

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

what goes on the web? in the book? in another book?

□ Understanding conflict

How you conceptualize conflict will guide the way you mediate. This section outlines some perspectives on conflict which underlie the mediation approach described in this handbook.

Life is full of annoyances, opposing interests, cultural differences, dislikes, insults, differences of opinion, and divergent interpretations. Only a fraction of those grow into persistent hostility—those more serious, ongoing situations that we define as “conflicts.” (A “dispute” is a particular incident, often a visible piece of the larger conflict.)

The next three pages map out some different characteristics of conflict: the sense of threat which drives it, what happens when it escalates, and the three primary aspects of conflict that a mediation process needs to address.

□ The Conflict Core

From a mediator’s point of view, many disputes seem irrational or trivial. Why are they fighting about this stuff? People do not expend such intense life energy on something unless it matters deeply, even if from the outside it is hard to understand what motivates the person to feel that way.

The Conflict Core diagram shows the sense of threat that throbs at the core of most conflicts. If the threat is powerful enough, they may act—heroically, foolishly, or meanly—in exaggerated ways they would never do otherwise. By the time they get to the table, the parties are usually feeling under siege. Something important is at stake, they are suspicious and afraid, and this keeps them from resolving the dispute. As mediator, ask yourself “What are these people afraid of?, and it’s corollary: What / who does this person care deeply about?”

This is not to say that a few people don’t leap into conflicts for the sheer pleasure of turmoil or opportunity for gain. Sometimes one side is heavily invested in the conflict while the others are only mildly involved—perhaps because their own core concerns are not threatened or they already have the upper hand.

Mediation can alleviate that sense of threat. The parties hear directly from each other instead of relying on rumor and interpretation. Written agreements can offer a measure of security. As anxiety loosens, the participants can think more productively and honestly about their conflict, act on that wider perspective, and eventually turn their attention and life energy to other things.

THE CONFLICT CORE

Conflict emerges when disagreements, differences, annoyances, competition, or inequities threaten something important.

Ask yourself: What are they afraid of?



UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

□ The Conflict Triangle: People, Process, and Problems

The Conflict Triangle on the following page sorts the spiral elements into three categories. These give mediators a basic framework for assessing the conflict.

- **People.** Every conflict involves personalities, emotions, and a history of relationships.
- **Process.** Intentionally or not, parties take actions which intensify, ease, spread, or resolve a conflict.
- **Problem.** And every conflict has substance—the concerns and needs that are the cause or focus for the dispute.

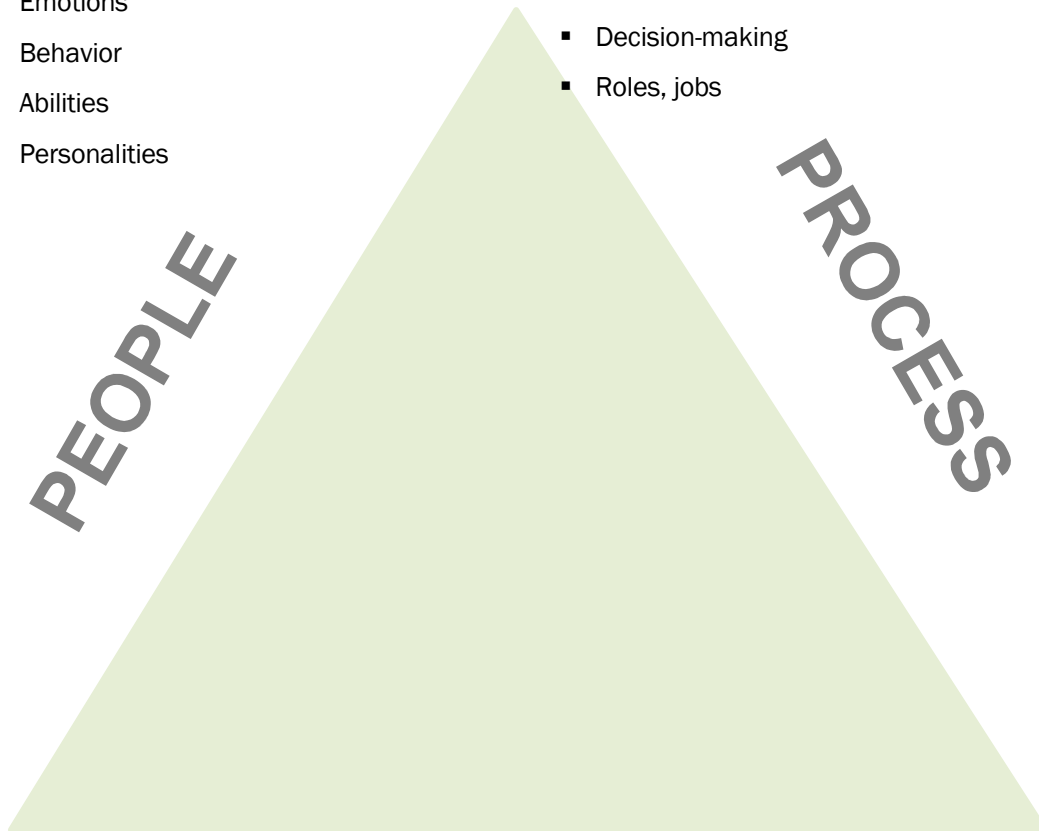
Triangle section on later page?

Any lasting resolution must engage all three sides of the conflict. We chose the triangle as an organizing theme throughout the *Handbook*, because each side of the triangle requires its own set of mediation skills. Assessing the conflict from each vantage point gives the mediator better perspective and more options.

THE CONFLICT TRIANGLE

- Past history
- Values, meanings
- Relationships
- Emotions
- Behavior
- Abilities
- Personalities

- How people communicate issues and feelings
- Structures, systems, procedures
- Norms about how to behave in a conflict
- Decision-making
- Roles, jobs



PROBLEM

- Facts
- Positions
- Issues
- Consequences of events
- Perceptions
- Interests, Needs
- Solutions
- Consequences of possible outcomes

THE CONFLICT SPIRAL

<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/escalation/> has a more sophisticated summary. Link in a sidebar? Just on the web?

□ The Conflict Spiral

As conflict intensifies, all kinds of consequences spiral outward, affecting an increasing number of individuals, relationships, tasks and decisions, and sometimes whole organizations and communities. Beneath what appears from the outside to be a few resolvable issues is in reality a dense, interconnected web of connections and consequences which is difficult to unsnarl. Small wonder disputants feel discouraged by the time they get to mediation.

Internal responses. The stress of conflict an effect the body, mood, and thoughts. Every action or non-action of the other side becomes suspect. People become increasingly rigid in how they see the problem and what solutions they demand. It can be difficult for them to think clearly or to see what is happening.

Interpersonal responses. At first parties try direct strategies to avoid or to resolve the dispute. Eventually desire to exit or to see the other side suffer may predominate. Tactics become more intense.

Organizational and community responses. When the dispute begins to affect those around it, people may take sides or leave. Organizations bend or invent new rules and structures to contain the situation.

Politicization. At some point, the dispute becomes public. Authorities are drawn in. Each side develops set positions and gathers allies for the cause. At this point the conflict has spread beyond the original protagonists' control. The issues are general, not specific to the core people and specific events that launched the dispute. Once parties have crossed this line, there is no going back. Even if a settlement is reached, the relationship will be marked by that history.

□ When is conflict fun?

People invest life energy for protection but also for pleasure. It can be deeply satisfying to

- ✓ Win
- ✓ Get revenge
- ✓ Stand up for a principle or a person or a cause
- ✓ Be engaged in something important to you or to the wider group
- ✓ Gain allies, a sympathetic audience
- ✓ Add a bit of drama to life. For some people, conflict is the reason they get out of bed in the morning.

- ✓ Feel righteous.
- ✓ Think through important issues
- ✓ Take on authorities
- ✓ Feel powerful

To resolve a conflict, each party has to let go of some or all of these satisfactions. When you sense resistance, ask yourself:

What are they giving up?

THE CONFLICT SPIRAL

Not

