



Social Transformation of Conflict

Covid-19 and the restrictions being put in place to prevent its spread will inevitably place additional pressures on families and on our communities. These stresses can cause even minor disagreements to seem more significant than they might otherwise be, and may even provoke angry or violent responses.

This guide, adapted from the work of John Paul Lederach, explains the way in which these minor disagreements can escalate and how we can address this.

Explanation

Social Transformation of Conflict is a tool that shows how minor disagreements can escalate into deeper and more serious conflicts. If we are aware of these common ways of responding, then we can recognise the behaviour when we see it, pause, take a step back and de-escalate the situation. The process is shown in the diagram below.

Disagreements often begin with two people facing a common challenge but having different perspectives on how that challenge should be addressed. At this point their focus is on the problem and if they work together, it is likely that they can come up with a solution that will work for both of them.

Too often though, we take our eyes off the problem and focus instead on the other person. We personalise the issue and begin to blame the other person: they become the problem. We may say things like: 'That's typical of you, so selfish, always thinking of yourself.' This rapidly leads to the next step, which is where we recall a whole history of bad experiences with that person or 'people like them'. We are no longer standing side by side looking at a common problem. Instead, we are swamped with a toxic mix of bad experiences from the past. We are no longer even just looking at the other person as the problem but instead we are considering them, their family and everyone like them as the problem.

Frustrated and angry, we stop talking to the other person and instead look for other people who we know will be sympathetic to our point-of-view and who will reinforce our sense of injury. Backed up by this so-called 'support', we act to get even, to 'show them that we can't be pushed around or taken advantage of'.

Before we know it, the one original problem is now lost amid a storm of tit-for-tat responses as we take 'an eye for an eye'. We move from anger and frustration to outright hostility and so bring in others to join our side as we face off against each other.

Notice how, as we progress through this cycle of behaviours, we stop talking to each other and instead talk about each other. There is less and less direct communication; consequently, the 'facts'

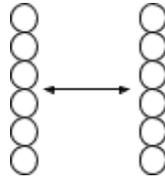
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 covid19-response-team@tearfund.org

become harder to recognise as we only look from our own, by now blinkered, perspective. Rumour and misinformation thrive, trust disappears and, ultimately, the level of violence increases.

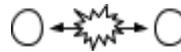
To break the cycle, we need to recognise these responses in ourselves and in others, and we need to pause and take a step back. Keep talking with each other. Recognise that neither side has the full picture and that we are probably both in error: there is usually right and wrong on both sides. Each needs to spend time trying to understand the other’s perspective. Ultimately we need to retreat to our original positions: when it was just two people facing a common challenge. Instead of personalising the problem, we need to work collaboratively to come up with a win/win solution.

7. Polarisation

change in social structures and organisation

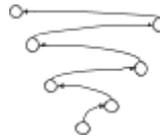


6. Antagonism → hostility



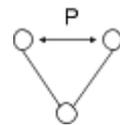
5. Eye for an eye

reaction and escalation



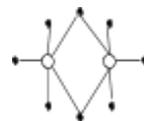
4. Triangle

talk *about* not with



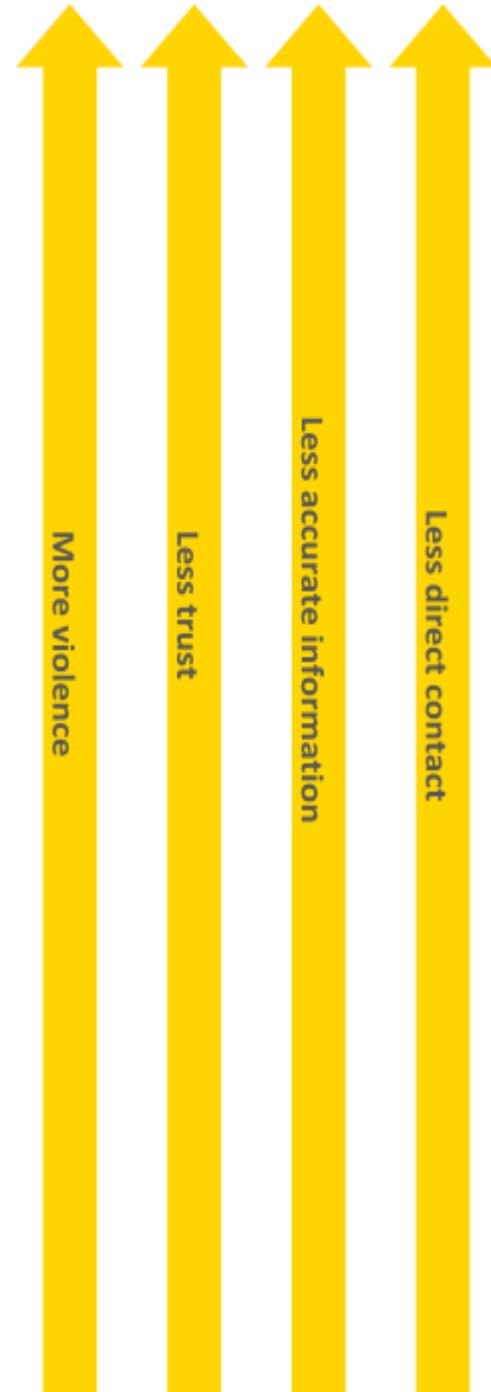
3. Proliferation of issues

from specifics to general



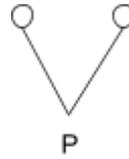
2. Shift from disagreement

to personal antagonism – the person is seen as the problem



1. Problem-solving

disagree but share the problem



Facilitation notes

The following notes describe how you can use the diagram with a group of people.

Draw the diagram out before the session starts and then talk through each of the steps, showing how one leads to the next. Be lively as you explain this, possibly acting out the two parties and jumping from one side's perspective to the other.

- From step 1 to step 2, you can use phrases like:

'Well, that's just typical of you... You always do that... You never think of anyone but yourself...'

- And then from step 2 to step 3, you can change character:

'Oh, blame me, will you...? What about when you...? I may do that but you are always doing... Only last week you...'

- At step 4, you can bring in another (imaginary) character:

'Do you know what X did last week? Isn't that unfair...? It's just like them, isn't it...?'

[new character] *'No! Really? Gosh, that's terrible... really unfair of them...'*

The new character sympathises with them and strengthens their view of what happened, rather than perhaps questioning or challenging that view.

Continue to act out how the conflict can then grow as the aggrieved party responds, only for the next person added in to the argument to go through the same cycle. Antagonism becomes hostility and ultimately aggression, as the two parties and their allies join opposing sides.