

Transcript for Introduction to Conflict Transformation

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Hello and welcome to an introduction to conflict transformation. My name is Sarah Lynne Bowman from Uppsala University and from the Rocket Erasmus Consortium. So, our agenda for today. First we're going to discuss why I, or you, might need conflict transformation skills, then we will give a brief introduction to conflict transformation theory, and then we will discuss the relationship between conflict transformation and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

So why do I need conflict transformation skills? Humans are in various states of conflict, whether that is obvious or under the surface. For example, if I am experiencing discrimination in the workplace that may be very obvious to me, but perhaps one of my colleagues who made a discriminatory comment didn't realize that that caused harm, so maybe it's not obvious to them. Or, there are some conflicts that are under the surface, that are completely unconscious. Like, maybe I have a time pressure that I'm not aware of that is actually influencing the way that I communicate with my colleagues at work. Working in groups, conflicts definitely emerge.

Conflict is actually part of the normal stages of group development according to Bruce Tuckman, this means means we can't actually fully avoid conflict, it will happen. And a conflict transformation approach allows us to see this as a positive thing that can actually help us create better communities. How we handle conflict ultimately can determine the course of our lives, so it can affect our personal relationships, it can affect our work dynamics, ultimately it can affect our success in life. For example, if I have difficulties with emotional regulation, and I'm constantly having angry outbursts at work, for example, that might affect my employment. So toxicity within groups is often directly related to the member's relative skill at addressing conflict effectively. So it's obviously great if one person in the group has conflict transformation skills, but it's even better if everyone in the group is training these skills.

Conflict transformation comes from peace and conflict studies, and John Paul Lederach is a scholar in this field. He investigates conflict transformation as a paradigm. This paradigm views conflict situations as opportunities to collaboratively envision positive futures together. Now this may seem like a lofty goal, and it is in a way, but I think it can be actually achievable. What we're used to thinking about, is how destructive conflicts can be, so times when conflicts have caused harm, or conflict dynamics have made it difficult for people to get their basic needs met.

However, conflict transformation aims to help us shift this orientation and to view conflict as a way to address the underlying factors that are present in constructive ways. So when we have a conflict, then we become aware of underlying, and then maybe, we can try to address them in a more ongoing and resting way. However, conflict transformation skills take practice, and this is something that we don't just learn once, but we actually have to practice throughout our lifetime. And hopefully will have very positive impacts on our lives as a result.

Conflict transformation involves processes that occur at the same time. And these processes are intended to address the complexity of an

issue on an ongoing basis. So for example, if we have an issue related to unhoused groups in our communities, conflict transformation might envision short-term strategies, so for example, finding adequate food and shelter for people, but also, perhaps, long-term strategies at the same time, for example addressing intergenerational poverty by making home buying accessible to all members in a society. So the idea is that these two things don't have to be either or, they can be both and.

Conflict transformation as a method differs from conflict management, which is strategies that aim to de-escalate or minimize conflicts. Conflict management is often taught, for example, in leadership courses, ways to try to de-escalate conflicts at the workplace, for example. And of course, these strategies are very important, however, it can be difficult to actually address the underlying issues if you're just constantly managing things and keeping the conflict invisible. Conflict Resolution, which is another common word, this is strategies that aim to end or solve conflicts.

Although there are some conflicts that have a yes or no easy answer, oftentimes conflicts are complex and ongoing. So, for example, if someone else within a department gets a raise and I don't, yes, who gets the money is how to solve the conflict, but I might have lingering resentments that last for a long time, and that might actually cause more conflicts in the future. And it didn't necessarily address, maybe the bigger issue, which is that the department has budgetary concerns that, maybe, they should actually be addressing somewhere else, like for example, up the hierarchical chain. So while conflict resolution, again, is very important, a conflict transformation approach tends to not view conflict as a problem to be fixed, but rather an opportunity for growth.

In this model, transformation is a process or a series of processes that lead to growth, rather than being linear. Jean Paul Lederach views change as a circle. So if we see here on this graphic, we can see at the bottom things move forward, then things hit a wall and movement stops. Then things actually move backwards, you may be familiar with this phrase "two steps forward, three steps back". And then things actually collapse before they can move forward again. So, often times, when we are in a conflict and we get to any of these difficult stages, especially when things collapse, we might give up and think that the conflict is unsolvable, but actually, this approach to understanding conflict encourages us to hang in there and be with the process, and hopefully things will move forward again. Now, of course, not all processes work this way, sometimes they're more linear and straightforward, but oftentimes with complex issues, it can look a lot like this.

Similarly, Lederach emphasizes that change is not one event, but a series of change processes and these require many strategies to address that complexity as we discussed before. These strategies are then envisioned as a spiral. So if you look at the graph that we showed before, where it where it has a circle, this is several circles, a web of dynamic circles, that create momentum and direction according to Lederach. And here's an image of what that might look like. So we have this embraced need for linearity, we want to see things going from point A to point B, but we're also acknowledging that there are feedback loops that occur. Maybe we fail as part of the process, and that's okay, because we learn from our failure. And then we iterate upon the process accordingly.

These feedback loops and iterations are associated with this circularity, it encourages us to integrate "yes and..." thinking. So instead of either or, yes and. This is highly relevant for people who are into design thinking, game design, playfulness, even learning. So for those of you who do curriculum design you likely didn't get it perfect the first time, right? You try it out with your class and you see how they respond to the material and you iterate. This is a part of a lot of human processes, just conflict transformation.

Conflict transformation with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It often involves ongoing dialogue and collaboration between members in a conflict situation. It also involves a respect for differences and individual subjective experiences. This is especially important when you have people from diverse backgrounds that are in conflict with each other, really honoring their worldview and their individual subjectivity becomes important, and not trying to collapse everybody into the same solution, for example, but rather understanding how individual differences can be a benefit in a conflict situation.

It also involves having a commitment from all parties to ongoing constructive change, and when we're dealing with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, these are not easily solvable, it requires a level of commitment, and it requires us to be willing to sit in the discomfort of ongoing constructive change. It also involves co-creation, so creating methods together to address issues. These could be previous methods that have worked in the past, or in other situations, or we could be innovating entirely new strategies.

But importantly, it involves having patience to trust the process, because this process is long-term, and that can be very difficult for those of us who are get uncomfortable in conflict situations, maybe we would prefer to just try to resolve it and move on, but this approach requires being able to sit in that discomfort. Because issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are deeply entrenched within societies, this approach could be particularly helpful.

I would say actually that conflict is at the heart of all issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. While the circumstances and contexts differ, and those are very important to keep in mind, if you study conflict on a basic level it can help us understand what lies at the root of these diversity based inequities. So, for example, going back to poverty, when people experience poverty in different cultures around the world, they often live within distinct cultural contexts, they have different histories, they have different economic systems, they have different environmental pressures, so we don't want to ignore those things, those are very important to consider, but at the same time, these difficulties are all related to our basic human needs that we all share.

In this case, according to William Glasser's theory, it could be the need for security and safety. So being able to make sure that someone still has a home, or they still have food. We all share these basic human needs, and being able to identify these core aspects that underly conflict can help us recognize the shared humanity in one another. Even if our lived experiences are quite different, and we're honoring those differences, we're also recognizing that we all have the same needs. As mentioned before, conflict transformation arises from peace and conflict studies, and this field distinguishes between negative peace and positive peace according to Addams and Galtung, both leaders in this field.

Negative peace is when a community has an absence of visible violence, meaning that we don't see war occurring, we don't see people harming each other on the street, for example, so therefore we think we're in a state of peace, but this is considered just negative peace, meaning the absence of violence. However, violence is a more encompassing term in peace and conflict studies, there's also positive peace and this is when all basic needs of every community member are met. Now, this is very difficult to achieve, of course, but it is the goal of peace and conflict studies often. Conflict management and resolution, as we talked about before, can contribute to negative peace. The conflict becomes less escalated, less visible, it can feel like we have returned to a state of equilibrium and a state of peace.

However, they fail to address positive peace often. This requires a deeper, more long-term, and more intensive approach. So positive peace, in this case, requires paying attention to the underlying identities at play, the social dynamics, the cultural contexts, and the individual stories connected to those. That takes time and takes commitment. For example, if you're working to address intergenerational poverty in the long term, you'll need to meet the basic needs of individuals within poverty in the short term, and both of those things happening at the same time would be positive peace. When discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion, often times we're talking about privilege and marginalization.

Privilege is not an inherently bad thing, but it means that some members of society are centered, and others are on the periphery, or the margins. That's what we mean when we say marginalization. Marginalized members of society unfortunately are often the target of violence, and Galtung talks about three different types of violence.

He talks about direct violence, which is when physical, emotional, or spiritual harm is occurring. It could be matters of abuse, neglect, or war. And that connects to what we talked about earlier in terms of negative peace, so if there's no direct violence that's visible, then we have negative peace, but often direct violence still does exist in a community even if it considers itself peaceful. However, there are other forms of violence, there's structural violence. That's when there is harm towards marginalized groups that's embedded within inequitable laws, for example, or institutions that are exclusive and it's very difficult to get into, or other structures in society that have these sorts of rules embedded within them that give certain privileges to some people while making it difficult for others to thrive.

And then we have cultural violence. And these are harmful beliefs and practices that permeate society on a cultural level, for example, racist attitudes or beliefs. So for example, we may have a rule that says, a law that says, that everybody is equal in society, but if we have certain beliefs that perpetuate negative stereotypes, then we have cultural violence.

These external factors are often internalized by people, and so the fourth type of violence we'll talk about was developed by Bourdieu and Passeron, and that is called symbolic violence. This is when these external factors affect one's actions, one's belief about what they can do in the world, and about their own capabilities. This can cause inequities to persist in a society. This includes both people who are beneficiaries of privilege, they may feel like they have, for example, more access to certain kinds of jobs and feel more emboldened to actually go and apply for those jobs, but can also be, obviously affects people

who are the targets of marginalization, so whether they believe that they are capable, or whether they believe that a certain job is for them.

When considering diversity, equity, and inclusion, conflict transformation can help us identify several things. For example, we can identify what norms we might have in engaging with conflicts in various settings and cultural contexts, we might notice the different layers of conflict that are often difficult to unpack in the moment, especially when we're in some an emotionally elevated state. Some of these may be more visible than others, for example, we have positions, interests, feelings, and needs. A position is what a person says they want to happen, or they believe, in the moment. So for example, maybe I believe that I should have a raise.

The interests is why they want this to happen, or what is personally at stake in this belief. Perhaps I believe that women should be paid the same as other genders, and so therefore I am putting forth this cause, or maybe, I'm just really worried about not being able to make rent, and I really need the money. So those are two kinds of interests. Then we have feelings. How does this topic make us feel? And our feelings can affect our behavior our judgment and the stakes of any given situation. So for example, if I don't feel a whole lot, maybe I'm not very motivated to engage in a conflict, but if I have strong feelings, like if I feel very angry, that might affect my dynamics at work, or if I feel very scared, maybe that'll affect how much I'm willing to engage with the conflict.

And then there are the human needs that underly this topic, and these transcend these specific situations, but they also inform how we engage with them. According to Glasser, a psychologist, we have these five basic human needs, and of course there are a lot of other needs that are attached to them, but there're sort of overarching strategies for understanding our needs. So, in this particular situation, we have power, so maybe I feel like I want a raise so that I can get a higher position within the institution and have some authority. Or perhaps I want more money for my hobby, so maybe fun is what's at stake here. Or maybe I need safety or security, as I mentioned before, maybe I need to pay my rent. Maybe I need more freedom, if I have more authority, or if I have more money, then maybe I can go on vacation that I've been dreaming of going on. And then, maybe what's affected is my feelings of love and belonging, so maybe I feel like I'm not valued by the group, and I feel like I'm not fully belonging, if I don't have the same pay.

So conflict transformation can help us practice strategies for engaging with conflict, for example, different conflict styles. Thomas and Kilmann came up with five conflict styles, which we'll cover later in this training, but just very quickly, those are: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. Depending on the situation it may be very advantageous to use one style over another, but understanding that you have the option to change styles is really critical. Also, Kraybill talked about how we might have different styles in times of calm versus times of storm, so that's also important to know about ourselves.

Methods for engaging in reflective listening that help improve mutual understanding. This is very important, obviously, for issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We need to be able to hear the needs of others, which may be very different than our own life experience, in order to be able to meaningfully address issues of conflict. Then we can

also develop methods of perception checking that help us understand how a conflict is viewed from different people's world view, which are all unique.

So when a conflict starts, who the main characters are, what cultural lens that they are looking through and how that affects the conflict, all of these things are unique to each one of us, so being able to check perceptions with another person can help build that mutual understanding. We can also practice methods of communicating these positions, interests, feelings, and needs non-violently. And what we mean by non-violently is attempting to communicate in a way that does not confer judgment or blame on others. This is very difficult to do when we're upset, especially if we are feeling like we're experiencing some form of injustice, and in some cases it might not even be possible or even desirable. But it is often a way that other people can more easily hear our positions, interests, feelings, and needs.

So for example, the use of I-statements, focusing on one's own feelings rather than what somebody else did wrong. Being able to self-advocate and make requests rather than demands. Being able to say this is what I need, can you please help me? And then also negotiating what might be the outcome here, and ideally looking for something that's win-win that everybody can be happy with, but obviously, that's not always possible. Ultimately learning how to transform conflicts is in all of our best interests.

Practicing communication skills can help us engage in both short-term and long-term change processes at the same time. Conflict transformation can help us find win-win approaches through collaborative and co-creative strategies to envision new possible futures. Conflict transformation can be especially helpful in situations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion that require an approach that honors the identities and lived experience of people within the conflict. And practicing skills that develop constructive ways of engaging with conflict is a worthy lifelong investment. Here are some of my references for this talk, and again, my name is Sarah Lynne Bowman from the ROCKET Consortium and Uppsala University. Thank you for your time.