

Dealing with conflict



What conflict at Playcentre? Never!

Playcentre is by its very nature a hot bed for potential conflict. Firstly, strong passionate and skilful people from a range of circumstances and cultures. Then have them discussing issues that matter intensely to them; their children. Now overlay long days, frequent sleep deprivation and fatigue. There is a high likelihood of conflict.

I have abiding memories of tears, vehement dissent and the occasional walkout at Playcentre meetings. Sometimes I was in the conflict, perhaps the source of it, other times I chose to avoid it and sometimes I offered to facilitate a way forward.

This article brings together my learning in order to share ideas for managing yourself in a conflict situation. I have been working in the area of conflict all my professional life and I honed my facilitation

and conflict resolution skills within Playcentre; at Centre, Association and National levels working with individuals, working groups, teams, and centres. I enjoy it and for the most part am able to support a group to achieve process for change, whatever that is.

There is no magic to conflict resolution, there is however, a truth that magic can happen. I have seen people and situations transformed. It is what motivates me to continue doing this work.

So how do you go about managing a conflict situation?

As workshop participants, from a workshop I facilitated yesterday, said, "it all depends".

We have to be ready for anything and therefore we need a wide range of options to choose from. We are all competent and many of us are already very skilful. I hope this article helps you to identify what challenges you.

Framework

Self-awareness

How

Attitude

Skill

Framework

1. We need a framework to understand what is happening in the current dynamic, how things came to be that way and what action we can take.
2. We need a high level of self-awareness to understand how we have contributed to the situation, what our preferred conflict style is, how we learn best and our current level of stress.
3. We need to know how we will work with each other as we start to manage the conflict, this is a large part of what makes conflict management successful.
4. We need an unconditionally constructive attitude.
5. And lastly we need to have skills that we can use to tie all of the above together.

This article will cover the five resolution topics, with specific examples of concepts and a case study that demonstrates some aspect of the issue. Additionally there is an exercise for you to work through.

In order to work through a conflict situation it is useful to have a number

of models in your head to assist you manage the plethora of information and the dynamic that you will be facing. Here are three models I believe are effective.

Drama Triangle

Sometimes a conversation starts off fine but quickly deteriorates. In this case it is useful to think about the "drama triangle" developed by Stephen Karpman. There are three roles played out in the drama triangle:

1. **Persecutor** – out for themselves and blaming others
2. **Victim** – unable to cope by themselves and blaming others
3. **Rescuer** – needs to be needed, others can't cope without them



We need to consider which of the roles we are attributing to the other party and which we are attributing to ourselves. In order to step out of this triangle we need to bring ourselves

into the present, clarify our contract while taking responsibility for the situation we find ourselves in.

Problem Solving Model

This model helps to ensure that we are solving the correct problem. Developed by Colin McKenzie, owner and principle of CMNZ Ltd (Conflict Management New Zealand Ltd). The idea of this model is to work your way around the 4 squares.



Have a good discussion about the problem and why it is a problem, understand the symptoms as being different from the problem itself. Be aware that this is a problem you have the ability to

influence or change, otherwise you are on a path to frustration.

As you list the causes remember that you may be contributing in some way. Look not to attribute blame to specific people. See if you can group the causes into like groups.

Next step is to brainstorm possible options that could resolve the causes. Remember to ensure they are within your span of control to influence.

Finally work out what you are going to take action on. Be specific. Use the SMART measure for action (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time bound).

Conflict Partnership mode

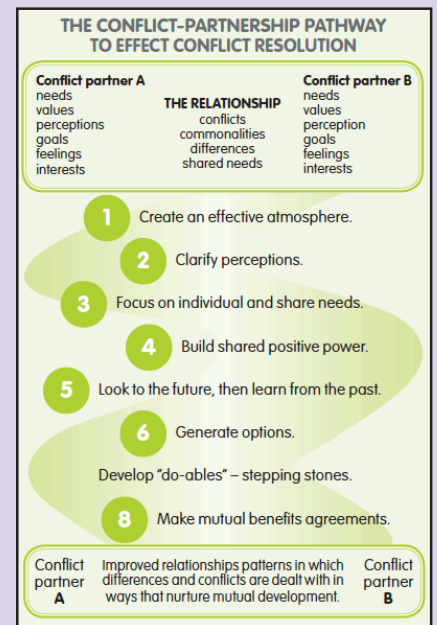
This model was developed by Dudley Weeks who says that we don't fight with those we have no investment with. If we had no investment we would simply walk away. He has eight steps in his model.

1. Invite a Partnership Atmosphere
2. Clarify Perceptions
3. Focus on Individual and Shared Needs
4. Develop Shared Positive Power ('Power-WITH')
5. Focus on the Present & Future and learn from the Past
6. Generate Options
7. Develop and Agree on "Do-ables"
8. Develop Mutual Benefit Agreements

Case Study

I once worked with a centre where there was disharmony and deep seated conflict. I used the Conflict Partnership model to begin and engage with the parents at the centre. One of the "do-ables" was a series of workshops. During one of the workshops we used the problem solving model to work through the issues identified.

At another workshop we taught the drama triangle and learnt about the winner's triangle.



Exercise

Think of a conflict situation. Now answer the following questions.

- What framework/model did you use to consider the conflict in your situation?
- How did your model help you with:
 - Managing yourself?
 - Understanding perceptions and assumptions?
 - Understanding the situation?
 - Providing a road map for moving forward?
 - What model would you like to explore more?

Self Awareness

Being aware of yourself and the impact you are having is paramount to managing a conflict. Consider the following ways you can increase your self-awareness.

Learning style

We each have developed a preference for the way we learn, take in and process information. The more we can be aware of the preferences we have the more we are able to adapt ourselves for differing situations. Here are some of the different learning styles to explore:

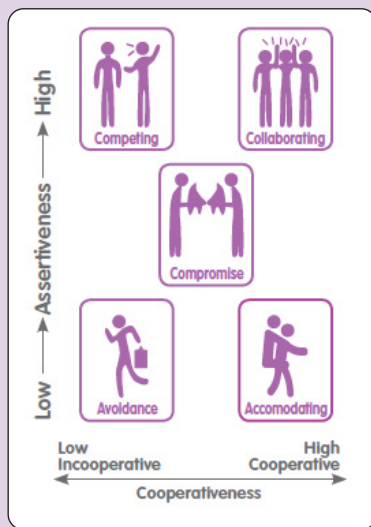
Neuro Linguistic	Accessing Direct/Indirect
Inductive/Deductive	Gregoric
Introvert/Extravert	Hand/Eye Dominance

Conflict style

Conflict comes not only from the circumstances and environment but also from the styles used when faced with disagreement. The way in which you respond will often shape the responses of others. Understanding your own style, especially when 'under fire' can improve your skills in managing conflict.

Thomas Kilmann provides a set of 5 styles for us to assess ourselves against:

- Avoidance
- Accommodating
- Compromise
- Competing
- Collaborating



Triggers

We get triggered into a flight and fight response when we perceive something is threatening to us. It is useful to understand the things that trigger us, as frequently the trigger has more to do with past experiences, than what is happening in the here and now. Imagine a rubber band pinging you back to an earlier experience (Kupfer and Haimowitz 1971). Once we are aware of this in our lives when it happens we can recognise it and more easily stay in the present and work through the here and now issues.

Current level of stress

Being stressed makes it likely that we are going to be triggered and less likely we will be able to manage that trigger. We need to find ways to keep ourselves in the 'zone'.

Think of ways to help keep you in the zone.

Case Study

I was facilitating a workshop and I was triggered by a participant. Later after spending much time thinking about it I was reminded about when I was a little girl, my mother has told me, I would get so frustrated with my brother that I would hold my breath until I went blue. I must have been very little as Mum would pick me up and put me under the cold tap to make me breathe again. Somehow I learnt to stop holding my breath. So my new awareness in this situation was that the participant whose behaviour triggered me rubber banded me back and it was as frustrating for me as when I was that little girl. I "felt" the participant was deliberately annoying me, even though in my cognitive part of my brain I knew this was not the case, I now know that my feelings are my own and where they had come from and so I can recognise this for the future and manage myself differently.

Exercise

Think of a conflict situation. Now answer the following questions.

- What is it that made it hard to manage?
- What were you feeling and why?
- What situations make it hard to be emotionally resilient/strong?
- What is the "story" you are telling yourself in these situations?
- What do you feel?
- How old do you feel?
- What does this mean to you?
- Who do you know that manages these situations well?
- What do they do?

How

The way in which we work together is as paramount as the issues we are working through. How often have you heard "It wasn't fair as the process wasn't right". Again Colin has provided a model of the 5 P's of Process which I call the How. To his 5 P's, I have added one, making it the 6 P's of How.

1. **Purpose** – what is the reason we are in the conversation or conflict?
2. **Product** – what do we want to get out of it?
3. **Procedure** – what are the guidelines that will help us work together – e.g. contract for our meeting?
4. **People** – who needs to be there? Often we go ahead without key people and then we have to redo the work.
5. **Place** – we all know that meeting at the centre is different from someone's home, or the marae.
6. **Psychological** – lastly we all need to whole heartedly buy in to finding a way forward and commit to the way we have agreed. Sometimes people say yes but don't really mean it and because we don't check, we get an unexpected response.

An important aspect of How is to have a IN THE ZONE conversation about it and agree with those we are in conflict with before we start talking about the what. Often conflicts arise because our expectations had not been clarified.

Working through the six aspects of How frequently prevents conflict.

Case Study

I attended a public meeting about the replacement of a building that had been destroyed by fire. The meeting didn't go as smoothly as it could have due to:

1. the facilitator saying there were no rules (procedures) and
2. the organiser of the meeting changed the outcome by stating that they also wanted to get feedback about another issue (product).

This meant the psychological contract was damaged and people felt irritated and possibly deceived.

Exercise

Think of a conflict situation that went wrong. Now consider:

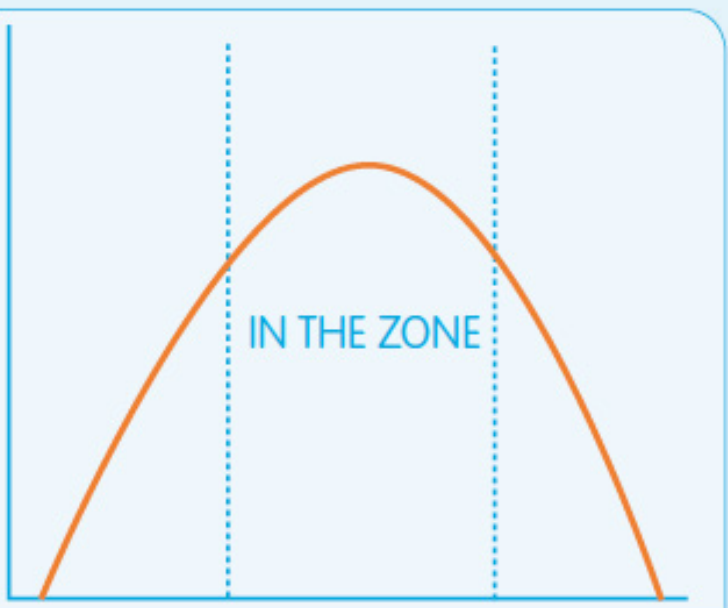
- How was the purpose agreed to by the parties?
- What outcome/product did both parties want?
- What procedure was agreed to?
- Who needed to be in the conversations and did these people change as the conflict moved?
- Where did the conversation happen – phone, email, face to face, in a group?
- Were the people involved really invested in resolving the conflict?
- What will you do differently next time?

Yerkes-Dodson Law

How to stay in the zone

PERFORMANCE

IN THE ZONE





Attitude

We need an unconditionally constructive attitude. Do only those things that are both good for the relationship and good for us, whether or not they reciprocate.

1. **Rationality.** Even if they are acting emotionally, balance emotions with reason.
2. **Understanding.** Even if they misunderstand us, try to understand them.
3. **Communication.** Even if they are not listening, consult them before deciding on matters that affect them.
4. **Reliability.** Even if they are trying to deceive us, neither trust them nor deceive them: be reliable.
5. **Non-coercive modes of influence.** Even if they are trying to coerce us, neither yield to that coercion nor try to coerce them; be open to persuasion and try to persuade them.
6. **Acceptance.** Even if they reject us and our concerns, as unworthy of their consideration, accept them as worthy of our consideration, care about them and be open to learning from them.
 - We all try to do our best work
 - Our intent can be different from our impact
 - Always start off being collaborative
 - There are exceptions to every rule

Case Study

In my early years of working, I made a hugely expensive mistake. When I discovered the error and informed my boss about it, the response was unexpected. Calm, kind, matter of fact and solution focused. An unconditionally constructive approach. My reaction was to esteem my boss even more and to work harder to ensure I was vigilant about every little thing.

Exercise

Think back to the last week and remember a conflict you were involved with.

- Think back over the last three months and remember a conflict you were involved with.
- Think back over the last year and remember a conflict you were involved with.
- Think back over the last five years and remember a conflict you were involved with.
- In each of these situations what was the "attitude" you went in with?
- What attitude did you stay with?
- From now on what attitude will you go into conflict resolution with?

Skills

What I mean by skills are the micro communication skills that we use in our communications with others. Often in a conflict situation our intent is positive but the impact we have can be other than that. To become unconsciously competent in conflict management we need to be aware of how we are using these skills. Many of these skills we are trained in as child educators. We need to transfer these skills to our conversations with adults.

being present | observation | building rapport
listening | asking questions | acknowledgement
advocacy | clarifying commitment

Case Study

Yesterday I talked to a woman who had contracted me to teach micro communication skills to her team. She reflected that the team had commented prior to the workshop, "we have all done this stuff before, We know it". However, after the workshop the talk was, "It is harder to do than know."

Exercise

After the next time you have a difficult conversation or are involved in a conflict situation take the time to write down exactly what was said.

- I said... They said...
- After you have written it word for word take the time to step back and look at the micro communication skills you used.
- How often did you ask questions? What type of questions did you ask?
- How present were you and what was your self-talk saying to you?
- How did you observe what was happening?
- What judgements did you make?
- What micro skill do you want to practice?

Conclusion

Thank you for reading this article. While the purpose of this article was to provide you, the reader, with information, an additional purpose of mine is to write more fully on this topic and in turn write a book. I would therefore appreciate your feedback have reading this article. What additional questions does this article raise for you? What issue were you thinking about that may not have been satisfied by reading this article? Please tell me about the gaps and generally provide me with your thoughts.

Email: madeleine.f.taylor@xtra.co.nz