

Reflections on Working with Conflict in Groups: What I learned from Diane Hamilton

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Every facilitator knows that conflict in groups can actually be a good thing. It is often a healthy sign that a group has established enough basic trust to raise tensions. Skillfully navigated, conflict can build trust, strengthen relationships, and enhance the effectiveness of team functioning. Poorly navigated, conflict can be a real setback for group effectiveness. That skillful navigation part is key, and a central part of professional development in our field.

I for one am always interested in learning from masters of conflict alchemy to deepen my own tool kit in working with groups. That's why I recently attended a [training intensive with Diane Hamilton](#). Diane is a veteran mediator and facilitator, having worked for decades with heated conversations around race, gender, culture, and religion. She also happens to literally be a Zen master, which I figured would have some sort of interesting impact on her work. I was curious to see her in action and learn from her style. And I was *not* disappointed. Two key learnings stand out.



1. Being present with what's *really* here.

Diane gained my total trust and respect within minutes of entering the room, simply with her stable and spacious quality of presence. What I noticed watching her throughout the weekend was that moments of conflict seemed no more or less interesting to her than any other part of the day's events. For the most part, she held deep conflict around topics like race and gender with total equanimity and skill. No doubt all that meditation had something to do with it.

But what actually impressed me most was how she handled the moments when she could not stay neutral. In one moment, she had a strong personal reaction to a verbal attack as part of the group's exploration of conflict. And instead of using her tools to come back to a place of neutrality, she chose to step out of that role and use her own reaction as part of the group process. She was able to skillfully own her anger as it was occurring in the group, and acknowledge her loss of neutrality in a way I've rarely seen from a facilitator. Though for some Diane's choice resulted in a loss of trust, for me it deepened trust. Too often

I've watched facilitators try to play neutral when they are obviously embroiled in emotional reactivity themselves. In my experience, this rarely serves to do anything but increase confusion. And in my own sensing of the group as a whole, her willingness to be a vulnerable human participant in a key moment actually seemed to serve the group's development beautifully.

As Diane has said, "You can't really hold space. Space is holding itself! Your job as a facilitator is to move energy within the space." This aligns with my own view of my work as a group process designer. Especially when working with groups over a long period of time, we straddle an awkward line between our roles as neutral 3rd parties and our realities as sensitive human beings just like everyone else in the room. Often it is our job as facilitators to "burn our wood", as mediation master Arnie Mindell says — that is, to explore the emotional territory of conflict outside of meetings so we can as much as possible "sit in the fire" of conflict without catching fire ourselves.

But sometimes we are the conduits and the ones to catch fire. And if this is what serves the group, then we should go with it. Sometimes a topic is so alive and real for the collective that, for moments, there is no neutral party and we must all sit together in the discomfort and confusion of conflict. In my experience with groups, these can be incredibly powerful and transformative moments. I believe a masterful facilitator knows when to let themselves be part of the flame. Skillfully and transparently acting as participants at key times is an advanced yet useful skill for developing genuine rapport and trust.

2. Using conflict as a group thermostat

Throughout the weekend, Diane also impressed me with her highly refined attention and ability to track *very* subtle group dynamics. And then I began to notice how she used those dynamics to consciously play the group's energy like a live DJ works an audience. One of the key gauges she played with, she later explained to us, was conflict.

Consensus is cooling. Biologically, we tend to be soothed by sameness — by a sense of unity, connection, and belonging with those around us. But as any creative knows, difference can heat things up in a good way — conflict and tension can generate energy for action, innovation, and more holistic thinking. Too much sameness leads to complacency, stagnation, and blind spots. Too much difference leads to stress and an inability to learn and make progress.

So the trick is to consciously adjust the group temperature to help move a group forward toward its intended outcomes. When the group energy is low, for example, that's a great time as a facilitator to turn up the heat and begin highlighting difference in a discussion. When the energy is rather heated already, you might need to cool things down and remind those in an argument of shared interests and qualities of sameness. The effect is literally like an energetic thermostat, and while this concept sounds simple, there is a lot of art in its execution. Through the choices we as facilitators make in our verbal and body language and which questions and comments we choose, we are playing with group temperature. And Diane showed me new ways that we can do this with intention and skill.

In my own work, I have been playing with the dials ever since. I notice I am watching for something new in groups now — how facilitators do or don't play with the heat. I have been experimenting with different ways to raise or lower the temperatures of conflict and consensus, and watching the ripple effects in the room with a certain delight. It's like having a new instrument to play with.

We all know the old 'forming, storming, norming' heuristic. The temperature tool offers a new way of thinking about the *intentional* role a facilitator can play in that process, across various time-scales. Whether within a dialogue, a day long, or a year long process, we don't have to just ride the group wave. We can guide it.

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