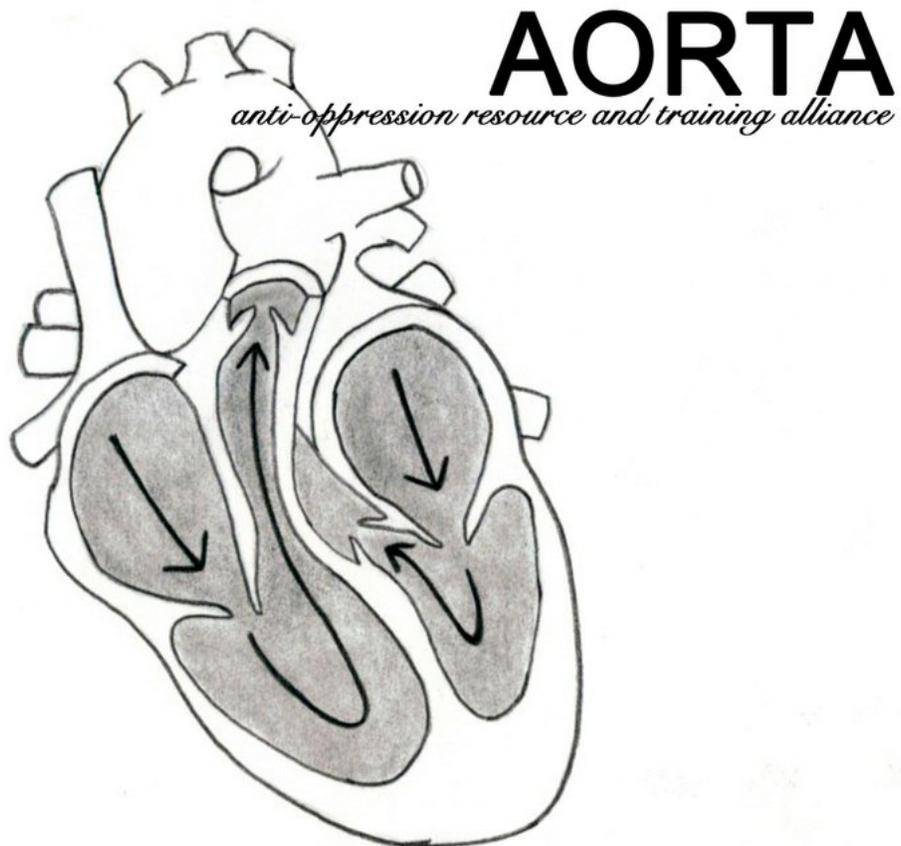


BHC Conflict Resolution Manual



A Note from BHC:

Boulder Housing Coalition (BHC) would like to acknowledge that this manual was created for a different co-op system but ICC Austin offered it, to us, as a resource. Our primary goal is maintain high occupancy in our houses. Conflict often leads to members moving out rather than working it out. We hope the conflict resolution manual and training provided will help members at houses work through conflict more effectively, thereby helping maintain occupancy in the houses.

Additionally, BHC is interested in promoting a healthy house culture at all of the houses. Part of BHC's purpose is to enhance the formal and informal education of members using cooperative methods. Working through problems as a group is fundamental to cooperation. Houses that can work through conflict effectively will be safer for members and hopefully lead to healthier house cultures.

Third, BHC would like to help members and especially leaders at the houses recognize conflict early and understand how to best to address the conflict. This includes members knowing their own preferences for working through conflict and house leaders understanding and respecting member's preferences.

Our success in achieving these goals will depend on current and future members buying into the value of working through conflict. Thank you for reading this manual, participating in the training, or becoming a mediator for BHC conflicts. Learning how to navigate through conflict is a skill that will serve you well your entire life.

Lincoln Miller, Executive Director, July 2016

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Introduction

Hello! Welcome to the BHC Conflict Resolution Handbook. Conflict is a normal and healthy part of life, but many of us have not been trained to deal with conflict effectively. In this manual, you will find a variety of resources for helping to resolve tensions and conflicts that can arise in housing cooperatives. This handbook shares a broad understanding of conflict, strategies for alleviating tensions before they turn into conflicts, basics of an ideal conflict resolution, and tips and suggestions for dealing with conflict.

Who we are:

AORTA (Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance) is a collective of trainers devoted to strengthening movements for social justice and a solidarity economy. We work as consultants and facilitators to expand the capacity of cooperative, collective, and community based projects through education, training, and planning. We base our work on an intersectional approach to liberation because we believe that true change requires uprooting all systems of oppression.

We believe that conflict resolution is a key tool for the success of cooperative housing and all collective projects. Few of us are taught how to deal with conflict constructively. Rather, we are taught to avoid conflict, to engage with conflict in aggressive or adversarial ways, and/or to fear conflict and see it as a destructive force.

AORTA believes that conflict is an *opportunity* for groups that are willing to engage with it responsibly. Conflict often draws out crucial tensions, differences, and power imbalances in groups, and gives members the opportunity to address these issues directly and attempt to resolve them.

As trainers who work with issues of oppression, power, and group dynamics, we have found that conflict is an inevitable and necessary part of creating strong groups. Dealt with properly, it creates space to engage with issues that are often invisibilized or ignored, such as cultural differences, privilege, and institutionalized oppression. While this manual will not go into great detail about these issues (that would take another manual in itself), we believe that it is crucial for groups to educate themselves about how they may play out in – or outside of – conflict situations. Please see the resource list in Appendix A for more tools to understand the dynamics of privilege and oppression.

A few things to understand about conflict right off the bat:

Please note! These things are important and complicated. Even for those who have experience with conflict resolution or mediation, it can be easy to fall back on the ideas that many of us have been taught about conflict. We encourage you to take some time to consider these concepts and how they could improve conflict resolution processes.

The health of a group is not determined by whether or not conflict exists, but by how well the group is able to deal with it.

Conflict is not the enemy. When groups of people live and/or work closely together, some degree of conflict is inevitable. The health of a group is not determined by whether or not conflict exists, but by how well the group is able to deal with it. Avoidance of conflict leads to far more destructive situations than engaging with conflict intentionally and respectfully.

Conflict is more than just a disagreement - it is an emotionally charged situation in which at least one person feels some form of threat.

Conflict resolution is not about someone “winning” or “being right.”

This is not the goal. In the heat of conflict, it is easy to get caught up in trying to prove “rightness” and “wrongness” - it’s easy to think that if we can just offer enough evidence to show that we are in the right, the other person will see that the situation is their fault and will have to correct it. But a conflict resolution process is not a trial; solving conflict requires letting go of being right, and seeking

compromise. The goal is to resolve the conflict, not to win or to prove guilt.

Conflicts cannot be resolved by reason alone. Conflict is more than just a disagreement - it is an emotionally charged situation in which at least one person feels some form of threat. Resolving conflict requires listening skills, compromise, and for everyone involved in the conflict to feel heard. Comfort and skill in dealing with emotion - and a willingness to respectfully listen to emotion - is one of the most important elements of conflict resolution.

Conflict can USUALLY be diffused before it reaches the point of a member review or other facilitated process. Healthy groups have systems in place to address tension and mild conflict before it escalates. Most of us are socially trained to avoid conflict, but confronting it head-on before it becomes too big to ignore is one of the best ways to avoid catastrophic results. ([See Tips and Troubleshooting for more ideas.](#))

Conflict does not take place in a vacuum. It is always influenced by broader issues, including systemic power dynamics. (See “Consider intent vs. impact” under “More tips for resolving conflict”.) We are told by dominant society that the U.S. is a “level playing field”, but actually we all experience different challenges based on systemic power and oppression. When people work to build healthy cohousing relationships across lines of race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, etc, these broader systems are bound to have an impact. It’s important to acknowledge this, and to educate ourselves about issues of oppression that we might not directly experience.

Current Member Review Process

For the current BHC Member Review Process and accompanying processes, go to ...

Conflict Resolution Cliff's Notes

This is a very basic explanation of an ideal conflict resolution process. Of course, conflict is rarely this simple. Think of this as a conflict resolution "cheat sheet" – it provides an outline, and is meant to be used alongside the other materials found in this manual.

1) The people involved in the conflict sit down to intentionally discuss the conflict. If needed, an outside mediator can be brought in.



2) Each person involved in the conflict has the opportunity to say a) what they perceive the conflict to be, and b) how it is making them feel/how it is impacting them.



3) The people involved in the conflict listen actively to the other(s), and reflect back what they hear being said.



4) Everyone makes an effort to avoid blame and accusation, to use "I" statements, and to take responsibility for their contribution to the conflict. (Taking responsibility is not necessarily the same as "admitting guilt", or "being wrong". It does not have to be about anyone being right or wrong; it is simply an acknowledgment that people have different needs/desires/communication styles, and this can lead to conflict without anyone being at fault.)



5) The people involved say what changes they are willing to make in their behavior in order to resolve the conflict.



6) The people involved *follow through* on their commitments, and continue to communicate in an ongoing way to be sure that the situation has improved.

More tips for resolving conflict:

Use “I” statements. “I get really frustrated when the dishes aren’t done” is much more likely to move a conflict towards resolution than “You’re a disgusting slob,” for example. Not only do “I” statements provoke less defensiveness and antagonism in the people we’re trying to communicate with, they also require that we take responsibility for our own feelings rather than labeling and blaming another person.

Ask open questions. Open questions are the ones that begin with Who, What, Where, Why, When, or How. They are the questions that journalists ask to get to the heart of a story - they invite people to answer questions in their own words. In contrast, yes or no questions are “closed” questions, and often come with implications that we already know the answer. For example, if I ask, “Did you just assume that we would clean up after you?” it sounds like I already think I know the answer.

Compromise is not possible until all of the people negotiating have heard and understood the perspective of the others. Don’t propose a solution until everyone involved has been heard and understood.

Reflect back. Miscommunication is the cause of a LOT of conflict. One tool for avoiding miscommunication is paraphrasing what you just heard the other person say, as objectively as possible. Additionally, hearing our statements accurately reflected back to us helps us feel heard, which makes it easier to let go of defensiveness. Say Joe and Naima are having a conflict because Joe parked in Naima’s parking spot for the third time this week, making her late to class. When Naima confronted Joe about it, he brushed her off and acted like it wasn’t a big deal. They

got into a fight, and he kept telling her she was overreacting, which just made her angrier. Finally, Joe mentions that an old injury had

been acting up, making it painful to walk for more than a couple blocks. Naima says, "So, you're saying that walking from your parking spot made your knee injury worse?" Joe says, "Yeah. I guess I just didn't want to admit to myself that it was that bad. I could probably talk to someone about getting my parking spot changed." The door to resolving this conflict has been opened.

Consider all the sides of the story. Our response to conflict is usually not based solely on an objective review of the facts, but on our perception of what is happening and the dynamics at play - perceptions that are influenced by many different factors, including personal histories, value systems, beliefs, culture, social positionality, etc. Trying to understand (or at least acknowledge) another person's experience of the conflict is crucial for conflict resolution. Compromise is not possible until all of the people negotiating have heard and understood the perspective of the others. Don't propose a solution until everyone involved has been heard and understood.

Ask for support. Sometimes, especially in conflicts involving more than two people, we can end up feeling attacked, ganged-up on, or just particularly vulnerable. It can be helpful to have a support person with you in a conflict resolution discussion - not to argue your side or defend you, but to help manage stress and emotions, keep you grounded, or just be a presence that helps you feel safe, respected, and seen.

It can be easy to make the mistake of assuming that other people have the same needs and desires as we do.

Understand that everyone has different needs and reactions. When we try to look at situations from other people's perspectives, it can be easy to make the mistake of assuming that they have the same needs and desires as we do. For example, Theo loves social interaction and Jake is a quiet introvert. Theo may feel slighted when

Jake spends hours in his room alone, and Jake may feel intruded upon when Theo knocks on the door wanting to hang out. Both of them are doing what makes sense to them, and both feel that they are being good housemates, but tension builds. Eventually they get into a big fight over something small - Theo wants to “talk it out”, and Jake needs some space to process by himself before deciding how he wants to deal with the conflict. Theo feels shut down, and Jake feels attacked. When they finally sit down to talk about it, they realize no one was at fault. They just have completely different communication styles - and a lot of frustration and hurt could have been avoided if they had realized that from the beginning.

It is crucial to be aware of the impacts of our actions (and be open to having them explained to us) - even if the impact is very different than what we intended.

Consider intent vs. impact. When our actions upset someone, it can often be instinctive to insist that we didn’t *mean* to be hurtful. This doesn’t always matter. (See above scenarios.) To add to the complexities of different needs and desires, privilege and oppression often come into play here as well. When we have privilege, it can be difficult to see how our actions fit into broader systems of oppression. For example: women are often criticized for being “too emotional”, people of color are told they are “too angry”, people who grew up poor are

told they are stupid or ignorant, etc. These are all-too-common ways that people who are oppressed are dismissed and cut down. Even comments that seem to be compliments can be symptoms of oppression; for example, people with disabilities are told they are “inspirational” (as if their main accomplishment of note is simply functioning with a disability); people of color are told that they are “articulate” or “speak English really well” (as though this is surprising because of their race), etc. The people who make these comments are rarely intending to be sexist, racist, classist, ableist, etc - but because of larger systems, their comments reflect or perpetuate

oppression. It is crucial to be aware of the impacts of our actions (and be open to having them explained to us) - even if the impact is very different than what we intended.

Address tension before it becomes conflict. Often, we avoid talking about frustration or tension - but ignoring it usually doesn't make it go away, especially if you're in a situation where you are regularly interacting with the person you're having tension with. Ignoring conflict until it becomes too big to be ignored can make resolution a lot more difficult than it needs to be. Make a habit of bringing up challenging dynamics as soon as you notice them - they will be easier to deal with if they are addressed before the emotional stakes get high.

Make a habit of bringing up challenging dynamics as soon as you notice them - they will be easier to deal with if they are addressed before the emotional stakes get high.

Seek compromise. Conflict resolution requires compromise. (So does living collectively, and every other situation involving authentic human interaction.) Conflict can be polarizing, and it's easy to become attached to "winning". In that framework, compromise can feel like defeat. But when people in conflict are able to come to a compromise that feels acceptable for everyone involved, it strengthens the group, the relationships, and individuals' conflict resolution skills. Triple win!

Check your defensiveness. Letting go of defensiveness is one of the most difficult things to do in a conflict. By definition, conflict is a situation in which one or more people involved perceive some form of threat, whether it is "real" or not. But when we enter into a conflict feeling threatened and defensive, it makes the conflict resolution process more painful and difficult for everyone involved. Try to enter a conflict with an open mind and a willingness to be challenged.

Emotions are NOT a problem, and no one in a conflict resolution should ever be shamed or shut down for expressing emotion.

Make space for emotions, but don't let them control you. Skill at dealing with emotions is one of the most important elements of conflict resolution; when we're able to examine and understand our own emotions, manage our stress, and avoid being triggered by other people's emotions, we are well equipped to resolve conflict. Conflict is emotional, and feelings of all kinds

should be anticipated and allowed in discussions about conflicts. Emotions themselves are NOT a problem, and no one in a conflict resolution should ever be shamed or shut down for expressing emotion. The challenges arise when we become so caught up in our emotions that they prevent us from seeing the situation realistically or realizing our own needs. But intentional, conscious awareness of emotions can be key to understanding what we need and how to resolve a conflict situation.

Be aware of your nonverbal communication. In conflict situations, it isn't just words that are communicating - it is also body language, facial expressions, tone, pace, voice levels, and so on. No matter how respectful your words are, if you are shouting, scowling, and gesturing aggressively, it may be less likely that the people you are talking to will feel like you are communicating respectfully. (Or not - loud, expressive communication works great for some people and groups, who might experience measured communication and modulated tones as passive-aggressive or fake. That's why it's so important to talk about how you prefer to

Conflict resolution means not holding grudges - or at the very least, being honest about the grudges we're holding, naming them, and taking responsibility for them.

communicate during conflict.) No matter the cultural norms of the group, it's important to be mindful of the nonverbal ways you are communicating.

Focus on the present. When a conflict gets heated, it can be tempting to pull out the laundry list of the other person's past offenses. But if we're holding onto old hurts and resentments that have already been discussed/resolved, we aren't able to have a clear experience of the conflict at hand - nor is it fair to continue holding someone responsible for past mistakes that have already been addressed. Conflict resolution means not holding grudges - or at the very least, being honest about the grudges we're holding, naming them, and taking responsibility for them.

Conflict is an opportunity for growth. Really. As painful as conflict can be, it is an important part of building a healthy group AND building skills that will be helpful in relating to people in all different situations. Viewing conflict as an opportunity is a lot more motivating than seeing it as a painful, frustrating intrusion into everyday life. Conflict is par for the course of collective living, and accepting that is the first step to having a great cohousing experience.

Appendix A: Anti-Oppression Resource List

Understanding and dealing with issues around power, privilege, and oppression is a lifelong process, and one that goes hand in hand with effective conflict resolution for diverse groups. Here are some places to begin.

Websites:

“Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh:
nymbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf

“Trans Respect/Etiquette/Support 101” by Micah Bazant:
<http://ganimede.transboys.info/trans101.html>

“5 Tools for Talking About Disability Justice” – Stacey Milbern:
<http://blog.cripchick.com/archives/5844> (and the rest of
<http://blog.cripchick.com>)

“Challenging the Framework: Disability Justice” by Mia Mingus:
<http://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/> (and the rest of
<http://leavingevidence.wordpress.com>)

SOA Watch Anti-Oppression Resources:
<http://www.soaw.org/resources/anti-opp-resources>

Books:

Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice by Paul Kivel

Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics by bell hooks

Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle Class Activists
by Betsy Leondar-Wright

Classified: How to Stop Hiding Your Privilege and Use it for Social Change
by Karen Pittelman and Resource Generation

Appendix B: Conflict Resolution Worksheets

These conflict resolution worksheets were designed by AORTA (Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance), based on worksheets originally created by the Arizmendi Worker Co-op. We recommend they be used as preventative tools, to ensure better communication in tense situations.

Conflict Resolution Profile Worksheet for _____
Date _____

Reminders and Guidelines

Give me the benefit of the doubt that I'm doing my best and mean you no disrespect or harm.

Don't enter into conversations with assumptions and accusations. Ask what happened or what the intent was (ask rather than accuse). Tell me what you experienced or perceived and ask me what I experienced or perceived.

Be solution-oriented rather than simply critical. Instead of competing with me over who's right, let's work together to reach a resolution.

Which of the following is important to you when discussing a conflict?
(Check if yes. Add commentary below the item as needed. Err on the side of safety for yourself.)

____ Rather than talking to other people, come to me directly when you have a problem with me.

_____ When possible, do not criticize me or express negative interpersonal feelings in front of others; ask to speak to me in private.

_____ It is important to me that you be focusing on listening while I speak. Please do not interrupt or make impatient gestures. (Because listening means it's harder to think about what you're going to say, it's okay for there to be moments of silence between our comments.)

_____ Do not yell or use an elevated tone of voice.

_____ When in person, personal space is important to me, and I prefer to maintain arm's length distance (or some other measure: _____) when discussing a charged issue.

_____ When in person, positive touch is important to me. Examples:

- _____ Ask me if I want a hug
- _____ Feel free to touch my arm
- _____ Hold hands
- _____ _____
- _____ _____

_____ While I like a good joke, I find jokes can backfire during stressful

conversations and ask that you refrain from them when we are talking about difficult issues.

_____ While we are speaking about difficult issues, I ask that you refrain from the use of “curse words.”

_____ While we are speaking about difficult issues, I ask that you refrain from the use of strong words/name calling that could be seen as aggressive (i.e “coward”, “hate”).

_____ When in person, please do not point your finger at me while speaking to me.

_____ When in person, it helps me greatly if you maintain eye contact with me.

_____ When in person, I prefer for us both to sit down when we discuss something difficult.

_____ If you have a difficulty with me, I hope you will bring it up as soon as reasonably possible. I realize that sometimes, upon encountering the difficulty, you might want to take time to consider things, calm down, or get someone else's perspective; but, if after consideration, you still feel there's a problem, please approach me as soon as you can talk about a solution.

_____ Using specific examples when explaining conflict is useful for me.

_____ Pointing out broad underlying trends when explaining conflict is useful to me.

_____ It is important for me to hear positive as well as constructive feedback.

_____ I want you to know that I may ask for a support person in our conversation about conflict. If I do, I understand that you also get the option of having one.

_____ Please don't talk about our conflict with someone else before we have a conversation about it.

_____ Please refrain from use of "absolute" language i.e. "you always," "you never," "every time," etc.

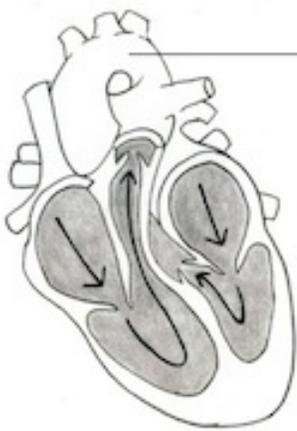
_____ Please come to our tension/conflict discussion with a recognition that conflict is never simply a matter of black or white, but is a complex grey. To that end, I request both of us acknowledge that we are neither simply victim or aggressor but have interacted in complex ways.

Things I want to hear:

(I think our friendship is strong enough to work through this, etc)

Other things and thoughts:

(Are there other things that may escalate or de-escalate you?)



anti-oppression resource and training alliance

AORTA

aortacollective.org