

---



# Introduction to conflict competence

DANYA RUMORE, PH.D.  
ULCT MIDYEAR  
CONFERENCE 2025

---

1

---

Who has experienced conflict in your work?

---

2

---

Who has experienced conflict in your personal life?

---

3

---

Who typically finds dealing with conflict to be easy and comfortable?

---

4

---

Who tends to feel anxious, tense, or nervous when dealing with conflict?

---

5

---

Who thinks conflict is inevitable in governance?

---

6

---

Conflict just is

---

7

---

This is particularly true for anyone working in  
or with the public sector

Including municipal officials

---

8

---

That's why we need to talk about conflict

---

9

---

Here's where we're going

---

- What conflict is, what it is not, and why it matters
  - What conflict competence is
  - Overview of our conflict competence work with ULCT
  - Basic skills and concepts that can help you navigate conflict productively in your work and life
  - Tools and resources that can help you continue to develop your conflict competence
- 

10

---

Let's start with a little exercise...

*If you'd done this before, be an observer (or pretend as if you haven't done it before)*

---

11

---

Thumb wrestling!

---

Goal: Score as many points as you can in 15 seconds

NO TALKING before or during the round

---

12

---

## Thumb wrestling!

---

Round 2:

Goal: Score as many points as you can in 15 seconds

Talk with your partner for 30 seconds BEFORE the round  
NO TALKING during the round

---

13

---

## What the thumb wrestling exercise teaches us about conflict

---

- Some issue of mutual concern (an opportunity or challenge) brings people into interdependence with each other
    - "Score as many points as you can" = issue of mutual concern
  - People have different needs and concerns (i.e., interests) related to the issue of mutual concern
    - They have conflict!
  - People often assume the situation is zero-sum, but it isn't
    - There is potential to create value for all parties (i.e., mutual gains) through working together on the issue of mutual concern
    - There is potential for all parties to lose value by not working together on the issue of mutual concern
- 

14

---

## What the thumb wrestling exercise teaches us about conflict (cont.)

---

- To create mutual gains, parties must reach agreement on and implement an effective joint strategy
    - I.e., they must negotiate and collaborate
  - Effective communication is key to identifying and implementing a joint strategy
    - Talking is not enough; you must talk about the right things
  - Parties must have confidence in each other to follow through
    - If one party does not follow through, it will erode confidence, and future dealings will likely be more difficult
    - Parties can and should take action to ensure follow through (i.e., to protect their interests)
- 

15

---

What is conflict?

---

16

---

## What is conflict?

The intersection of different needs, wants, and concerns that are in tension with each other and not easily reconciled

---

17

Conflict just is

Conflict can be destructive if poorly dealt with

Conflict can be productive and generative if skillfully dealt with

How parties deal with conflict will determine whether it is productive or destructive

Conflict competence is key to making conflict productive

Conflict competence also helps us avoid conflict becoming destructive and resulting in disputes

When we need to reach agreement on courses of action, we need to collaborate

Collaboration means "to co-labor" - it is all about working together to make conflict productive, and it is rooted in interest-based negotiation

Conflict competence and collaboration are pragmatic skill sets that anyone can learn (and everyone should know!)

---

18

---

## Ways of dealing with conflict

---

Conversation  
in the hot tub



War

---

19

---

## Unproductive ways of dealing with conflict

---

Avoiding



Arguing

Fighting

Violence

War

---

20

---

## What is conflict competence

---

The ability to deal with conflict skillfully  
(i.e., to make conflict productive - and not destructive)

---

21

---

## Conflict competence is NOT

---

Just being nice

Compromise

Disagreeing better

"Sit down, shut up, and get along"

---

22

---

## Overview of our conflict competence work with ULCT

---

23

---

## Developing a conflict competence training program for Utah's municipal officials

---

- So far:
    - Situation assessment to understand the need and opportunities
      - Interviews with 19 diverse municipal officials from across the state
      - Survey of municipal officials from across the state (205 responses)
    - Presentation on preliminary assessment findings at the ULCT Annual Convention
    - Mini-training (a lot like today) with the ULCT board last summer
  - Today: introduction to conflict competence mini-training
  - Coming your way soonish: more (and more in-depth) training offerings
- 

24

---

## Some key findings from our situation assessment

---

- Dealing with conflict is “part of the job” for municipal officials
    - 61% of survey respondents said they experience conflict in their role weekly or more frequently
  - 93% of survey respondents indicated that managing conflict well is an important part of effective governance
    - 58% said conflict is unavoidable in governance
  - There is strong interest in and support for conflict competence training for municipal officials in Utah
    - Almost all respondents said it would be very helpful (61%) or somewhat helpful (32%)
  - Strong interest in (>50% of respondents): in-person training at the ULCT Annual Convention or Midyear Conference; in-person training held in their community; online interactive training; online educational modules they can do anytime on their own; and in-person training held in each region of the state
  - Almost all survey respondents said they would be interested in a one-hour or half-day training
  - >50% of survey respondents are very or somewhat interested in a multi-day or more in-depth training
- 

25

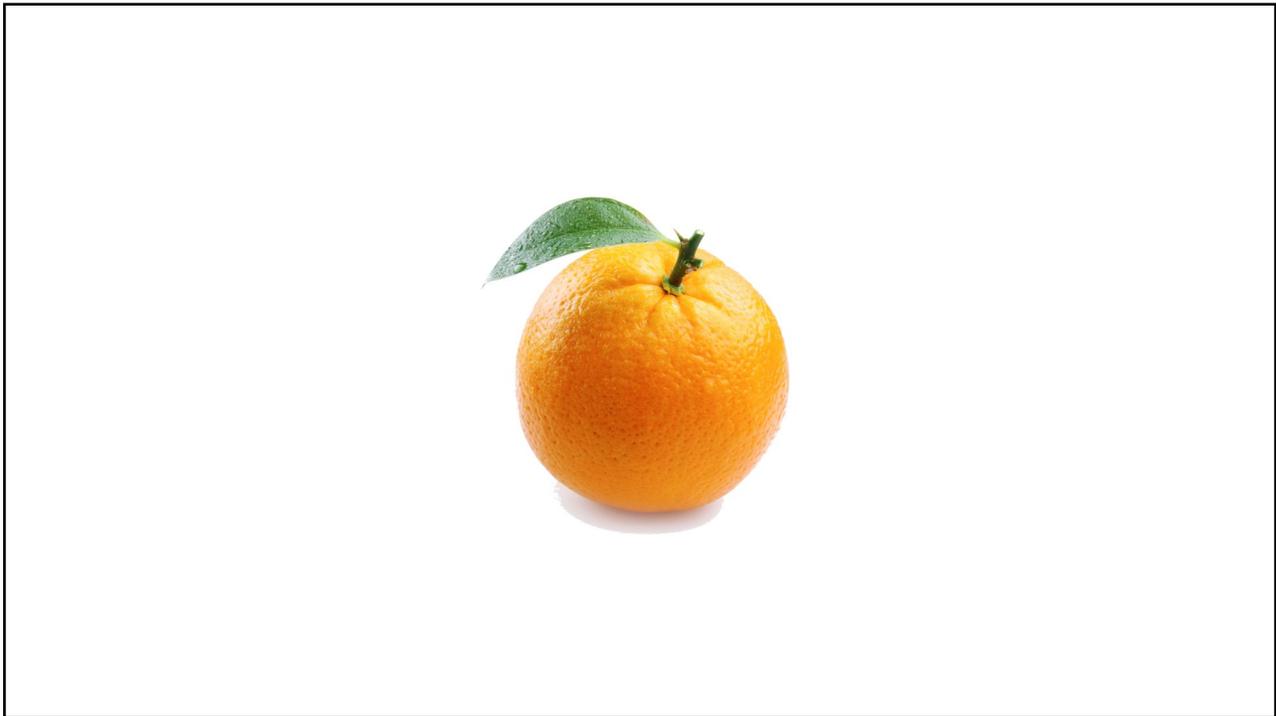
---

Today:

Introduction to conflict competence mini-  
training!

---

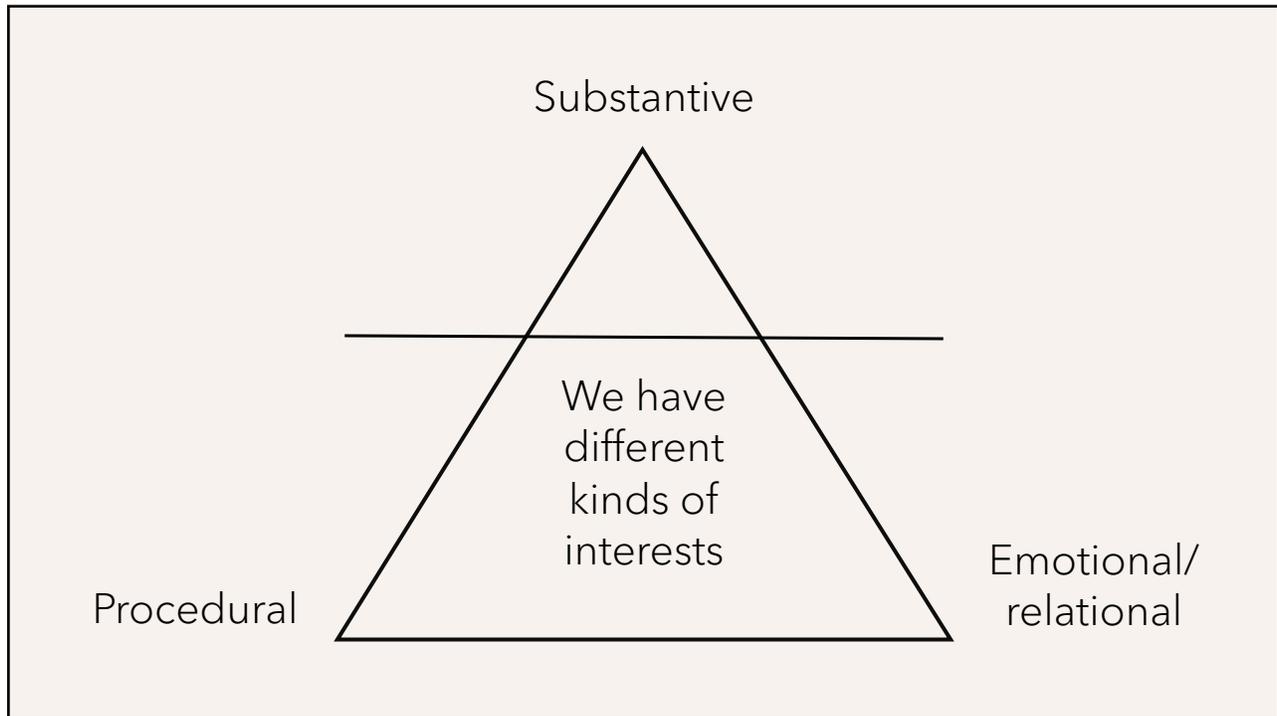
26



27

Focus on interests, not positions	
Interests	Positions
<i>The "why"</i>	<i>The "what" or "how"</i>
Fundamental needs or concerns	Specific solutions or strategies

28



29

---

Most people just want to be heard and considered!

---

30

---

## Understanding your interests

---

*Think on your own for 2 minutes, then discuss in pairs:*

Reflect on a conflictual situation you experienced recently in your work or home life...

- What **positions** (specific solutions or strategies) were you advocating for?
  - What were your underlying **interests** (your fundamental needs and concerns)?
    - It may be helpful to practice the Nine Whys: repeatedly ask "why is that important?" to help you get to the root of what *really* matters
    - Pull back the layers of the onion!
- 

31

---

How was that?

---

32

---

## Advice for focusing on interests

---

- This is a whole new way of seeing and operating in the world
    - Be patient with yourself - and keep practicing
  - Understanding interests is like peeling back layers of an onion
    - What really matters here?
    - Use the Nine Whys exercise: keep asking "Why is that important?"
      - E.g., "Why does getting this particular outcome matter to me?"
  - This concept applies to all parts of your work and life
    - E.g., what you advocate for; how you frame conversations; how you solicit input
  - The importance of effective listening
    - Effective listening = listening to truly understand
    - Ask good questions and listen for interests
- 

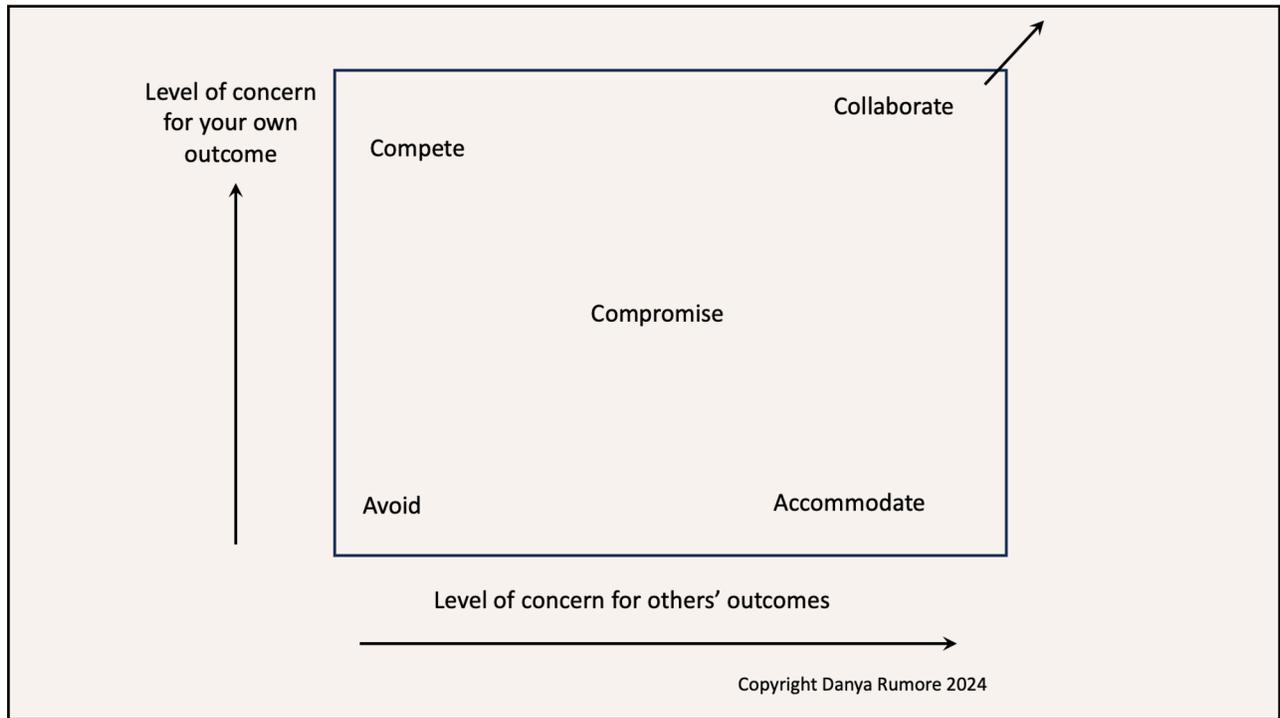
33

---

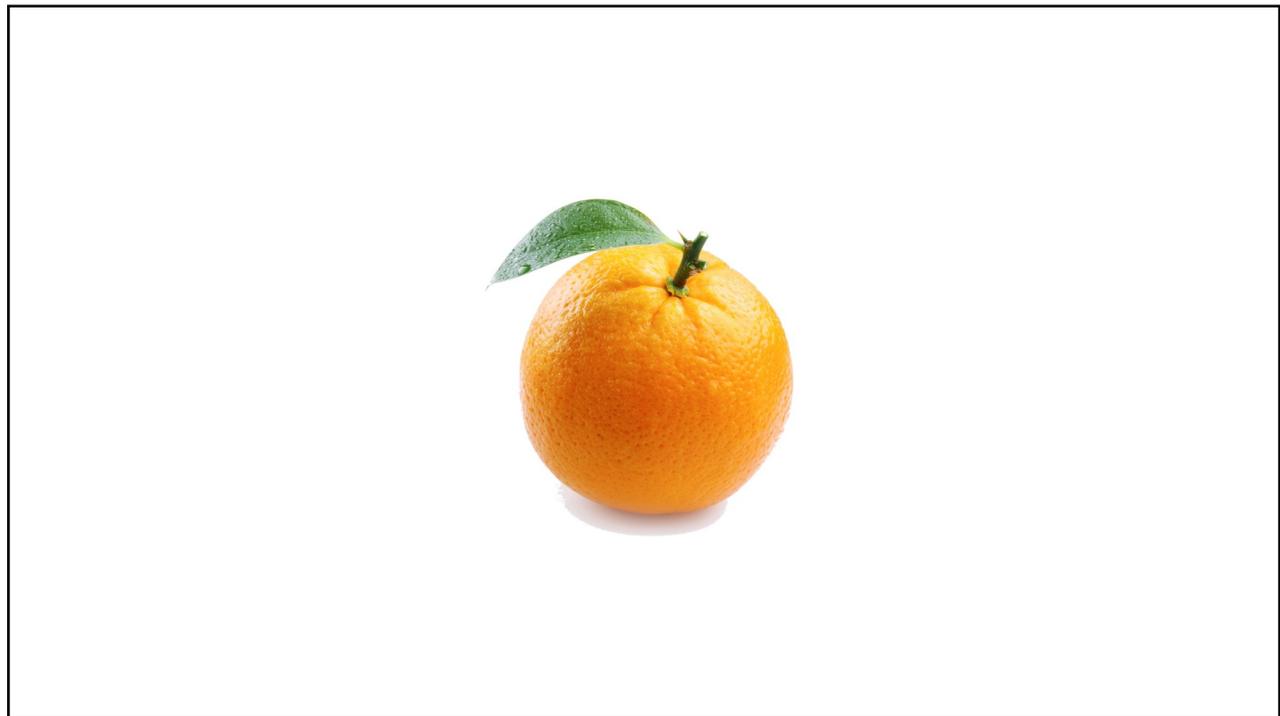
Curiosity is a superpower!

---

34



35



36

---

Collaboration is *not* just “being nice” or “let’s all get along” or compromise

It is a pragmatic approach based on interest-based negotiation

---

37



38



39

---

Collaboration is all about:  
Effective problem solving  
&  
Help me help you help me

---

40

---

Why is conflict so difficult for us?

---

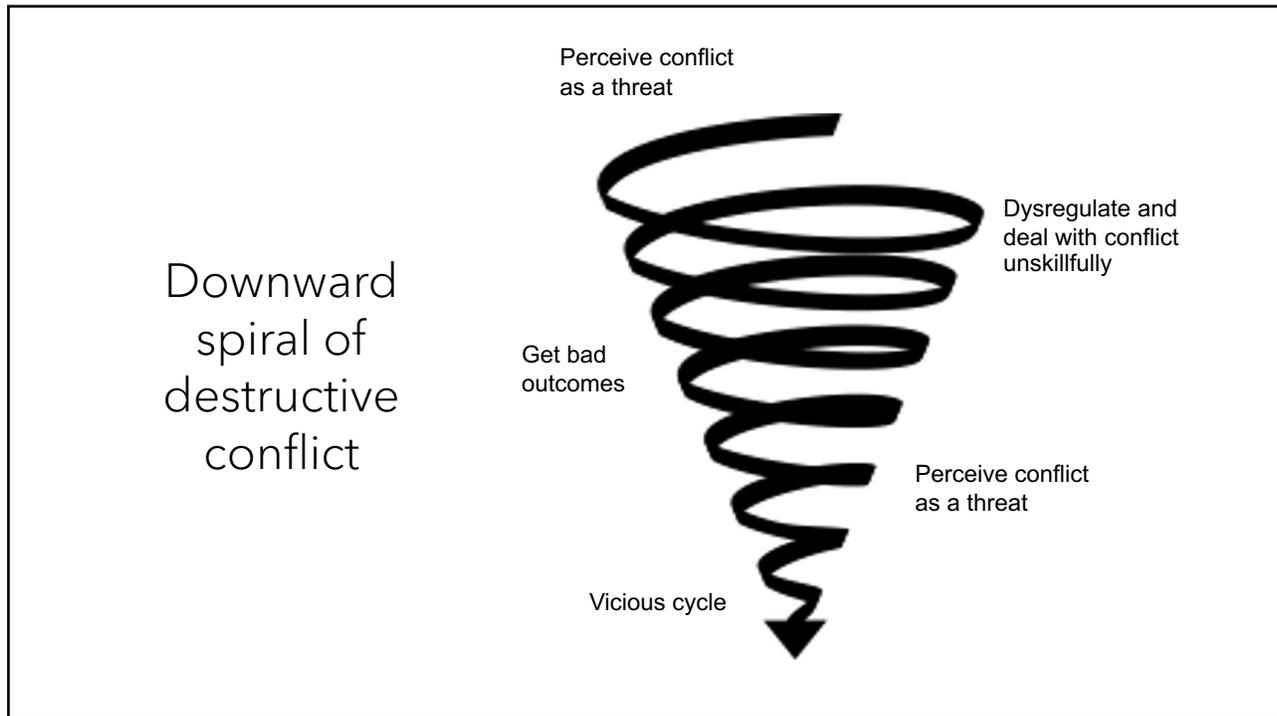
41

---

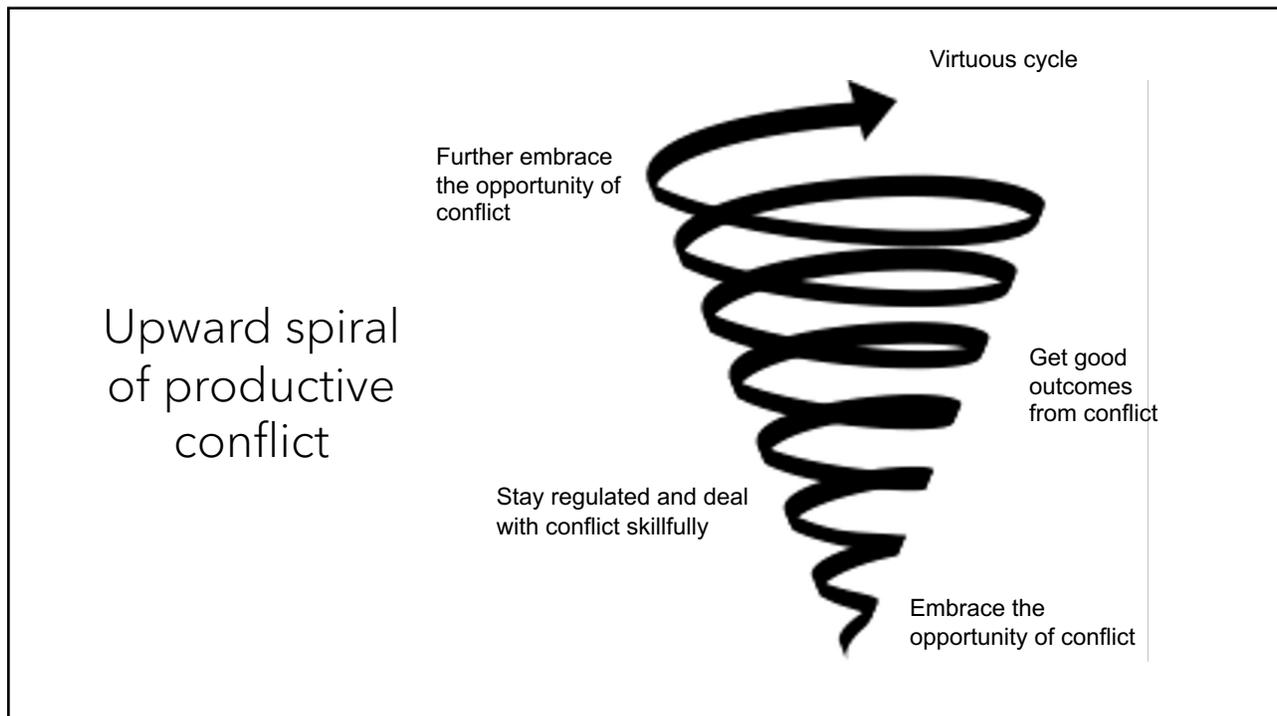
The fact that we see conflict as a problem  
*is a problem*

---

42



43



44

---

So much of what we experience as conflict is  
just dysregulated humans

---

45

---

Don't pass go until you're well regulated  
(i.e., calm and present)

---

46

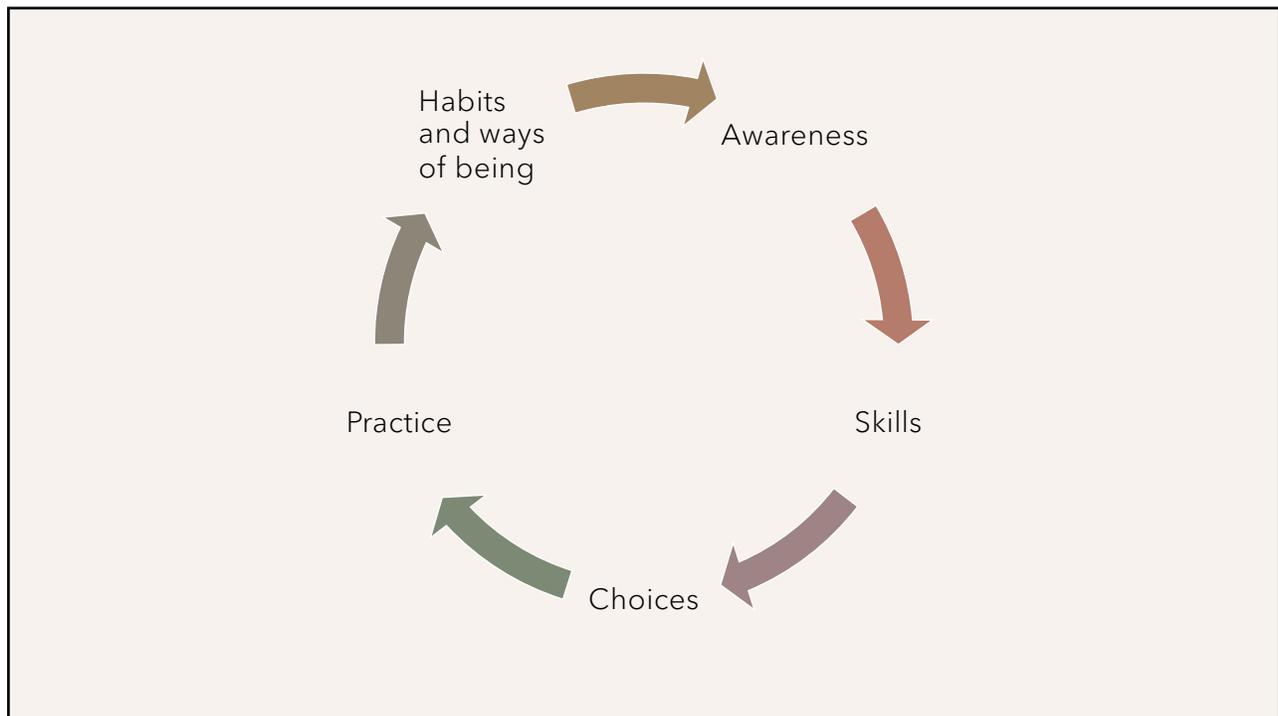
---

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

-Attributed to Viktor Frankl

---

47



48

---

Do you choose to see and treat conflict as a  
problem?

Or as an opportunity for growth, innovation, and  
effective problem solving?

---

49

---

Do you default to unproductive conflict  
tendencies (such as defend-and-protect  
behaviors)?

Or do you choose to deal with it skillfully (and  
learn how to do so)?

---

50

---

## Some key conflict competencies

---

1. **Conflict competent mindset:** understand that conflict “just is” and can be an opportunity if skillfully handled
  2. **Calm:** ability to maintain and return to a well-regulated nervous system and present state of mind
  3. **Clarity:** focus on interests (*what really matters*)
  4. **Compassion:** understand that people (you included) do what they do for a reason, and assume you don’t know
  5. **Curiosity:** seek to truly understand and to learn, not to be right or to win
  6. **Constructive communication:** listen and speak to create shared understanding
  7. **Creativity:** lean into open-mindedness, innovation, thinking out of the box, and “what is possible here?”
  8. **Containers:** use structure to liberate productive dialogue, engagement, and problem-solving
  9. **Commitment:** commit to acting in conflict competent ways, and intentionally make and follow through on commitments
  10. **Courage:** have your own back, lean in when things feel challenging, and don’t shy away from discomfort
- 

51

---

What is one key thing that you are taking away from  
today’s mini-training?

AND

How might you put that into practice in your work/life?

---

52

Wallace Stegner  
Center  
EDR Program  
Resources

[Danya.rumore@law.utah.edu](mailto:Danya.rumore@law.utah.edu)

[www.law.utah.edu/stegner-center/edr/](http://www.law.utah.edu/stegner-center/edr/)

EDR Blog



Free tools and  
resources



Collaboration  
Certificate  
Course

(Applications due April 30!)

