relationship**: Negative images of the other, poor communication, misunderstandings and emotion also drive conflict, both on its own and in combination with the other causes. To resolve these parts, it’s important for all parties to take responsibility for how they contribute to the conflict.³

³ Moore, Christopher W., *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*. (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996). More information can be found at e.g.: Craig, C. *Navigating Conflict and Change - DPC Handbook* (Dialogue for Peaceful Change, 2023), Retrieved 10 November, 2024.

CAUSES OF CONFLICT

Most conflicts are driven by more than one factor. By thinking through what might be the main causes of a particular conflict, we can also get some guidance on what's needed to resolve it.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think about a conflict or situation of tension you've faced in your work in the community.

- *What types of causes were involved?*
- *Which were more or less important?*
- *Does thinking about the causes of conflict help you see where to concentrate your efforts to find a solution?*



UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT DYNAMICS

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The **dynamics of a conflict** is what maintains, escalates or deescalates it. Conflicts are not static.

An escalating conflict can be described as a **spiral**, where a small conflict between central actors left unresolved can lead to negative images of the other, hostile behaviours, seeking allies, and so on in a way that makes both the conflict matter, intensity, and number of actors involved grow.⁴

The Norwegian peace researcher Johan Galtung describes conflict as having three elements.

A

ATTITUDES

Thoughts, feelings and wishes people have about the conflict itself and about other actors in the conflict

B

BEHAVIOURS

Actions that each actor takes in relation to the conflict and to other actors

C

CONTRADICTION

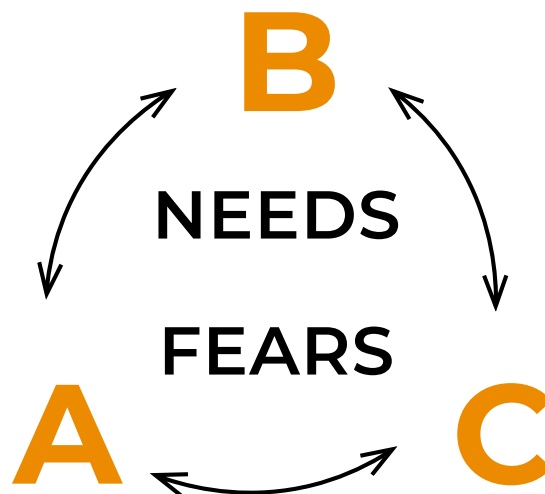
Basic opposing goals or wishes between parties to the conflict. Can also mean context, as in the broader context that influences the conflict patterns.⁵

⁴ For a detailed theory on conflict escalation, see Friedrich Glasl as explained in Jordan, Thomas. "[Glasl's nine-stage model of conflict escalation](#)" (October 2000). Retrieved 16 October, 2024.

⁵ Galtung, J. [Theories of Conflict](#) (University of Oslo: 1958).

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT DYNAMICS

These three - Attitudes, Behaviours and Contradiction - are often drawn out as a triangle, where each corner represents one aspect of conflict dynamics, and there are arrows showing that they all influence each other.



Our attitudes, behaviours and even what we want changes as a conflict evolves. Change, positive or negative, in any element can spark either escalation or de-escalation, by affecting the other elements.

ABC CONFLICT ANALYSIS EXERCISE

You can use Galtung's model to do a [conflict analysis](#) to help you better understand both conflict elements and dynamics.

POSITIONS, INTERESTS & NEEDS

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The **contradiction or opposing goals** in a conflict usually have different layers. Understanding them better is helpful when trying to find creative solutions.



Positions are openly held opinions and wishes, and are often the easiest to see. It's what people say they want in a conflict. A position might be *"I want the new park to have parking"*. Another may be *"I want our new park to be car free"*.

Interests lie deeper than positions, and describe the reasons why people want what they say they want. The person who wants a parking lot may

want to come to the park with their son with a physical disability or may be the only person in the group who lives too far away from the site to bike.

Needs are even more fundamental, and shared between all people, even though we interpret and fulfil them in different ways. It may be things like human connection, psychological and physical safety, and food and shelter.⁶

⁶This model appears in many conflict resolution materials, among them Fischer, Simon et.al. *Working with Conflict 2. Skills and Strategies for Action* (London: Zed Books, 2020).

POSITIONS, INTERESTS & NEEDS

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Positions in a conflict often seem completely locked - like a zero sum game where A can only get what they want if B doesn't. But if we are able to ask about and understand why the things the parties want are important to them, it may very well be possible to find a solution that satisfies the interests and/or needs of both.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think about a situation of tension or conflict that you have faced in your work in the community.

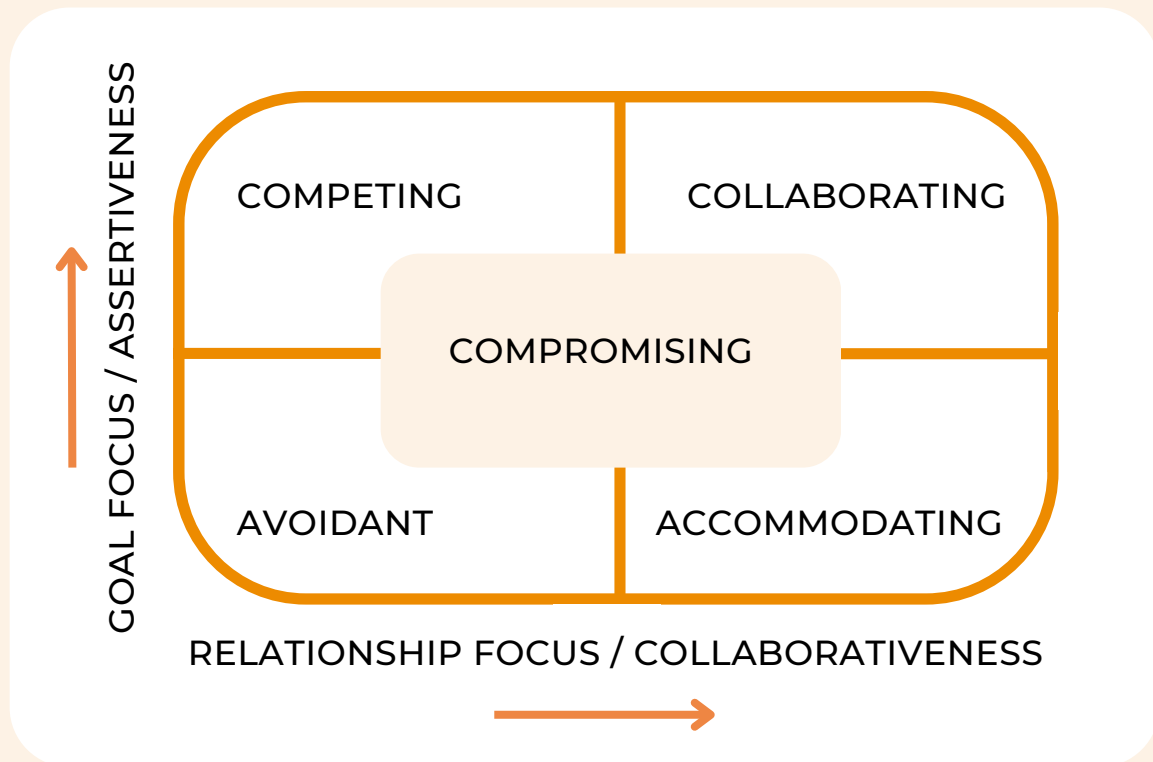
Map out your positions, interests and needs in the conflict, trying to distinguish between them.

Start with “what” you want or wanted, and keep asking yourself “why is this important to me”, until you feel that you’ve gotten all the way to your needs.

CONFLICT MODES

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Researchers Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann describe **5 modes of conflict management**, depending on how focused an actor is on their own goal (assertiveness) versus on the relationship to the other actor (collaborativeness).



Avoidant: to focus neither on the relationship nor on the goal, avoiding the conflict by removing oneself from the situation or ignoring it. The solution is a lose-lose one - neither party gets what they want. This may be appropriate if the timing is wrong to deal with the issue, or if the benefits of removing yourself outweighs the need for resolution.

Accommodating: to focus more on the relationship than on the goal, and therefore let go of one's own interests and needs to accommodate the other person. The solution is a lose-win one - one person gets what they want while the other doesn't. This style may be appropriate if the issue is of less importance or if you're dependent on the relationship for other needs, but can cause resentment and anger over time.

CONFLICT MODES

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Competing: to focus more on the goal than on the relationship, trying to get one's way even if it hurts the other party. This is a win-lose solution, and may hurt the relationship and make future collaboration more difficult. There might however be situations where it's appropriate, such as when the desired outcome is a basic right or need, and when the conditions for more collaborative solutions are not present.

Collaborating: to focus on both the goal and the relationship, trying to problem-solve together and find win-win solutions that will satisfy the needs of both parties. This is a style that can deepen relationships and lead to creative outcomes. It's also time consuming and requires a lot of work and willingness, so not helpful for trivial matters.

Compromising: Somewhere in the middle, a compromise leaves both parties with some gains and some losses. It can be appropriate when cooperation is important but time doesn't allow a collaborative solution, or when you need an interim solution while working on the greater issues.⁷

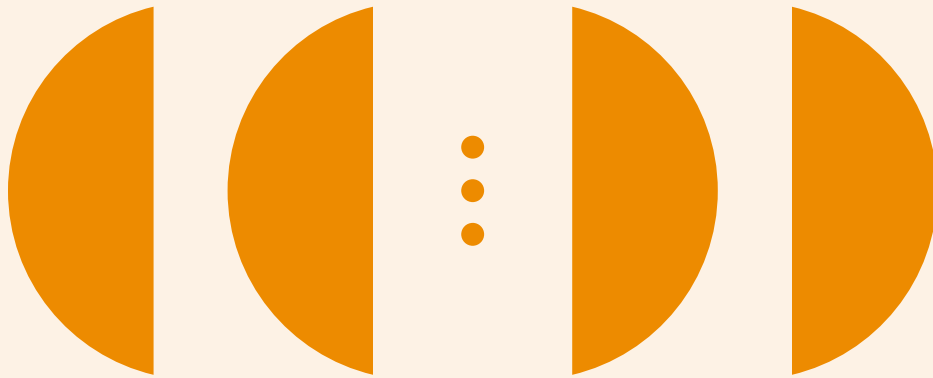


⁷Thomas, K. & Kilmann, R. *Thomas-Kilmann conflict MODE instrument* (1976). [Kilmann Diagnostics](#), Retrieved 1 November, 2024.

CONFLICT MODES

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Most of us gravitate toward one style or another. Being more **mindful** and **strategic** in which style we choose by thinking through what's important to us, how much **time and resources** we are willing to invest in resolution and what **consequences** are acceptable to us can help manage conflict more effectively.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Is there a conflict style that you naturally gravitate towards? What are the pro's and con's this style? Are there any styles you'd like to practise more? Why?

CONFLICT MODES EXERCISE

If you want to dive deeper, this [exercise](#) will help you use the conflict modes to strategise.

COMMUNICATION IN CONFLICT

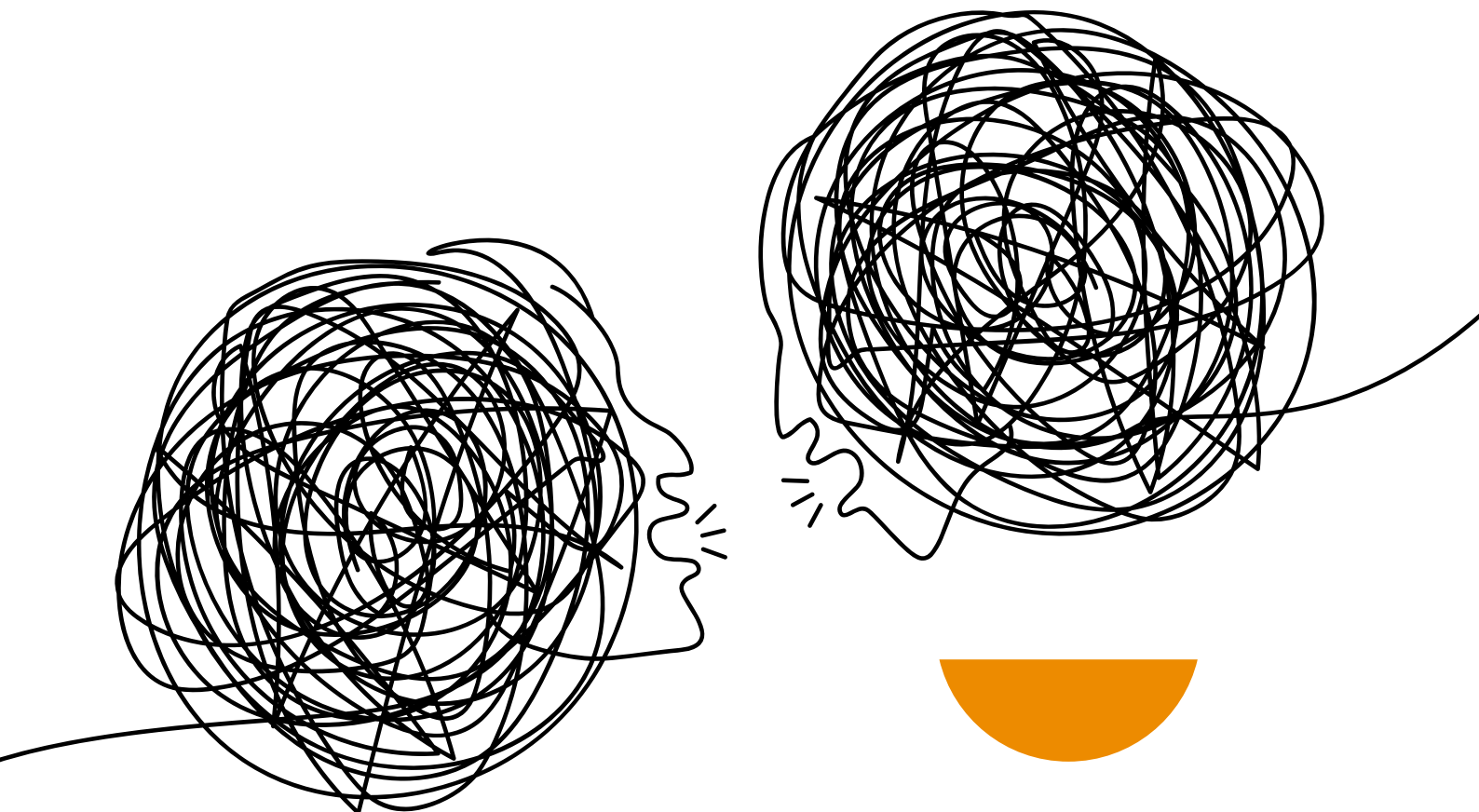
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No matter what conflict management tool or strategy, **communication is at the core.**

Communication consists of both **sending** messages and **receiving** those messages - listening is as important as expressing.

Between two people trying to communicate there are **filters** - language, background, culture, values, ideas, emotions, etc. - that can distort the message, making the receiver hear other things than the sender intended. This is further described in the [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#).

In situations of tension and conflict, with **heightened emotions and a lot at stake**, the risk for these filters to muddle communication is even greater.



COMMUNICATION IN CONFLICT

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To make sure we communicate as effectively as possible in a conflict situation we need to:

- Find ways to express ourselves that **minimise the risk** of defensiveness, hurt and escalation. We will explore this further in the next slide.
- **Listen openly**, with curiosity and compassion, to the concerns of the other person. This is covered in depth in the [Active listening thematic bloc](#).
- Make sure that messages are **properly understood**, by asking for and providing feedback. This can for example be through paraphrasing - telling the message back to the sender in our own words and asking if we've understood it correctly.

Keeping all of these things in mind in the midst of tension or conflict can seem overwhelming. Taking a deep breath, grounding yourself by feeling your body, and trying to stay mindful throughout the conversation might sound hard, but can help.



A MODEL FOR EXPRESSING CONCERNS AND FRUSTRATIONS

So how **do** we express our concerns and frustrations while minimising the risk of triggering defensiveness, hurt or anger in the other? This is one model, adapted from, among others, Marshall B Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*.⁸

1 OBSERVATION

Start with an **observation** of the behaviour that frustrates you. Be careful to only **describe what you can observe with your senses**. Refrain from interpretations - such as words that describe someone's character - and generalisations - like every, always, never - which can easily trigger defensiveness.

EXAMPLE

"I've noticed that you haven't done the tasks that were assigned to you in time over the last three meetings."



2 CONSEQUENCES

Describe what **consequences** this action has, from your perspective, feelings and needs. One way is to start with **your emotions**, and then explain why you feel like that based on **your own needs**.

EXAMPLE

"This makes me feel frustrated and stressed, because it's important to me that the project moves in time so we don't have to pay back the stipend."

⁸ Rosenberg, M.B. [*Nonviolent Communication, A Language of Life*](#). 3rd edition. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015). Retrieved on 14 November, 2024.

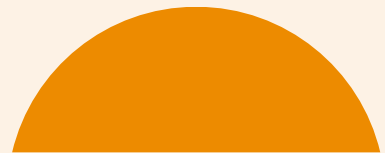
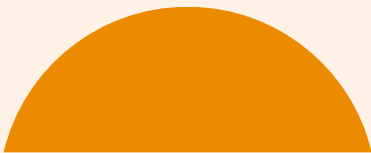
A MODEL FOR EXPRESSING CONCERNS AND FRUSTRATIONS

3 REQUEST

Make a **request**, to invite the other person to take part in the problem solving. The request can be for a specific action, but often it's useful to start by asking about the other person's experience or needs, to give a chance for them to feel listened to.

EXAMPLE

"Can you tell me what's going on for you, and if there's anything I can do to support you?" / "It would be very helpful for me if you didn't accept tasks unless you know you'll have time to complete them, since that gives the rest of us an opportunity to step in and help."



You can also use this model to listen when someone brings something up with you. Try to understand what they've observed, what the consequences are for them, and what they are asking of you.



EXERCISE

To learn to communicate in this way takes a lot of practice. You can use this [exercise to practice your communication skills](#), either by yourself or with your group.

DIALOGUE, NEGOTIATION, MEDIATION

Dialogue, negotiation and mediation are all ways of working to resolve conflict, but they have slightly different definitions and approaches.

- **Dialogue** is an exploration of perspectives, emotions and needs, with the goal to increase understanding and build trust between different people or groups. Finding a solution is not the primary goal of a dialogue, but increased understanding and trust can often make resolution more likely and open up for creativity. A dialogue can be facilitated by a third party, but doesn't need to be.
- **Negotiation** is a structured interaction between parties, with the goal to find an agreement on specific issues. Negotiating your salary, negotiations between workers and unions on labor conditions, or negotiations between parties in war for a ceasefire are examples.
- **Mediation** is a several-step process, hosted by a third party. The mediator doesn't take sides or control the outcome of the process, but provides a structure and space for it to happen, and uses their skill to help parties understand each other better and come up with joint solutions.

Each of these are **fields of expertise** in their own right, even though they intersect. If you find yourself in a situation where outside support to a conflict is needed, always ask yourself if you have the knowledge and experience needed to be of help, and if not, ask for support!



RESOURCES

- Fischer, S. et.al. *Working with Conflict 2. Skills and Strategies for Action*. (London: Zed Books, 2020).

This is a brilliant resource for practitioners working with conflict, full of perspectives, thoughts, tools and exercises, and written in an accessible, hands-on way.

- Fitzduff, M. and Williams, S. [*Dialogue in Divided Societies – Skills for Working with Groups in Conflict*](#). Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2019. Retrieved on 5 November, 2024.

Great resource for facilitators working with conflict specifically, but also holds exercises that work in any group to build trust and get to know each other better.

- Rosenberg, M.B. [*Nonviolent Communication, A Language of Life*](#). 3rd edition. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015). Retrieved on 14 November, 2024.

Classic and accessible book on communicating with empathy and care. Contains detailed guidance, small exercises, and reflective questions.

- Jordan, Thomas ["Glasl's nine-stage model of conflict escalation"](#) (October 2000). Retrieved 16 October, 2024.
A good summary of the stages of a conflict.

Return to the [Useful tools page](#).