

HANDOUT FOR VIDEO 1: INTRODUCTION

This handout accompanies the three-minute video introducing the Better Conflict exercises from the Conflict Transformation Collaborative at Middlebury. This is the first video in a five-part series. Below, you will find a transcript of the video as well as additional resources.

TRANSCRIPT

Speakers: Sarah Stroup, Mandy Berghela, Teyonce Allison

Sarah: Welcome to our module on fostering better conflict. Many of us hear the word conflict and have a pretty negative reaction. You might think of fights that you've had with a friend, tensions that still exist with a coworker, or conflict in society that is divisive and even violent.

Conflict can be terribly destructive. But it also cannot be avoided. Conflict is part of the human experience. If we are able to engage in conflict in constructive ways, it can deepen our relationships, foster closer collaboration, and even lead to positive organizational and social change.

Mandy: When we talk about fostering better conflict, we want to first support this new understanding of conflict and then offer spaces to practice new skills. We know that conflict might still be uncomfortable. Really listening to ideas, experiences, and views that are different from our own is hard. And we don't ask anyone to do anything that feels unsafe or would lead them to shut down.

Teyonce: But with practice, we can get more comfortable being uncomfortable. We can strengthen our ability to really listen and honestly speak across our differences. Our hope is that rather than simply coexisting or tolerating one another, we can have more robust and respectful engagement across those differences.

Sarah: This is the work that develops more inclusive organizations, workplaces, and schools. This is better conflict. In the series, we will focus on four core skills.

Mandy: The first is about developing critical self-awareness. "Who am I in conflict" is a great question to ask of ourselves before sitting down with someone else.

Teyonce: Second, we will practice active listening skills. Real listening is hard, and often doesn't happen when we're just trying to think about how we can respond or critique. By slowing down that reactivity, we can listen carefully, signal our willingness to talk, and better understand the other person's perspective.

Mandy: Third, we will talk about what it means to understand another perspective. Sometimes we hear a person's position on an issue and immediately think that there's no common ground. The goal of this practice will be to listen for deeper interests and needs that might help us identify more creative solutions to a problem.

Teyonce: Finally, we will focus on how to ask better questions. We will never have the full story of what's going on in the conflict situation, but open questions will help us get to that deeper story.

Sarah: These are a lot of things to practice, and they take time and effort. But there's a great payoff on the other side. At Middlebury, we have found that self-awareness, active listening, going beyond positions to interests, and asking open questions can foster productive collaboration among students, faculty, and staff.

Thank you for investing in this practice. Let's get going!

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you want to learn more about what it means to think about better conflict rather than avoiding conflict, we recommend two books.

Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why we get trapped and how we get out* (Simon and Schuster, 2021).

Ripley is a journalist who became tired of a media model that oversimplified complex issues and fed into us-versus-them dynamics. In this clearly written book, she distinguishes between high conflict and healthy conflict and tells stories of transformations that happen in good conflict. The appendices offer guides to recognizing and preventing high conflict.

William Ury, *Possible; How we Survive (and Thrive) in an Age of Conflict* (Harper Collins, 2024).

This book distills decades of Ury's mediation work into a simple guide. Ury is co-founder of Harvard's Program on Negotiation and uses a conflict transformation framework to explain how conflicts from coal mines to Colombia can be addressed constructively.

In addition, you can hear from one of the founding voices in this field, John Paul Lederach, in our podcast series, *Opening Up*, and on Krista Tippett's *On Being*. He has written dozens of books on good conflict and peacebuilding, but a podcast allows you to hear the kindness and laughter of someone leading towards good conflict.