



HUMAN SYSTEMS
DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

Conflict Circles

Description of Conflict Circles

Conflict Circles allow you to build coherence between and among parts of the system. We have adapted this model from the work of Landmark Education to support engagement across differences to help clarify perspectives and assumptions. That level of clarity clears the way for open, productive dialogue and work.



What?

In any event where people are present to observe and participate, each person walks away with his or her own “version of the truth.” It cannot be helped. When you see something happen, you interpret it through the filters of feelings, experiences, understandings, and assumptions that frame your own world view. Because each person brings a unique world view to any interaction, the stories about that interaction will be varied and numerous.

So What?

The reality of conflict circles is that you have to be clear about your own reality and story before you can stand in inquiry* to hear and understand others’ perspectives. First, you consider what you believe to be true, and separate what is verifiable evidence. Then

* For more information, visit www.hsdinstitute.org.

Nothing is intractable.

you become aware of the stories you are telling yourself, which may or may not be true. You note the patterns. How are your reality and story the same? How are they different? What stories might the other person hold? How are they the same? How are they different? Are there “facts” that need to be reconciled?

All this reflection happens on your own, before you engage with the other person. In your reflection, you consider what are the real questions that will help you understand more deeply and productively? Working through these kinds of questions can help you negotiate the turbulence that emerges at the points of difference.

Now What?

Use Conflict Circles in your next sticky issue to:

- ▶ Get really clear for yourself what is fact and what are your assumptions and perceptions about that fact.
- ▶ Get really clear on what others think, see, and feel about the conflict.
- ▶ Take wise action to find a generative space for moving forward.



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What is the Purpose of Conflict Circles?

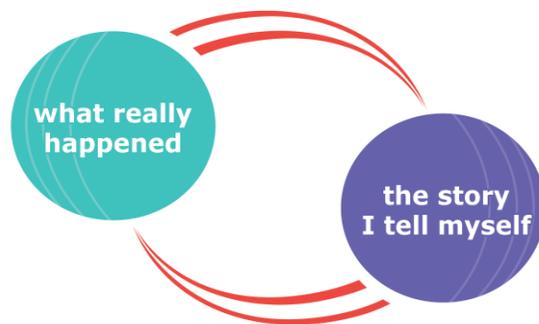
Any conflict carries with it a unique set of stories. First is the “story” of what really happened—“Just the facts, ma’am.” Then there are the “stories” of each individual who might be involved. The personal, individual stories are based in interpretations, experiences, emotions, and understandings, and may vary widely across those engaged in the conflict.

You can see this played out at multiple scales.

- ▶ Cultural groups inside countries that have been at war tell themselves very different stories about the “other” side. “They are the aggressors, and we are the victims.” “We are righteous, and they are evil.”
- ▶ Corporations create stories about other organizations or about their own performance to reinforce differentiation to capture market share.
- ▶ In families children tell themselves that their parents just don’t understand them, while the parents lament that the children will never really understand the complex challenges of parenting.

And on it goes. The prevalence and propagation of conflict relies on this natural tendency for us to see our teams—our communities, our families—from only the perspective that is most flattering to us and less so to the opponent. And we perpetuate these positions through the ongoing stories we tell and the symbols we choose to reinforce those stories.

— Conflict Circles —



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So What Can You Accomplish with Conflict Circles?

The problem is that as long as you live inside those stories, the resolution of that conflict is impossible. You may come to some agreements or arrangements, but the problem that feeds and triggers the emotional reaction will not go away.

One very useful tool for resolving conflicts comes from the Landmark Forum. As a model, the Conflict Circles helps you see that there are multiple stories about any given event or issue. As a method, the Conflict Circles open a process where participants reflect on and document the existing stories from their own perspectives—what really happened, in fact, and each individual's personal story about what really happened. Rather than telling their stories, the individuals or groups who are in conflict determine questions to ask the other side. These questions can be about stories or realities, but they are asked openly and without prejudice.

In most negotiation and conflict approaches you share your stories with the other party. Conflict Circles invites questions, instead. Unbraiding the conflict in this way allows those who are involved to sort out the facts and find long-term resolution based on mutual empathy.

Now What Can You Do Next to use Conflict Circles?

The next time you find yourself in a situation of conflict, stop. Take a breath. Ask yourself how to identify the facts of the situation before you. Choose some clear and meaningful questions to ask. Whether you do this on your own, or if you ask someone to facilitate such a conversation, you will reap the benefits of exploring your own story and generating questions that build new relationships.