

Patterns That Perpetuate Conflict

(Part 1 of 2)

Bob Wentworth

[Not long ago, I told some friends that I perceived patterns of interaction being active which seemed to stimulate and perpetuate “vortices of conflict” which continue without resolution. They asked me to offer details. What follows is my response to that request.]

Dear All,

Here are some interaction patterns that I’ve seen which I believe contribute to conflict going around and around without resolving.

Note: There is a risk of such a list being used to beat up ourselves or others. Using this pattern list that way would be to indulge in another pattern likely to perpetuate conflict. Without a sense of safety, it is very difficult for people to learn and shift to new behaviors. So, when we see these patterns (or other worrisome patterns) as possibly being active, I’d love for our noticing this to invite us towards compassion and care, thereby supporting safety for growth.

1. **Responding without confirming understanding** - Very often, people receive a message, assume they know what was meant, and then respond to what they *think* they heard. If their interpretation was accurate, this can work. But, if there is a conflict, then the likelihood that “*message received*” is the same as “*message sent*” is *very poor*. When this pattern is active, people “talk past” each other, responding to things that aren’t what the other person meant or is concerned about.
2. **Focusing on *proving yourself right* vs. *developing an integrated understanding*** - Conflicts are transformed when we successfully incorporate key aspects of what is important to the other person into what we are willing to acknowledge and value, and make it possible for the other person to similarly integrate what is important to us. Conflicts are very unlikely to be transformed by rejecting or refuting everything the other person says, or by “defeating” the other person. Conflicts transform when there is a shift from an adversarial “*me vs. you*” way of relating into a mutually collaborative “*us*” way of relating. If our attention is on “proving we are right”, the needed shift is unlikely to happen. The goal needs to be one of finding a way of understanding the situation that cares for both party’s experiences, values, and needs.
3. **Failure to integrate information, concerns, and corrections** - Sometimes, people do not offer satisfying evidence that they have taken in information, concerns, and corrections (to facts or interpretations of others) that have been expressed by others. For a conflict to evolve and resolve, the conversation must build on itself. Each

person expresses information and values that are important to them. If others in the conversation do not offer evidence that they have taken in this information and allowed it to affect them, then the person who originally tried to make a point will likely repeat their point over and over again. We all deeply long to be heard. A sense that “They haven’t heard me” drives repetition and escalating frustration. Finding a way to meaningfully honor and incorporate what others have said is a key to allowing the conversation to move forward.

4. **Dialoging without openness to being touched and changed** - Sometimes people “go through the motions” of dialog, while seeming to be energetically closed. The chances of a dialog being transformative are far, far higher if participants are open to being touched and changed by what they hear. Hoping that the other person will change, when we ourselves are not open to learning and changing, is seldom a bet that pays off.
5. **Believing your diagnosis of others** - Sometimes people become convinced that they “know” what is going on in the other person, and their responses become shaped around the assumption that their diagnosis of the other is the truth. This usually spells certain doom, when it comes to establishing mutual understanding. Such diagnoses are usually wrong in some important respect, if not entirely. Believing you *know* can be a powerful barrier to understanding *what is really going on*.
6. **Not allowing other’s concerns to matter** - Sometimes people don’t acknowledge what is important to the other party, or propose “solutions” that don’t care for those concerns. This is guaranteed to stimulate frustration and resentment, and prevent transformation of the situation. Being “heard” and having what is important to them “matter” are among people’s deepest longings. These needs are things that can usually be cared for, even if we don’t know how to fully address people’s concerns or meet their other needs. Allowing people’s concerns to matter to us, and demonstrating that they matter to us, via acknowledgment, our words, and our choices, are critical to supporting the transformation of conflict.
7. **Continuing using modes of communication that aren’t working** - Sometimes, a particular mode of communication repeatedly fails to improve connection, but people keep trying it, without shifting to try more promising options. For example, while email occasionally can produce connection, it’s extraordinarily rare for email to be effective in transforming conflict that has much intensity to it. More often, email leads to conflict escalating. Live conversation, with support, tends to be dramatically more effective. Sending email often seems far easier. But, when it perpetuates conflict and allows pain and disconnection to increase, choosing the “easy” route can be very costly.
8. **Focusing on intention without addressing impact** - Sometimes people respond to concerns about their actions by calling attention to their positive intentions, without acknowledging negative effects. Intentions are important but are only part of the picture. Positive intentions can lead to undesirable outcomes. It is typically essential to acknowledge impacts and allow them to matter, if a conflict is to be transformed.

9. **“Hit-and-run” engagement** - Transforming conflict requires sustained focus and effort. If someone shows up, stimulates (or re-stimulates) conflict, has a few exchanges, then disengages, then there is never enough sustained engagement to allow anything to shift.

The above are some of the key patterns that contribute to conflict continuing. If you're able to make progress on eliminating these patterns, this is likely to set the stage for more progress in addressing conflict.

For many people, the above list will be more than enough to try to digest. However, for those who would be supported by more information on patterns of this sort, there is also a *Part 2* of this list (available [here](#)) which you might want to consider.

Please try to apply this list only in service to love.

In service,
Bob

Bob Wentworth, Ph.D., is certified as a trainer in *Nonviolent Communication*. He is a former physicist and software architect, and enjoys doing what he can to help transform conflicts and other patterns of human suffering.

© 2021 Bob Wentworth <ptpc.z.rhw@recursor.net>. I am happy to have this resource be shared with those who might benefit from it, with attribution. Please include a link to this document (<https://bit.ly/3ahUIKx>) so that people can access the latest version.