

Learning Network

Mobilizing knowledge to end gender-based violence

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Navigating Interpersonal Conflict in Gender-Based Violence Work: A Transformational Approach

You may have heard the saying: “conflict is a normal part of life.” While it may sound cliché, it holds true. Conflict is inevitable due to differing beliefs, values, needs, and power dynamics in society.

Conflict can escalate over time due to breakdowns in communication and trust. It tends to escalate when we get stuck in a struggle to be right, to have our perspectives or needs “win”, but also sometimes, to be simply acknowledged.

In the gender-based violence (GBV) sector and movement, we may encounter conflict in a variety of ways, including challenging interpersonal relationships or dynamics, in our cross-sectoral advocacy to end violence, and in our workplace among community and staff. Further, we are often operating in high-stress environments conducive to increased levels of reactive conflict because people are experiencing higher levels of activation and trauma.



The aim of this Issue is to examine how we can better navigate interpersonal conflict as part of doing GBV work and to support the embracement of trauma-informed transformational conflict models.

Responses to conflict are often grounded in punishment models that suggest there is a “good” and “bad” side in conflict, and that the “bad” side should be punished. The problem with this approach is that punishment and its motivators do not shift behaviours, rather they create organizational cultures that are rooted in fear and precarity, and defensiveness. This is the opposite of what we need to move through conflict successfully. In comparison, transformational conflict models acknowledge root causes and explore how to enable authentic accountability.

This Issue encourages us to accept conflict and inspire towards healthier conflict outcomes through use of the Intentional Conflict Practice Framework. Tangible tips are offered to support the application of the Framework from prevention to de-escalation to resolution. Readers will come away with increased confidence in themselves and their skill sets when navigating conflict in doing GBV work.

This Issue is guest authored by Eddie Jude Hareven.

“I am the founder of [EJH Conflict Management & Resolution Services](#) and you can learn more about my story [here](#). I graduated from the Assaulted Women’s Counseling and Advocacy Program at George Brown College. Understanding gender-based violence played a pivotal role in shaping and developing my approach to conflict management and mediation. As an individual who used to deeply fear conflict and who has now been a professional mediator for 8 years, I will say that the sooner I learned to normalize it, the happier I became and the better I became at managing it. In my conflict management work, my approach and framework are based around the concept of *intentionality*, meaning being mindful in our approach, style, and method, so that we can work constructively towards developing shared meaning.”



Recognizing Types of Interpersonal Conflict

Conflicts do not always look the same and identifying what type of conflict is occurring can better enable us to respond to the conflict. Here we will explore 5 specific types:

1. Low-impact conflicts:

This looks like our day-to-day conflicts and disagreements over direction, timeline, budget, and priorities which can build up overtime and, if not addressed, create lasting impacts on our relationships. Sometimes low-impact conflicts, though appearing “not serious” in nature, can mask more significant issues.

2. Latent or “sitting” conflicts:

This occurs when no clear “rupture” or “escalating event” has taken place but there is an underlying tension or buildup of resentment that is going unspoken. For example, noticeable changes in interactions between staff or the development of cliques or gossips. These types of conflicts are common and often left to “sit” over time and develop into something more serious.

3. Interest-based conflicts:

This is when parties have competing interests or needs that do not align. For example, a manager that micromanages their team. This could be because the manager is receiving extra scrutiny from their superiors and their interest is in ensuring the results they provide are deemed acceptable. However, staff may interpret it as though they are not seen as competent enough to complete their own work and as impeding their autonomy.

4. Structural and value-based conflicts:

This refers to conflict that arises from patterns of behaviour, as well as inequities within the organization. For example, these conflicts can be a result of value systems that do not align whether this stems from ideologies, religions, political beliefs, etc. Sometimes value-based conflicts are not resolvable, and people must either learn to coexist or part ways.

5. Stubborn or enduring conflicts:

These tend to be difficult because the issues are complex, the emotions are intense, and the communication styles of the disputants clash. Navigating such conflicts can be challenging because there can be elements embedded in the structures, systems, and values of the people or organization which means it will take longer to work through and resolve. Stubborn and enduring conflicts are usually best handled by an external mediator.





Distinguishing Between Conflict and Abuse

While conflict may lead to feelings of disappointment and discomfort, this does not mean that conflict is inherently harmful. Being confronted with a problem can feel challenging, particularly when it is about our own behaviour and actions, but it may not cause harm. However, there are times that abuse is masked as conflict and further help is needed.

Signs that a conflict may involve abuse include:

1. There are threats to your safety and wellbeing (“do this or else”),
2. The conflict is accompanied by actual violence (e.g., physical violence, threats, extortion), and
3. The conflict is consistent/ongoing and not getting better. Some conflicts do take time to resolve but if you are in a constant cycle of escalation and attempts at resolution are not getting anywhere, there may be something more going on that you need to consider, like power dynamics.

Addressing Conflict: Moving Away from Punishment Models Towards Transformational Models

Many of us may have grown up experiencing and perpetuating punishment conflict models where fear, dehumanization, and shame are used to create feelings of remorse and accountability in those who are “bad.” Punishment is often motivated by revenge, vengeance, control, dehumanization, humiliation, and suffering, while minimizing opportunities for growth, learning, and inclusion. We see punishment models in our legal system in the form of prisons and jails, in our personal relationships in the form of physical violence and public humiliation, and in our professional lives in the form of performance-focused reviews and disciplinary actions.

So then, what is an alternative approach to addressing conflict? How can we build a conflict culture of trust and safety where accountability can be obtained without fear and suffering?

This is where transformational conflict models can support us. Transformational conflict models focus on addressing the root causes of issues to prevent escalation and recurrence, recognizing the systemic nature of many conflicts, and promoting accountability and safe spaces for dialogue.

The following outlines key principles and practices of Transformational Conflict Models:

- Exploring the root cause of an issue and minimizing the re-creation of the conditions that caused it, so that the conflict does not escalate and does not repeat itself.
- Understanding that people make mistakes and should be able to learn from them and that people who experience harm deserve safety and accountability.
- Considering that many individual problems are often part of larger systemic problems that require collective change.
- Seeking authentic accountability by prioritizing respect and empowerment over shame.
- Creating safe learning opportunities where people can explore the problem in an intentional and contained way (e.g., through mediated conversations as opposed to only formal discipline).

When we work in this way - through education, intentional group process, and acknowledging the root causes of the issue - the process can take longer, but often can provide us with authentic accountability that comes from a deep place of understanding.



Sharing the Intentional Conflict Practice Framework

The Intentional Conflict Practice Framework (ICPF) was developed by Eddie Jude Hareven. It encourages people to plan for conflict management, just like how we plan for many other high stress scenarios in our lives, so we can be responsive rather than reactive to conflict.

Reacting is an immediate gut or habitual response to a conflict situation. Our immediate reactions are unplanned and can be influenced by numerous factors, including a defense mechanism to discomfort, tension, or escalation. On the other hand, responding is a deliberate action which involves consideration, planning, and making conscious decisions. Responding intentionally as opposed to reacting immediately helps reduce the chances of escalation and prevents unhelpful patterns of behaviour. As a result, we increase the likelihood of achieving our desired outcomes and create space for transformative responses to conflict.

The purpose of the ICPF is to better ensure that we engage in higher risk conversations when we are not activated beyond what our body can tolerate, and this looks different for everyone. Responding intentionally reduces the risk of escalation and falling into patterns of behaviour that are not serving us. When we are reactive, we are defensive, argumentative, blaming, and shaming; we either shut down or we do what we are told. These behaviours are not conducive to resolving conflict.

The ICPF utilizes many of the same skills of de-escalation and supportive responses that those working in the GBV sector are familiar with, such as active listening, modeling, trust building, and co-regulating. Incorporating intentional assessment and reflection into your conflict practice demonstrates these same behaviours.

Responding intentionally, the opposite of reacting, is when we have a purpose and outcome in mind. Here are two first steps to respond intentionally when faced with conflict:

First, consider the outcome you are hoping for when trying to manage and/or resolve this conflict. Our desired outcome is of course, a desire, and not necessarily what will always occur. An outcome can look like:

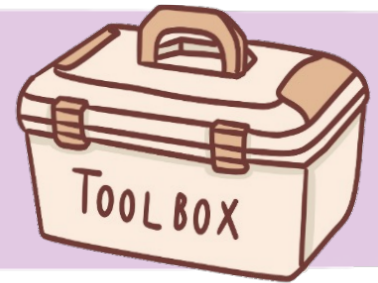
- I want to make this a learning opportunity.
- I want to get curious and understand this person's perspective.
- I want to understand this resistance.
- I want to shut this down immediately.

[Click here](#) to learn more about the intentionality revolution and intentional conflict practice.

Second, conduct a preliminary internal and external assessment to support you in being more likely to achieve your desired outcome. Assess:

1. **Am I prepared to get engaged?** For example: Are you too angry, tired, hungry, or distraught?
2. **Am I the right person to engage?** For example: Is there a conflict of interest or power dynamic? Is there someone who holds more information about the situation? Is there someone who has a better relationship with the individual(s) in conflict?
3. **Are the conditions right, such as time and space?** For example: Is there enough time? Is it late? Are there other people around who will be negatively impacted? Do you need a space that is more public or private?

Running these questions through your mind before engaging can let you know which tools to utilize from your conflict management toolbox, which can include pausing or postponing a conversation, focusing solely on de-escalation for the moment, or engaging in a dialogue for resolution.



Learn Through Application

Blair is organizing a virtual event and someone emails to ask if there is going to be interpretation. Blair responds that unfortunately there is no budget to provide interpretation. The person highlights that is not an “excuse” for the event being inaccessible to them. Blair feels overwhelmed and defensive because they want to support interpretation but feel limited by budget constraints.

Self-Reflection Questions:

- What type of conflict is this?
- What is the desired outcome and/or bottom line?
- What behaviours and actions can get us there?



How could Blair respond in this situation?

- Thank the person for their feedback and validate their feelings and concerns. Address how this impacts the person.
- Offer some next steps that Blair can take in learning from this feedback. For example, speak with higher ups who control the budget to see if they can adjust the budget for next time/future events.

In this response, Blair is validating and acknowledging the issue and feelings of the person providing the feedback. They are responding with empathy instead of defensiveness. They then go to offer tangible things they can do to learn from the situation to avoid the same situation from happening in the future.

Starting Internally: Applying ICPF in Your Workplace

Below, we share tips for conducting a more transformational mediation during the three phases of conflict management: prevention, de-escalation, and resolution.

1. Prevention: Noticing & Acknowledging

The objective of prevention work is to minimize opportunities for conflict escalation in the first place. This can look like team building, developing trust and understanding, and creating an environment where there is adequate conflict policy and protocol. Teams with higher levels of trust and strong relationships will be much more generous with one another when conflict occurs.

Too often, managers ignore conflict that is sitting or bubbling. You should not wait for a rupture or escalation. Often, employees are unsure whether they should come forward, so managers need to be attuned to and inquire about shifts in employees' behaviour and in the ways that employees are engaging with one another. Recognize signs of escalation by scanning/noticing for changes in:

- **Body language:** People might feel anxious or uncomfortable with very closed off or nervous body language. On the other end of the spectrum, people's body language can become hostile or aggressive, making themselves seem bigger and more threatening.
- **Communication:** A lot of conflict begins with people saying nothing! People often attempt to avoid conflict and when that inevitably does not work, they may try more passive aggressive communication techniques before using heavier tactics such as yelling and threatening.
- **Presence and atmosphere:** People might make themselves scarce and stop attending meetings, events, or programs. If they do attend, perhaps they do not actively participate. It may also present as cliques amongst participants or staff.



Learn Through Application

Carrie wants to create community in the office and often gives compliments to co-workers. Amara notices that Carrie's comments to her are often focused on Amara's race as a Black woman and racial stereotypes. For example, Carrie says, "Your hair is always so interesting!" and "How did you learn to be so articulate?" Amara tries to avoid Carrie, and eventually starts applying for other jobs.

What could be done to prevent this situation?

- Staff and management might notice these comments and immediately notify Amara that they are aware of the comments being made and that they are not okay. This offers reassurance and support to the person experiencing the harm.
- Management should speak privately with Carrie to inform her of what they noticed and explain the impact of her behaviour.
- Management might also consider offering training or other learning opportunities on microaggressions for the entire team as a preventive measure or as a learning opportunity for Carrie who is trying to learn from her behaviour.

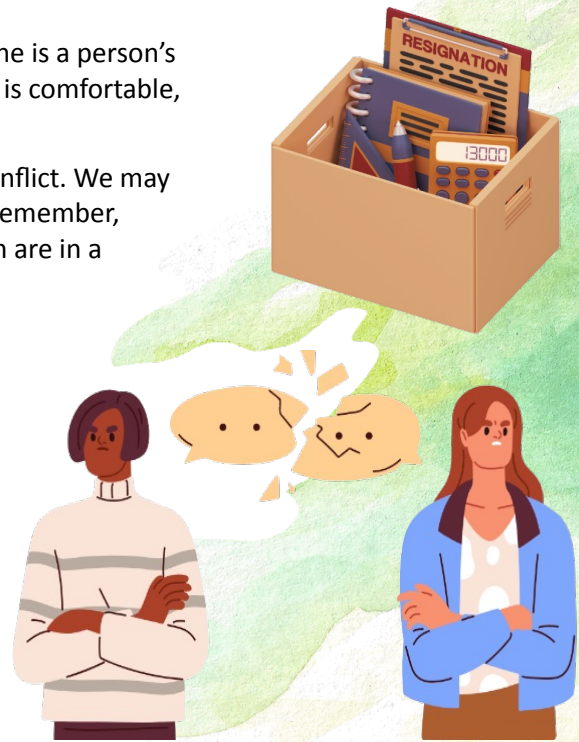
2. De-escalation: Addressing Immediate Concerns

De-escalation focuses on bringing someone back to baseline. Baseline is a person's own version of "normal." A person at their baseline is a person who is comfortable, feeling safe, and not activated.

De-escalating does not necessarily mean we are trying to resolve conflict. We may be more concerned with restoring calm and focus in the moment. Remember, if people are distraught, triggered, or activated, their body and brain are in a stress response and are not able to properly take in complex information or make complex decisions.

Sometimes, de-escalation is simply noticing a change and checking in. Other times, it's breaking up an argument and sending people to cool off.

In the event of escalation, such as an argument or written or verbal complaint, it is best to address them. Meet with the individuals separately and document their concerns. Look for commonalities in their stories, as well as any differences. Are they having communication issues? Are there issues around quality of work? Note them and ask them if they require any immediate supports to be able to continue co-existing.



Learn Through Application

Morgan is hosting a cross-sectoral meeting on responding to the crisis of homelessness. In the meeting, the topic of addressing the links between housing and stolen land through colonialism comes up. A meeting participant responds that "The land is not stolen – Canada won it!" Immediately, several meeting participants express their frustration and hurt.



How could Morgan respond in this situation?

Morgan can ask themselves what is their desired outcome in the moment? For example, it could be to shut this down immediately or to attempt to facilitate this dialogue in a respectful way.

What actions might get her there? Shutting the argument down: Morgan could say that this will not be the place for the team to discuss whether colonialism happened or not, particularly if the mission/vision of the organization already addresses/recognizes this reality.

Morgan can offer debriefs with the affected members after the meeting or if they are not the appropriate person to conduct this debrief, they can make the issue known to the appropriate supervisor.

If Morgan wishes to facilitate this dialogue, they could lay out some ground rules and ask that members abide by them in order to have a respectful dialogue.

3. Resolution: Mediating with the Parties

Once de-escalation has successfully occurred and people are in a place to have a conversation, we can begin to take the next steps towards resolution which involves learning and repair. Resolution is a process that looks different for everyone, and depending on the complexity, can take minutes, days, months, or years.

One way to seek resolution is through conducting **mediation**. It is important to assess if mediation is the correct approach, ask yourself:

- Do you believe the parties will act in good faith?
- Do you think it will be productive and not cause further damage?
- Is it a conflict that is within your realm or scope to mediate?
- Have there been many internal attempts at resolution, but it remains a difficult or complex conflict?



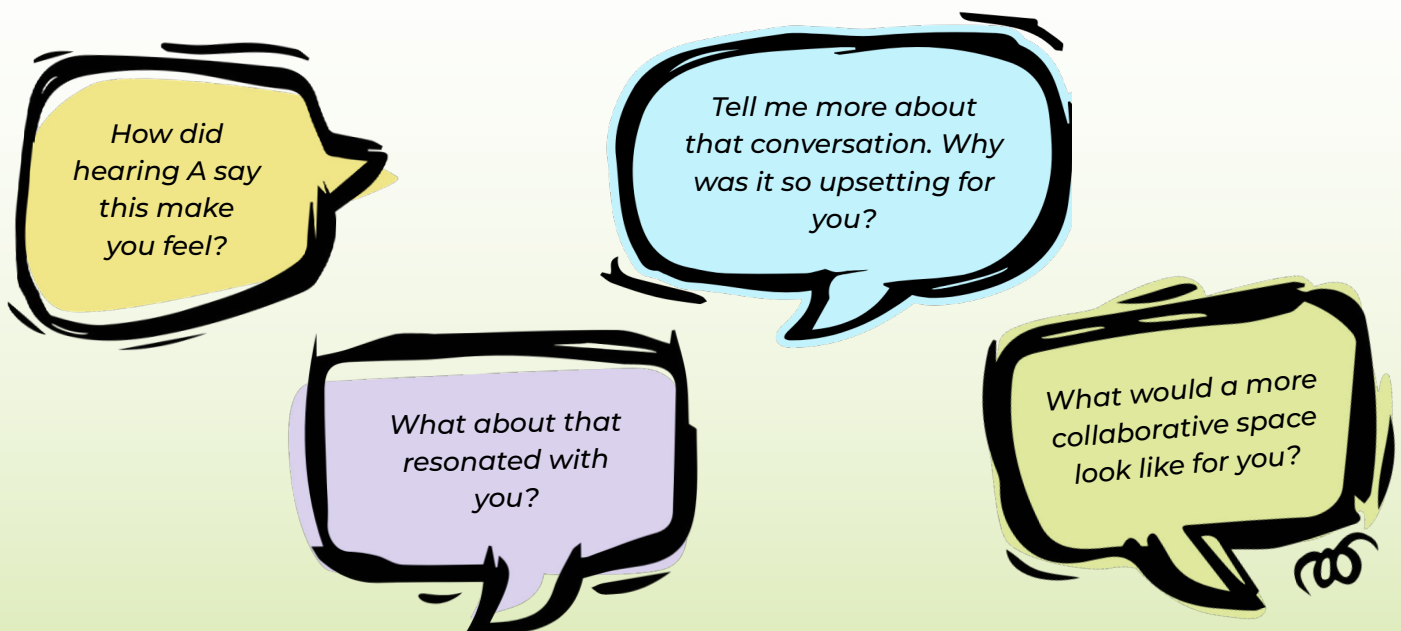
If conducting mediation does not seem to be a good approach, direct parties to the appropriate resources or seek external consultation.

If mediation is appropriate, the following steps to mediating for supervisors, managers, and others who are likely to have to intervene and manage conflict include:

Meeting with parties individually before meeting with them together. This is because you need to understand their individual interests and do some preliminary assessments. Highlight the issues as you understand them and look for their confirmation. You can use the ICPF question here of “What is your desired outcome?”

Laying some ground rules around behavioural expectations around how the process will work prior to having them engage. Encourage parties to use active listening and respectful communication. Sometimes, for higher stakes conflict, mediators revert to shuttling, which means going back and forth to each party separately. Shuttling is useful when parties do not want to engage with one another directly.

Early on in group mediation, having each party share their experience and then asking the other party to share a reflection of what they have heard and understood. It is the mediator’s job to ask questions in order to extract information. Refer to open-ended questions that dig for more detail and introspection:



Determining next steps and debriefing. After any group mediation, offer a debrief. It is not required but often accepted as an opportunity to process what occurred and work through any thoughts or emotions that have been brought up. Debriefs help build trust because they are less “all business” and more of a time to decompress and receive support. Debriefs also provide insight into next steps and detours.

Engaging in negotiation by reframing issues and highlighting needs and objectives. Once all interests are on the table and the parties have worked through their differences, negotiate the next steps. That can be changes in behaviour, changes in process, changes in how they will navigate their professional relationship, etc. People will always put their most desired outcome out there first but you as the mediator also know their bottom line, the minimum they need to feel satisfied.

Checking-in. After a mediation is complete, keep an eye out for changes in presence, vibe, behaviour, etc., and check in to see how things are progressing.

If the conflict is about your own management techniques, it is often best to get an external mediator to support the situation in order to acknowledge the power imbalance.



Learn Through Application

Jocelyn is a manager at a shelter and Ray, a case worker, comes to Jocelyn sharing that a colleague is speaking cruelly about Ray and their work. Ray shared that they tried talking to the person, Delilah, but the harmful behaviour did not change. Jocelyn is concerned because it is not the first time she heard about issues co-workers have had with Delilah, but Delilah was at the shelter for years and previously was very supportive to Jocelyn.

How can Jocelyn respond in this situation?

Jocelyn can proactively observe and scan interactions between Ray and Delilah to assess whether any of the mentioned behaviours are observable.

Jocelyn can meet with Ray and Delilah individually to inquire about the problem/complaint and try and determine what the issues are and if a mediation would be useful.

Jocelyn could attempt to mediate a dialogue between Ray and Delilah in an attempt to determine the root problem and negotiate an agreement to end the hurtful behaviour.

Jocelyn can ask the following questions:

- What kind of conflict is this?
- What is my desired outcome here?
- What conflict management outcome works best?
- What behaviour and approach will get me the closest to my desired outcome?
- What behaviour and approach will get Ray and Delilah to their desired outcomes?



Moving Away from Fear of Conflict

While conflict touches all of us and is unavoidable in our work, we have the power to choose how to approach and respond to it.

By preparing for conflict through team building and developing protocols and policies, we can anticipate and plan for conflict from a proactive place. This approach allows us to align our responses with our personal and organizational values.

By practicing and becoming comfortable with de-escalation skills and tools, we build our confidence in intervening when we notice changes in behaviour, participation, overall atmosphere, vibe, etc., rather than simply avoiding or reacting to conflict.

As we enhance our conflict resolution skills, we become more adept and prepared to handle complex situations with care and nuance, reducing our fear of conflict.

Often, the fear of conflict stems from not feeling skilled enough to handle its complexity or from concerns about how it will impact others' perceptions of us. Organizer and educator Mariame Kaba encourages people to “try something or try anything” when trying to form new and transformational ways to address conflict and harm. Even if our attempts don't unfold perfectly, intentionally trying a new or different approach is an important part of our journey towards ending violence in our communities.



To learn more about Eddie and their work, please visit their website eddiejudehareven.com. They offer training in Transformative Conflict Cultures, as well as in person, online, and self-paced training in Conflict Management and the Intentional Conflict Practice Framework.



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