CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

A workshop to discuss conflict as a creative force, and how to use it productively
SESSION OUTLINE

Without conflict there would be no progress, yet that same force can be highly destructive. Through guided reflection and discussion, participants will look at ways in which they can harness conflict and make it a tool for improvement rather than destruction.

Length of session Intended Group Size
1.5 hours 20 people

Materials
Prepared Flipcharts Pens
Sticky notes Blinders/Blinfolds

Introduction (5 minutes)
Introduce to participants the goals and assumption of the session. Express to participants that conflict can be both a destructive and creative force and the point of this session is to have participants think of ways to use it creatively.

Conceptualization of Conflict (20 minutes)
This time is to be used to have participants think about the Who, What, Where, When, Why and How of conflict. Divide the group into groups of three or four and have them write down the ideas to these 5 questions on individual sticky notes.

Ask each group to post the sticky notes on the board under each of the different categories and explain why they have placed that sticky note under that category. Use 10 minutes for this activity and then move on to explaining different types of conflict.

On a flip chart or board have the following types of conflict written down and explain them one by one to the participants with appropriate examples.

Constructive approaches
- Pragmatic approach: *Let's look at the facts and figure this thing out.*
- The Self-Empowered Approach: *Here is what I am doing about it.*
- The Relationship Builder Approach: *First, let's get to know each other.*
- The Conciliator Approach: *I know we can work this out.*
Passive/aggressive approaches

- The Avoider Approach: *Time heals all wounds.*
- The Accommodator Approach: *I lose and you win so you will like me.*
- The Regulator Approach: *If we do it for you, we will have to do it for everyone*
- The Insulator Approach: *The way my boss [or other significant third-party] feels about it...*

After you have explained all types of conflicts, have the participants relate the characteristics they came up with on the sticky notes to each type of conflict. This part can be shortened if time is short.

**Guided Reflection (15 minutes)**

This is a time participants should use for self-reflection about conflict. Either through silent time or through a guided meditation, ask participants to think about an experience of conflict and the way they and other actors managed the situation.

Encourage them to find three characteristics of themselves while engaging in conflict. This activity is used to have participants think more about their own experience with conflict so they can apply what they find out about themselves to future conflict.

**Conversation with Blinders (10 minutes)**

This activity will make participants think more about their communication in general, not just conflict.

Ask participants if they know what a leading question is and prompt examples. Repeat this process for exploratory questions and ensure they know the difference between the two.

Ask them to get in pairs and tell them to have one partner be the “leading question” partner and the other be the “exploratory question”. Have them sit with their backs to each other and put on blindfold to limit communication to only oral communication. Tell them to start a conversation about the conflict they thought about during the self reflection (if they feel comfortable talking about it) using only the type of questions they are assigned to. Do this for about 5 minutes and bring the group back together to discuss how the felt, what their limitations were, whether they had frustrations, etc.

**Counting as a Group (15 minutes)**

This activity will encourage the participants to think about their skill of listening, which is another important skill when it comes to conflict.
management.

Give the group the challenge of counting to 30 as a group. The trick is that only one person can speak at a time and nobody can say a number twice in a row. If two people speak out at once, the group must start over. This activity is about listening to the group, being aware of the people around you, feeling what everyone is thinking and about to do. You can also share that this is an improvisational theatre training exercise, and that there are teams that do this two hours a week to get in tune with each others’ rhythms so they don’t interrupt each other. (Also, that I’ve seen groups of 50 people get to over 100.)

**Debrief (15 minutes)**

This time is crucial to bring together all the skills learned during the session and relate them back to conflict. Ask participants to think about the ways in which they all tied together and how they can all be applied to conflict management. Open up the floor to general discussion on the topic.
### Aims and Objectives

#### Rational Aim
Through self-reflection, participants will know how they respond to conflict and will walk away with tools to turn conflict into opportunity.

#### Experiential Aim
Participants have a sense of what they want to improve in their approach to conflict.

### Conceptualization of Conflict

#### Intended Outcomes
The point of this section was to encourage the participants to think about conflict in general by asking them to think about the Who, What, Where, When and How and by introducing to them different types of conflict management. This way they are prepared to think about conflict as it relates to them.

#### Actual Outcomes
Sticky note activity was not clearly explained which caused some confusion and made us loose time. This meant there was not enough time to have a proper discussion on the general characteristics of conflict. Time can be taken away from the Group Counting activity and be given to this part. Overall a general conceptualization of conflict was indeed achieved despite the time issues. To improve this section, the introduction of types of conflict management should include examples and more time has to be given for discussion.

### Guided Meditation

#### Intended Outcomes
The purpose of this meditation was to have participants think about their past experience with conflict and reflect on how they have responded to it. Knowing how they have managed conflict in the past can help them know what to change for the future.

#### Actual Outcomes
It is hard to tell whether the meditation had the intended effect on participants. The subsequent discussion focused more on how they felt rather than on them sharing their own experience with conflict. It cannot be said whether this activity was effective or not.
Blind Conversation (Questioning)

**Intended Outcomes**
The goal of this activity was for the participants to practice the skill of questioning, under the assumption it is necessary for proper conflict management. By making them talk to a partner about their experience of conflict through an environment of sensory deprivation, participants are forced to rely on oral communication to learn about their partner's experience with conflict.

**Actual Outcomes**
Participants focused more on the typed of questions they were asking rather than on what they wanted to learn with those questions. Giving each of the partners a type of question to ask limited the conversation and many drifted away from talking about conflict. In part this may have been due to lack of clarity in explaining of the activity.

Group Counting Exercise (Listening)

**Intended Outcomes**
The intended outcome of this activity was to have participants practice their listening skills by listening and reading the mood, thoughts, actions and rhythm of the group during the counting exercise. The assumption behind this is that listening skills are necessary for conflict management.

**Actual Outcomes**
This activity felt more like a game than a learning activity. It lacked discussion and it was unclear whether participants really learned to listen or even if they made the connection between listening and conflict.

Overall Outcomes

**Intended Outcomes**
The idea behind the three main activities (meditation, conversation and counting) was to give participants the skills of knowing yourself, questioning and listening with the assumption that these three skills are necessary for conflict management. This way we wanted to achieve our stated goals.

**Actual Outcomes**
Overall, the most effective part of the session was the initial conceptualization of conflict. It is what made the most relevant conversation and where participants appeared to be learning the most. The meditation was probably the most effective at the individual level, but it is hard to tell as there was not enough discussion on specifics that people felt. The outcomes for this activity were mostly personal. For the questioning and listening activities, the participants did get practice in those skills, but it is unclear whether there was a clear connection between these skills and conflict management. The lack of discussion during the debrief makes me feel this connection was not properly uncovered.
RESOURCES

Constructive Conflict by Steve Wille and Bill Kuehn
http://www.colorfulleadership.info/papers/conflict_UK.htm