

*Big Brothers Big Sisters*  
*Abbotsford Mission Ridge Meadows*  
**Mentor Learning Series**

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***A Dialogue: Conflict as a Learning Opportunity***

*Written by Michelle Royle*

In this module, we will begin with clarifying what we mean by and the value of dialogue. Moving on we will focus on discussing our beliefs and perceptions about conflict; different conflict styles; how and what it would take to view conflict as a learning opportunity.



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## Introduction

The learning opportunities in this module consist of providing information and skill building activities:

1. To support mentors in developing a greater understanding with respect to how a dialogic approach to communication can enhance relationships
2. To increase individual mentor skills and knowledge with respect to creating a greater understanding of one's individual perceptions of conflict, conflict styles and the value of approaching conflict as a learning opportunity.

**"Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage – to move in the opposite direction."**

*Albert Einstein*

## Dialogue

- ❖ Dialogue derives from two roots: "dia" which means "through" and "logos" which means "the word", or more particularly, "the meaning of the word."<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ Dialogue can be defined as any conversation intentionally focused on searching, exploring and generating understanding.
- ❖ Dialogue creates the space and way for exploring and inquiring into the roots of an issue, by examining collective and individual ideas and beliefs and feelings.
- ❖ Dialogue is not about changing people's beliefs or behaviours; it is about informing and learning.
- ❖ Dialogue provides opportunities for participants to:
  - listen and be listened to
  - speak and being spoken to in a respectful manner
  - develop or deepen mutual understanding
  - learn about the perspectives of others and reflecting on one's own view
  - build relationships in positive ways – creating community
  - honour the wealth of experience and knowledge in the 'room' and the synchronicity of what that can bring and develop together.<sup>2</sup>

A dialogue is a way of being in conversation with others. It can be a formal structured process with a great number of participants facilitated by one or two people, or it can simply be an intentional way of being in conversation with a few people. The way of being in a dialogic conversation asks the participants to suspend their judgments, be open to the possibility of being changed by the information heard and shared, and to openly share one's insights and knowledge for the purpose of generating understanding about a topic and between individuals. An important reminder at the beginning of any conversation is to clarify the intent of the conversation, and one way to do that is to talk with each other about a statement such as: "understanding does not mean agreement".

<sup>1</sup> Bohm, Factor, Garrett, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Public Conversations, Project, 2003

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- ❖ To engage in a debate would be to have a view of winning and losing, believing that one opinion, position or way is better or right, it's an either or stance, where information is selectively shared to support a position, opinion or belief someone has. Debates are also solution-focused.

***Debate versus Dialogue<sup>3</sup>***

<b>Debate</b>	<b>Dialogue</b>
Assuming there is a right answer and you have it.	Assuming that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can craft a solution.
Combative: participants attempt to provide the other side is wrong.	Collaborative: participants work together toward common understanding.
About winning.	About exploring common and new ground.
Listening to find flaws and make counter-arguments.	Listening to understand, find meaning and agreement.
Defending assumptions as truth.	Revealing assumptions for reevaluation.
Critiquing the other side's position.	Re-examining all positions.
Defending one's own views against those of others.	Admitting that other's thinking can improve on one's own.
Searching for flaws and weaknesses in other positions.	Searching for strengths and value in others' positions.
Seeking a conclusion or vote that ratifies your position.	Discovering new options, not seeking closure as the prime goal.

***Circle***

Circles are one way to be intentional when in conversation with others to encourage dialogue, understanding and build relationships. People of all cultures, particularly indigenous cultures, have been meeting in circles forever. There are many examples of the presence and power of circles in the world. Participating in a circle requires people to maintain the confidences of the stories shared, to speak and listen from one's heart with the intention of connecting with and learning from others. The fundamental principles of engaging in circles can be established in any conversation, and though there are some basic process 'rules', the essence of the magic of circle results from the intention of dialogue.

<sup>3</sup> Yankelovic, 1999, p. 37



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**Activity: Difficult Conversations – Setting Ourselves Up For Success**

Think of a conversation you would like to have with someone to gain some clarification about an issue that rests between you. Thinking about engaging in a dialogue and the information about circles; What specifically would you need to do to initiate this conversation? How would you go about setting up this conversation for success? How would you need to be?

**Guidelines for Engaging In a Conversation through Dialogue**

Guidelines you can propose for a small or large conversation where your intention is to generate greater understanding between individuals need to be clearly agreed to at the beginning of a conversation. These can include establishing the purpose of your conversation, topic, how you all agree to participate and how much time you are each prepared to talk for. These guidelines are reflective for a circle process to. Often people feel awkward proposing what may seem to be a rather formal beginning, and yet there can be immense comfort and safety for everyone when what and how you are going to talk is clearly agreed to at the outset. This agreement can be posted on a flip chart for a larger group or you can simply record it on a piece of paper, doing so generates a shared responsibility and a way of helping each other stay within the topic and gentle reminders can be given to each other when the 'way' becomes difficult. The Public Conversations Project (2003) suggests there are two aspects of guidelines, the spirit of speaking and listening and the form our speaking and listening.

Suggestions for guidelines can include:

- ❖ Speaking for ourselves and from our own experiences
- ❖ Not criticizing the view of other participants
- ❖ Listening with 'resilience', "hanging in" when what is said is hard to hear
- ❖ Not interrupting
- ❖ Passing if we do wish to speak
- ❖ Honouring the time frames



## Beliefs and Perceptions about Conflict

Conflict can be defined as: *a real or perceived difference of opinion, understanding or values, that matters and is important to one or all the people involved.* It can be a vehicle to development and learning.

<b>Activity: Conflict is...</b>		
Circle the words or statements below that resonate for you when you think of the finishing the statement: CONFLICT IS....		
Divisive	Painful	Resolvable
Misunderstandings	Redundant	Inevitable
Wanting things to be different	Can clear the air – bring issues forward	Can lead to understanding and growth
Emotionally based	A 'me' perspective	A part of life
Stressful	Can create change	Hoping to fix
Exhausting	Trying	Not compromising
Aggressive	Awkward	Redefining
Can lead to an end or a beginning	Getting a point across – saying what's on your mind	An excuse to eat ice cream and chocolate
Lesson in hiding	Untrusting	Uncomfortable and squirmy
To be avoided if possible	Look inside	Purposeful
An opportunity to learn	Release	Negative
Growth – acknowledgments of skills	Truthful and untruthful – lies	Hopeful – hoping to help/resolve a situation
Win/lose	Lose/lose	Win/win
Conquer and divide	Disrespectful	Unexpected
Can be positive		



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**Activity: Heart of Conflict**

What is the heart of conflict? Reflect on an example of a conflict you have experienced in your life, what was the central issue or heart of it?

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**Activity: Source of Conflict**

Describe three examples of conflict you have or have had in your life:


What do these examples have in common...?

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Looking at the possible sources of conflict listed below...what are the source(s) of your conflict examples.

**Possible Sources of Conflict**

- ❖ Territory – Space
- ❖ Ownership - Property
- ❖ Values
- ❖ Beliefs
- ❖ Power
- ❖ Authority
- ❖ Rewards
- ❖ Expectations or Assumptions
- ❖ Unmet Needs
- ❖ Procedures, rules, laws
- ❖ Differences in goals
- ❖ Differences in ways of behaving
- ❖ Lack of Clarity
- ❖ Competing for resources
- ❖ Misinformation

**Positives of Conflict**

- ❖ It can identify a problem, a difference of opinion, an unmet need
- ❖ It can lead to growth and learning
- ❖ It can lead to the development of more stable relationships
- ❖ It can help us clarify our values and priorities – help us determine what is important to us
- ❖ It can empower us

Add some additional positives:

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**Common Approaches for Resolving Conflict**



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**“You’re not a failure if you don’t make it; you’re a success because you try.”**

*Susan Jeffers*

Conflict can destroy or create growth. It is how we approach and address conflict that determines its influence on our lives and in our world. People resolve or ‘deal with’ conflict in all manner of ways, and there is no right way to resolve conflict. It is important to know your preferred conflict style or strategy. With increased knowledge and awareness you are empowered to consciously choose your approach in ways which encourage more positive relationships. As you will see, there are many ways to resolve conflict, which are dependant on the situation, personal preferences and the stakes!

<b>Activity: Source of Conflict</b>				
How do you generally go about dealing with conflict?				
What influences your approach to addressing or not addressing a particular conflict?				
Looking at your answers, choose what you usually think of as your usual way of behaving when you are faced with a conflict that matters to you in some way: Would you say you act like a ...				
<i>Teddy Bear</i>	<i>Turtle</i>	<i>Owl</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>Shark</i>
List a few words that when you think of each of the animals – describe the way they would act if faced with a conflict.				
<i>Teddy Bear</i>	<i>Turtle</i>	<i>Owl</i>	<i>Fox</i>	<i>Shark</i>

The predominant view is that that there are five different styles people tend to respond to conflict with. Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilman identify these 5 different conflict styles which people tend to engage in:



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Style	Defined	When its useful	Animal?	Terms?
<b>Competing</b> <i>"My way or the Highway!"</i>	One person or group is wanting to defeat another.	When you want to protect yourself, when you know you are right, when you need a quick decision.		
<b>Avoiding</b> <i>"It's not my fault...leave me alone."</i>	You don't want to address the conflict, you withdraw or post pone addressing it.	When the issue does not matter to you - its an insignificant issue for you.		
<b>Accommodating</b> <i>"Whatever you say is fine with me."</i>	You give in to the other person, give up your own needs or desires so the other person can have their needs or desires met.	When you realize you are wrong, or you want to allow others to learn from their mistakes.		
<b>Compromising</b> <i>"If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."</i>	Find the middle ground, everyone gives up something and everyone gets something.	When you need a quick resolution and can live with a temporary solution.		
<b>Collaborating</b> <i>"Let's work it out together."</i>	Collaborate means to 'labour together' – its activity embedded in the belief that together we are more able to find solutions than apart. We can create a bigger vision together: $1 + 1 = 3$ .	Use when you want to find solutions that address the most needs of all the people involved.		

**Activity: Animal**

In the table above, write in the name of one of the five animals in the box that best describes it.



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**Activity: Terms**

In the table above, write in the terms in box that best describes the conflict style it fits with:

- ❖ lose/lose
- ❖ lose/win
- ❖ win/win
- ❖ win/lose

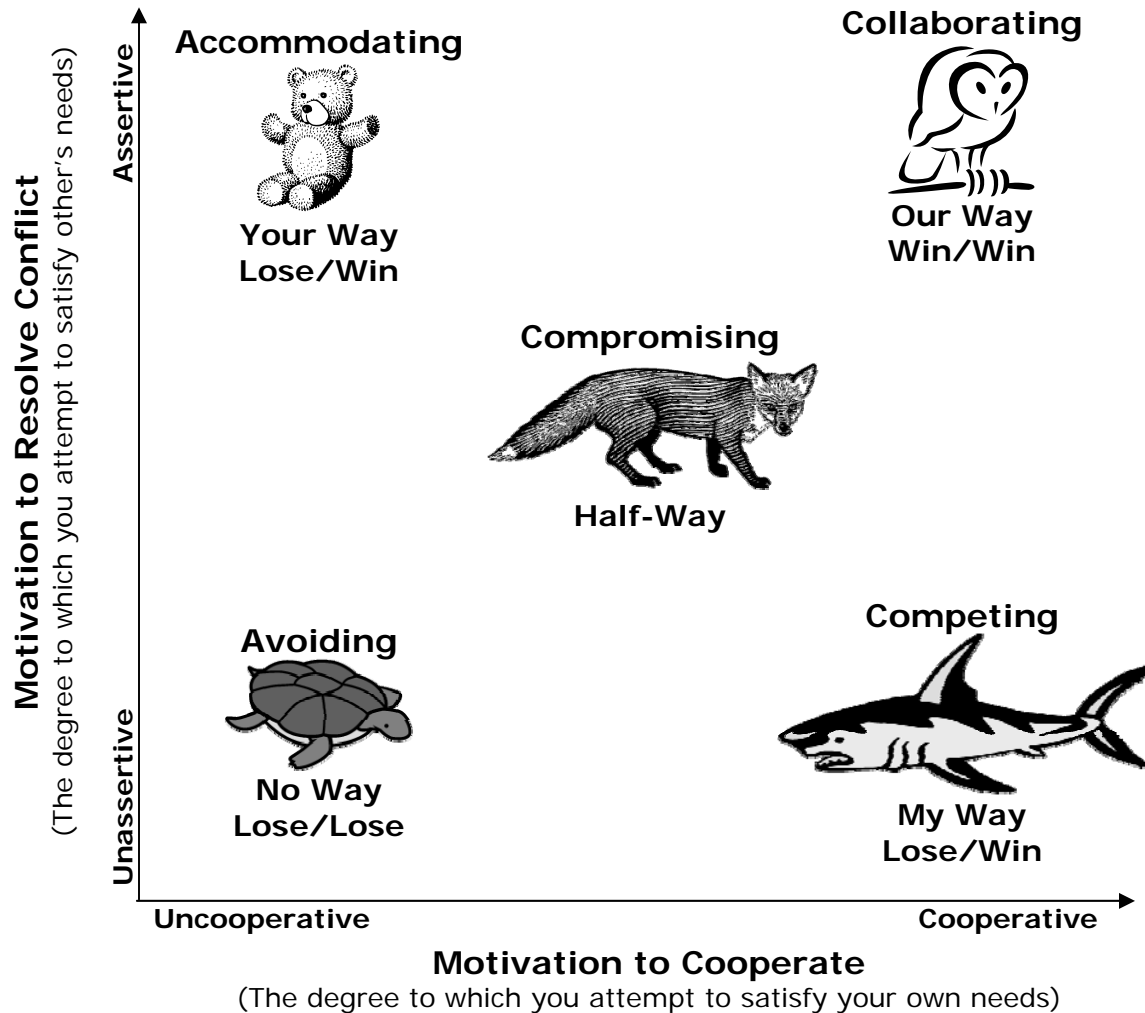
In the table above, write the following terms in the box that best describes the conflict style it fits with:

- ❖ Half-way
- ❖ My way
- ❖ No way
- ❖ Your way
- ❖ Our way



**The Axis: Motivation to Resolve Conflict and Motivation to Cooperate**

**Conflict Styles Diagram**



Though we each may have a preferred way of resolving conflict, our ability to shift our strategies is important. There are all manner of influences, which allow us to make choices as to the strategy we use to resolve a particular conflict, these can include our learned behaviour, feelings of emotional and physical safety, our development, our confidence levels, how much something matters to us in the moment and how much energy we have, etc. The strategy is also chosen based on how assertive and cooperative we can be in that moment with another person. The more assertive and cooperative we are



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with another, the more able we will be to find ways to resolving a conflict in a way which meets the needs of all the people involved.

*"All people have difficult choices to make in life, and no one can always get what he or she wants. Sometimes, in the name of peace or resolution, disputants have to give up something very important to them. But people can address their most important needs and protect their essential interests with dignity and with compassion and respect for those they are in conflict with, even when they don't like those other people and are very angry. People in conflict can get beyond their anger and fear to make wise choices, even when under great duress"<sup>4</sup>.*

In your work as mentors, it is important that you understand the need for collaboration as a viable conflict resolution style because you have interdependent ongoing relationships with your "Littles", each other, parents, teachers, care givers, etc, with all of whom you share the same overall goal: To assist and support young people to be in life in a positive way. A collaborative style or strategy is most effective when you are engaging in a discussion or addressing a problem where there is a need to maintain a future relationship between individuals. *"Collaboration is a strategy for moving parties beyond conflict by engaging them in a creative partnership"*<sup>5</sup>. Collaboration is concerned with action; it is future focused and is not about assigning blame and resolving long standing issues of the past. It is about moving forward to build present and future positive relationships.

Collaborating with another, being both highly assertive and highly cooperative, is the work of the wise owl. One of the many attributes of an 'owl' is their capacity to listen. Being collaborative means to use active listening skills and empathy, to remain curious, suspend judgments. Having the courage to risk, being open to learning, being committed, respectful and patient with ourselves and others, are all necessary ingredients to resolving conflict in a collaborative way. Being open to the possibility of being changed by what one hears or learns in a process, is one of the most important ways we can be, as we work toward resolving conflict which builds mutually respectful relationships.

**Activity: Listen first to understand, so you can speak to be understood.**

What can you do, to remind yourself, when you are in a conflict, of your strategy choices?

<sup>4</sup> Mayer, 2000, p. 81

<sup>5</sup> Heart of Conflict, p. 12



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<b>Activity: Conflict Approach</b>
Think of a story of a conflict or problem you had with someone and in sorting it out – it turned out well, and your relationship was not harmed. What was the approach and the other person's approach that made it turn out well?
What might your preferred way be of addressing conflict?
Does your way of addressing conflict change depending on circumstances, and if so, how?

***Conflict as Opportunity...***

Conflict is inevitable; violence is not. Conflict is generally seen as a negative occurrence, a disruption, and an obstacle to overcome. One of the challenges we all face is to find positive ways to use conflict in order to minimize negative impact and maximize positive effects. Using a specific conflict as a 'teachable moment' through an integrated participation and accountability process enables those involved to resolve conflict and restore relationships. This approach provides a positive and meaningful learning opportunity.

<b>Activity: Conflict as a Learning Opportunity</b>
Reflect on and answer the following questions:
Why might it be important to you to view conflict as a learning opportunity?
In what areas of your life or relationships are you able to shift conflict to a learning opportunity?



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How would you need to be to view conflict as an opportunity? (What would you need to do/behave like?)
What are the values that underpin this way of being? Values are those things or principles that are important to you – that you want to operate from and often are unspoken.

**Some ideas of how we need to be, when we are assisting others in resolving their conflicts:**

- ❖ *Commit* – “I’m not going anywhere” – “You matter to me” – “A positive relationship with you is important to me” - stay in the conversation, be in ways you are proud of and would love others to be
- ❖ *Model* through your actions and behaviours, and then talk about why you did what you did, acted the way you did, share your mistakes and your learning
- ❖ *Talk* about what is important to you
- ❖ *Listen*
- ❖ *Ask open questions* “What would you suggest we do? How can we work together to sort this out? Help me understand what it is about this that is important to you?”
- ❖ *Encourage and Invite* the other person to participate to their comfort zone
- ❖ *Be curious* - suspend judgment, use non-blaming language
- ❖ *Talk about ways you can each manage anger, identify and share your triggers*
- ❖ *Be Patient*
- ❖ *Be Respectful*
- ❖ *Focus on the future* – what can we do differently
- ❖ *Breathe*



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**Dialogue Circles**

The use of dialogue circles is one type of proactive process that could assist families, groups, communities, organizations, and schools in creating safe and caring environments. Dialogue circles, circles of understanding, talking circles, peace making or peace keepers' circles provide opportunities for facilitated dialogue to address topics best attended to by the individuals most directly involved. Dialogue circles incorporate essential components: the analogous values of speaking and listening from the heart, sharing stories and experiences, honouring confidentiality, respecting all members equally, building understanding and generating knowledge to address issues or changes.

<b>Activity: Introducing Dialogue Circles</b>
How could you use dialogue circles to address conflict and build healthier, more safe and caring relationships in your life or work life?
How would you go about introducing the use of dialogue circles to one area of your life? Who would you talk to, how would you approach them, what would you say?

<b>Activity: Planning a Dialogue Circle</b>		
As a dialogue circle facilitator develop a:		
❖	checklist of the guidelines you would propose to the participants	
❖	a list of who you would invite	
❖	what your topic (purpose) would be	
❖	an opening and closing	
❖	several open questions to guide the dialogue	



## Final Reflections

1. In any helping role, it is sometimes challenging to draw a line between being responsible to another and being responsible for another. One of the ways we can be helpful is to promote learning and skills acquisition. For example, at their invitation, talking through a conflict with a young person, brainstorming different approaches and then role playing can be a useful practice. What are some other ways you can assist a young person in resolving a conflict they have?

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2. How would you need to be or act, to use a collaborative approach to resolving conflict?

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3. How do you need to be, what do you need to do to adjust your way of being in conflict that encourages others to be more collaborative? Think of someone who routinely avoids, accommodates, compromises or competes as a way of addressing conflict...what do you need to do to support that person to be more collaborative or engaged in addressing the conflict with you? ie: We have to be careful to not assume that those who are avoiding are undervaluing the importance of the issue or that they are afraid.

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4. A personal challenge I want to overcome, when addressing conflict is:

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5. My plan to work on this challenge is:

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## Taking It Back: Working with Your Little

Specific ideas to incorporate this module in your work with your Little:

### **Develop relationships**

Dealing with differences in a good way and managing conflict is essential to building positive relationships. Discover together the challenges you face when you are dealing with conflict and your tendencies.

### **Manage conflict**

As a first step: Make an agreement between you and your Little to view conflicts that arise between you as opportunities to learn and challenge each other to rise to the occasion in a good way.

### **Build knowledge**

Share the information in this module with your Little, and find out what your Little's conflict strategy default is. Talk between yourselves about other people in your lives and what you might 'hunch' their preferred strategies for resolving conflict are. Then discuss how you could encourage a more collaborative approach.

### **Encourage self reflection**

Share stories of conflicts that resolved well and what you and the other person did well. Focus on building a positive 'bank' of experiences you share.

### **Build capacity**

Plan and facilitate a dialogue circle with your Little and yourself as the circle facilitators.



## References and Further Resources

Bohm, D., Factor, D. & Garrett, P. (1991). "Dialogue: A Proposal", Copyright 1991, David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett. Available at: <http://world.std.com/~lo/bohml/0000.html>

Empowering Ourselves Together: What's Your Conflict Management Style? Available at: <http://webhome.idirect.com/~kehamilt/ipsyconstyle.html>

Falikowski, A. (2002). Mastering Human Relations, 3rd Ed. Pearson Education. Available at: <http://www.pearsoned.ca>

Mayer, B. (2000). The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: San Francisco, CA: Jossey- Bass.

Public Conversations, Project, 2003. Available at: <http://www.publicconversations.org/pcp/page.php?id=262>

The Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument can be completed and more accurately determine your preferred or dominant conflict resolution style by contacting: Available at: Training and Development Materials of Canada: 1-800-283-4964.

Yankelovich, D. (1999). The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation. New York: Simon & Schuster.

