

Conflict is the Spice of Life – Handout

By Francesca Cerletti

I believe conflict is natural. It is part and parcel of who we are and of our lives. From my experience, the energy of conflict can be used as a resource—an opportunity to transform potential for destruction into something creative. To do so, it often helps to understand the context of conflict and view it from a systemic perspective.

This booklet covers the material discussed in the workshop. It gives a quick, visual guide to viewing conflict systemically and two principles of coaching “conflict” from a conflict transformation perspective upon which coaches can draw in their practice, especially when working with conflict issues. In this handout there are also visual metaphors which can be used by coaches as mental reference or for clients as reflection tools to develop their thinking. Everything that is here has helped me greatly in my practice.

1. The cake – a systemic perspective on conflict (adapted from Lederach, Dugon and Galtung)

Conflict is like a spice in a cake: sometimes sharp, sometimes subtle, yet present throughout. To make sense of it, imagine a cake. As the ingredients of a cake can be grouped, for simplicity of argument, in proteins, carbohydrates and fats, we can imagine what makes who we are and the influences in our lives can be grouped in four: our individuality, our past, our socialisation, and our environment. Let each of these groups be a slice of our cake.



Within each slice there are layers (again for the sake of simplification) that progress from the MICRO (the immediate details at the core — the issue, words, momentary behaviours) to the MACRO (broader influences). As we move outwards to the icing, the degree of control decreases (but still we retain some agency) and often have less awareness of such influences. The factors that are represented by these layers can amplify meaning and shape expectations and exist whether or not there is “a conflict”. When conflict arises, they shape how we notice it, make sense of it, and respond and our ability to work with it. The discussion of these factors below focuses on situations of conflict.



Our Individuality



Personal preferences
Roles
Emotions
Awareness
How we communicate
Conflict

Our Past



Narratives
Histories
Inherited experiences
Lived experiences
Recent events
Conflict

Our Socialisation



Culture
Values
Beliefs
Attitudes
Habitual patterns of interactions
Conflict

Our Environment



Meta narratives
Systems
Structures
Policies
Relationships
Conflict

Our Individuality

Who we are as unique persons — our traits, preferences, states, identities, and the lines we draw for ourselves.

Core: the actual words we say in the moment.

Layers moving outward:

- How we communicate — tone, body language, pacing, silence, listening, responsiveness.
- Awareness — the degree of self-awareness as well as what we notice, how we interpret the moment, and what meaning we assign.
- Emotions — feelings, triggers, and the capacity to name and work with them.
- Personal preferences & cognitive styles — action vs. reflection, big-picture vs. detail, learning styles.
- Roles — e.g., parent, colleague, leader, student; the 'hat' we wear changes what feels possible.

Example: A manager says, “We need to move faster” (words). Their sharp tone and closed posture (how) reflect narrowed attention on deadlines (awareness) and heightened stress (emotion). They prefer quick action over detailed reflection (preference). In their role, they feel responsible for delivery (identity), and when progress slips they sense their aspiration for quality and timeliness — and their boundary around professional standards — are under threat (outer layer).

Our Past

Where we come from — the experiences we lived, the stories we inherited, the histories we share, and the identity-building narratives attached to them.

Core: the now

Layers moving outward:

- Recent events — immediate or proximate situations that colour the current moment.
- Lived experiences — personal episodes that shape patterns of perception and response.
- Inherited or “known” experiences — stories, cautions, and grievances passed down by family, peers, or community.
- History — widely accepted events and legacies (organisational restructurings, community/national milestones or ruptures), expected cultural behaviours, and collective traumas that continue to influence how groups behave and what they expect.
- Narratives & myths — identity stories and interpretive frames built around that history (e.g., “we are the underdogs,” “management never listens”) that persist even when facts change.

Example. An employee hesitates to support a new policy (recent event). Years earlier they lived through a painful restructuring (lived experience). Colleagues have long shared warnings about leaders ignoring staff (inherited). The organisation has a record of top-down change (history). A durable identity story — “HQ always overrules us” — primes them to read the policy as a threat (narrative & myth).

Our Socialisation

Who we are shaped to be by family, education, community, and culture — the patterns we learn for being with others.

Core: Behaviour displayed at the moment of the conflict (strongly connected to what we communicate).

Layers moving outward:

- Habitual interaction patterns — how we tend to engage (e.g., speak up, wait, avoid, seek consensus).
- Attitudes — general stance toward challenge, disagreement, and change.
- Beliefs — what we hold to be true or right; what feels negotiable vs. non-negotiable.
- Values — guiding principles (e.g., fairness, loyalty, respect) that orient choices and priorities.
- Culture — broader norms, languages, and power expectations that shape what is sayable/doable and by whom.

Example. Someone raised where open disagreement was discouraged (habit) tends to defer in meetings. They prize harmony (attitude), believe relationships should be protected (belief), and value respect and face-saving (values). In a culture that prefers indirect communication (culture), direct challenge feels risky, so they seek a softer route to influence.

Our Environment

The context around us — situations, relationships, rules, institutions, and broader narratives. These conditions exist regardless of conflict; when conflict occurs, they can constrain, enable, or channel options.

Core: the immediate, visible points of contention (e.g., workload, noise, deadlines).

Layers moving outward:

- Relationships & networks — trust, interdependence, and power between people/groups.
- Policies & procedures — formal rules that enable or constrain action (workplace policies, school rules, tenancy agreements, legal framework).
- Structures — constitutional organisation of a country, institutions, organisational structures, family arrangements

- System: the interaction of all the above.
- Meta-narratives & labels — pervasive frames (e.g., “us vs. them,” “they’re difficult”) that shape perception and behaviour.

Example. A tenant raises a complaint about noise (issue). A strained relationship with their neighbour (relationship) limits informal problem-solving. Building rules require formal notices (policy). Part of the problem is connected to how the building refurbishment was carried out by the contractor, for which the housing authority/council has taken to court (structure). Both feel angry and disempowered, believing that “they are always the last companies and institutions think about” (meta-narrative).

2. The two principles (Bush & Folger)

The transformative approach to mediation prioritises empowerment and recognition over immediate resolution. Instead of focusing solely on solving a specific issue, this approach helps coaches working with conflict increase self-awareness in the client and open them to options. The model focuses on shifting people from weakness to strength (offering opportunities for “self-empowerment”) and from self-absorption to responsiveness (recognition). I have adopted these principles in my conflict coaching practice.

Empowerment: Coaches help clients gain clarity about their goals, resources, and options, enabling them to make informed decisions. This strengthens their ability to manage conflicts independently and assertively. During sessions, there are clues from clients, like “I have tried everything”, that coaches can pick upon to:

- Support the client to regain clarity, strength, and agency.
- Help them recognize they have choices about how to respond.

Recognition: Encourages clients to acknowledge and understand different perspectives, fostering empathy without requiring agreement. This shift from a self-focused mindset to a broader awareness helps in building stronger relationships and constructive dialogue. It’s not agreement or sympathy, but a moment of seeing and validating the other’s perspective or experience. This can reduce hostility and open up new relational possibilities. The clues here sound like “this is always like this”. Here the coach can:

- Encourage a genuine shift from self-absorption to acknowledging the other.

Example: A client is struggling with a difficult manager who dismisses their ideas. They feel unheard and stated that they do not know where to turn to (disempowerment).

Example: A client feels their sibling is always (lack of recognition) dismissive of their needs and opinions. They want to repair the relationship but don’t know how to start.

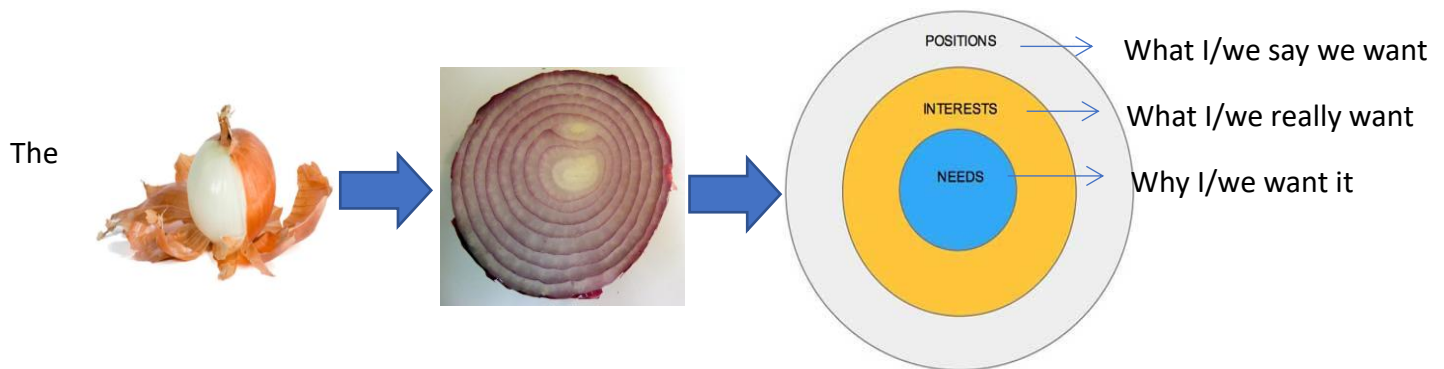
3. The Onion (Simon Fisher et al. and Fisher & Ury)

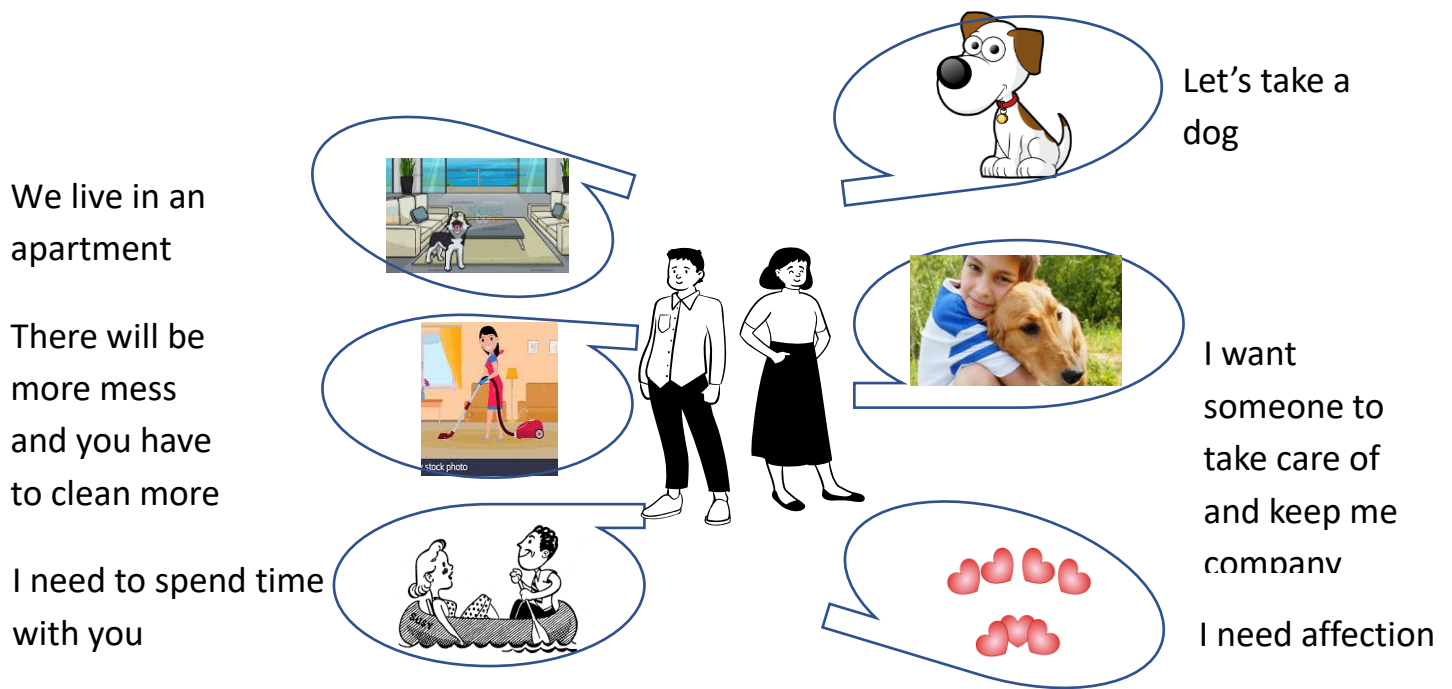
The onion as a metaphor can help coaches and clients looking at conflict “peel” back layers to uncover deeper motivations. Like peeling the layers of an onion towards its core, we can move from fixed standpoints to what lies at the heart of such standpoints and, maybe, find more room for negotiation.

- Positions (Outer Layer) – The public stance a person takes in a conflict, often expressed in firm demands.
- Interests (Middle Layer) – The reasons behind a position, representing what a person hopes to achieve.
- Needs (Core Layer) – Fundamental human needs driving the conflict, such as security, recognition, or belonging.

By guiding clients to explore these layers, coaches help them move beyond surface-level disputes and gain insight into their own and others' motivations. This can lead to more constructive dialogue.

Example: One partner says, “*Let’s get a dog,*” while the other refuses. At the position level, they are opposed. Looking deeper, one’s interest is in companionship and spending more time together, while the other’s is in avoiding extra work and stress. At the need level, both actually seek affection, recognition, and balance in the relationship. By peeling back the layers, a coach can help them see the shared needs beneath the clash of positions.





4. The Conflict Tree Model for Conflict Coaching (Simon Fisher et al.)

The Conflict Tree is a visual and analytical tool that coaches exploring conflict can use as a visual metaphor to help clients with their thinking. It helps unpack and understand conflict by dividing it into three interconnected parts: Roots, Trunk, and Branches.

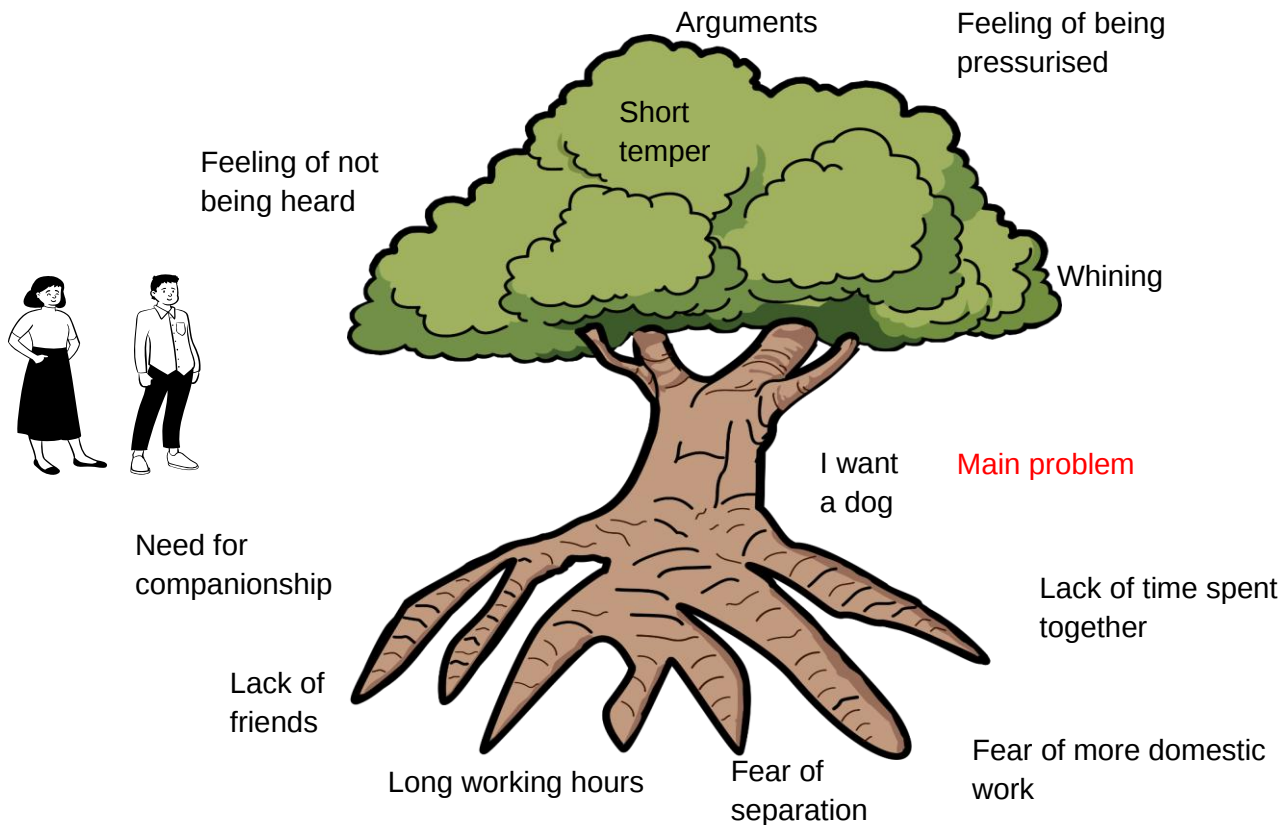
- Roots represent the underlying, deep-seated causes of the conflict. For e.g.: Personal experiences, contextual factors, psychological factors that create tensions.
- Trunk represents the central issue or manifestation of the conflict, i.e. the "visible" core that people are arguing/disputing/fighting about directly. For e.g.: Disputes over land, leadership, practices, identity, roles and responsibilities.
- Branches represent the visible effects and consequences of the conflict. For e.g.: impacts and consequences such as fear, anxiety, broken relationships, poor performance.

Coaches exploring conflict can revisit and revise the "tree" as new insights emerge. The tree as a metaphor can also be extended:

- healing a tree requires addressing both branches and roots
- moving beyond surface-level solutions.
- recognize that addressing deep roots can take time and require multiple steps.

Example: The trunk of the conflict is the visible dispute: whether or not to get a dog. The roots lie in deeper issues — one partner's need for companionship and fear of loneliness, the other's

worry about workload and lack of time together. The branches are the effects: arguments, tension, and feelings of not being heard.



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Possible Questions

The Cake

- What feeling stands out now? What is that feeling telling you?
- What part of you showed up (e.g., the leader, the parent, the expert)?
- How do your preferences (action/reflection, big picture/detail) shape what you see here?
- What relationships, rules, or norms are shaping this?
- What options do those rules open — or close?
- What stories about 'how things work here' are at play?
- What past experiences are echoing here?

The Two Principles

- What would taking control of this situation look like for you?
- What choices do you have in responding to this conflict?
- What is important for you in this relationship?
- What boundaries would help you feel more in control?
- What pressures or challenges might they be facing?
- What might your sibling be feeling in this situation?
- Have there been times when they have acknowledged your perspective?
- What would understanding their viewpoint change for you?

The Conflict Tree

- What specifically is at the heart of the conflict right now?
- How would each party involved define the conflict?
- What long-standing issues are contributing to this conflict?
- How have past experiences shaped your response or the response of others?
- How is this conflict affecting you emotionally (e.g., anger, sadness, fear)?
- How has the conflict impacted your relationships with others?
- What behavioural changes have you noticed in yourself or others?
- What broader impacts has the conflict had (e.g., on your community, workplace, or family)?

The Onion

- What would having that give you?
- What feels most at stake for you in this situation?
- If this argument disappeared, what deeper need of yours would still remain?
- What matters more to you than the solution itself?
- When you think about this conflict, what do you most long for?