Differences that Matter:
A Framework for Conflict Engagement at UBC

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Why We Need This Framework

We are experiencing a time in history marked by endless demands and opportunities to share physical, digital, intellectual, and psychological space with people who are different from us. Our daily lives inevitably bring us into contact with those who hold and exercise worldviews, values, desires, perspectives and needs unlike our own. In this context, the potential for eye-opening and stimulating exchange is great. So is the potential for conflict.

Universities have always been active sites for contestation of ideas - today perhaps even more so - as we attempt to create environments that are conducive to learning and growth for a wide and widening range of identities. UBC's globalized campuses, situated on the unceded lands of Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Syilx people, are impacted by historic and evolving questions around rights, power and belonging. Our pedagogical and administrative landscapes need to adapt to stay relevant. Many members of the UBC community – administrators, faculty, staff, students – are looking to be better equipped to navigate these conflictual times and spaces. This Framework has been created in service to them.

The Conflict Engagement Framework exists to build individual and institutional capacities to engage with conflict as it naturally emerges in the UBC community.

How We Understand Conflict

Conflict is generally defined as a real or perceived incompatibility between opinions, objectives, interests, or desires of two or more parties. In other words, conflict hinges on difference. Sometimes difference is experienced as a threat to something one or more parties care about, and it elicits emotional responses: anxiety, anger, hurt, indignation, irritation, fear – a feeling that things aren't fair.

Conflicts are differences that mobilize our emotional resources: they are differences that matter.

This Framework takes a broad view of conflict as something that manifests between individuals or groups of people, with possible structural or symbolic underpinnings. At the university, conflicts range from daily disagreements and mundane tensions, to explosive confrontations and grievances. Not all conflicts are created equally. They exist along a spectrum of intensity. The literature on conflict is clear that tensions tend to escalate, growing more serious over time. Small acts of resentment such as sarcastic jokes, gossip and subtle passive-aggressive behavior, if not productively engaged, can become the seeds for an escalation pattern that ends with complaints of bullying, for example.

The ways that an organization and its members view conflict shifts over time, circumstantially and as the organization's identity changes. At UBC, we are in the midst of a shift in how we view conflict and our relationship to it. This shift – which the Framework names and formalizes – can be described in four parts:

We view conflict not as a deficit to be managed and removed, but as a resource to be engaged and harvested.

- Reframing interpersonal and intergroup tensions as natural, normal and full of potential for deepening conversations and developing people, relationships and ideas. In this view **conflicts are seen as resources** we can harvest, not deficits we need to manage or remove.

- Recognizing the need for a **wider range of tools and approaches** for working with conflicts of various natures and intensities. Building a bigger toolkit expands the opportunities for targeted, appropriate response in each case.

- Acknowledging that we need **widespread skill and acumen** across all populations at our institutions. This calls for building capacity for conflict engagement at a mass scale, targeted to meet the needs and the responsibilities of various positions.

- Committing to build institutional systems that are **in service of our collective aspirations**. To have credibility, conflict engagement policies and procedures need to be experienced as transparent, fair and accessible by the entire community, including its most marginalized members.

What is Conflict Engagement

Conflict engagement is defined as any process for facing into and attempting to address conflict, either directly or indirectly, with another party. Conflict engagement is a broad umbrella term that includes conflict resolution, conflict management, conflict intervention, conflict investigation, conflict exploration, and conflict transformation – recognizing that there is a time and place for each.

For a variety of cultural, practical, personal or structural reasons, one or more parties to conflict may decide to walk away from conflict as an alternative to engaging in it. This may well be the most suitable option. But sometimes walking away is *not* an option. Nor should it be the *only* option. This Framework aims to build individual and institutional capacity for engaging with conflict in a variety of ways, so that members of the UBC community can exercise more choice when deciding whether or how to engage with conflict.

Alignment with UBC's Strategic Plan

Shaping UBC's Next Century identifies inclusion, collaboration, and innovation as three priorities to be advanced by all the work of our institution. Conflict engagement aims to concretize these commitments through realistic and practical efforts, noting that the pursuit of inclusion, collaboration and innovation *requires* engaging with conflict.

The road to inclusion, collaboration and innovation is paved with conflict.

Inclusion is the commitment to access, success, and representation of systemically marginalized groups of people. Meeting this commitment necessitates wading through historic conflicts and their legacies. Difficult and emotionally charged conversations are to be expected. Without a commitment to engaging in uncomfortable conversations the commitment to inclusion is empty and meaningless.

Collaboration is about bringing different points of view to the table. The benefits of collaboration are well-known. But a multiplicity of views can also make for a difficult and slow group process. We need conflict engagement skills in order to work with the rub of our differences across disciplines, cultures, and power distances. Without skills at engaging conflict, collaboration can be inefficient and frustrating.

Innovation is the by-product of working through conflict. Disruptive ideas do not grow in risk-averse, conflict avoidant cultures. Conflict invites us to be more explicit in our thinking and refine our ideas in response to critique. Often creative solutions emerge precisely because we disagree on the obvious answers. Without the ability to lean towards conflict, we run the risk of leaving truly transformative possibilities on the table.

Structural Factors and Conflict Propensity

Certain characteristics of the university environment make it prone to conflict in ways that differ from other institutions. Some of the same factors also make universities fertile ground for productively engaging conflict. They include:

Primacy of open discourse and argumentation- Challenging the methods and ideas of others is core to the academic discourse that permeates the university. As debate becomes passionate, it can be experienced as conflictual, particularly when the cultural norms of argumentation are new, unspoken, or changing. Academic debates that are framed clearly and carried out constructively fulfill their role as the essential vehicle for advancing knowledge and practice.

Unique governance structures – Decision making at the university depends on a mixture of hierarchical and democratic processes. The tenure structure, for example, introduces hierarchy that expands power distances between faculty by rank, and between faculty, staff and students, while collegial governance models –faculty management committees, administrative advisory bodies, student governments –shorten power distances and put checks and balances in place. Other components of our system such as unions and associations, alumni and donors also shape the governance landscape, as does the intersection of positional rank and status with personal rank and privilege. The results are a complex web of relationships, where both power struggles and abuses of power are possible, even likely. When members of our community use their personal and positional power responsibly and constructively, they can prevent conflict escalation and create opportunities for fruitful engagement with differences.

Societal role and responsibility- At UBC we aspire to have impact on the region and the world around us. This in turn means that we are entangled in the issues of the world. There are unresolved and ongoing struggles in our societies arising from historic patterns, such as colonization, patriarchy, systemic racism, and current turmoil such as political polarization and the threat of environmental collapse. The simultaneous commitments to diversity, justice, and free expression invite the largest societal debates to our campuses. The opportunity is to find productive ways to work with these tensions, and to inspire the world.

We cannot ignore the contribution of such fundamental structural factors to interpersonal or intergroup conflicts at UBC. Nor should we assign *all* responsibility for conflict to structural factors, or assume that structures are fixed and unchangeable. Engaging conflict with more ease and confidence can enable critical conversations that transform those structures that no longer serve us.

Costs of Conflict Escalation

When conflicts escalate, as they often do when they are not engaged early, the university community bears enormous costs. Being aware of these costs allows for more informed risk and benefit assessment every time we choose whether and how to engage with tensions.

Wellbeing
Being trapped in conflict without a productive way out is very hard on the morale, mental health, and wellbeing of individuals, including those caught in the middle and those not directly involved. Sick leaves and turnover are common side effects of a culture mired in conflict.

Time

Substantial amounts of time are spent dealing with conflicts that have escalated. Teams that cannot work their way through conflict are less productive and less efficient. Time spent regularly on disagreements is well worth it as it prevents escalation.

Money
Investigation of formal complaints is

expensive, as are legal fees, liabilities, and potential fines associated with a complaint. The university also incurs costs related to sick leaves, turnover and donor loss when conflict is not addressed well. The costs to individuals who are party to serious conflicts include financial loss, legal costs, risks to employability, mobility or career advancement.

Reputation
When a conflict becomes public via media, social media, or word of mouth, it can cause irreparable damage to UBC's reputation. Even more costly is the erosion of trust in the institution, internally and externally.

Opportunity Costs
To the degree that conflict can unleash creativity, innovation, transformative learning and change, we are losing out when we fail to engage conflict constructively.

Personal Options for Responding to Conflict

What often makes conflict scary or difficult to engage is that it disorients us. Most people do not have a map or mental model for dealing with conflict, particularly because most of us have never had formal instruction in it. Many of us default to approaches we learned in our families of origin, but fail to appreciate and use the range of approaches we have available to us as adults.

When we find ourselves in conflict that we don't want to or cannot walk away from, we may consider a range of engagement options including:

1. **Speaking with those with whom we are in conflict**
2. **Seeking help from a third party to address the conflict**
3. **Requesting that authorities adjudicate our conflict**
4. **Appealing to public opinion to serve justice**

There is no inherent hierarchy to these options. They may all be necessary in order to satisfy and protect people with intersecting rights, interests, and preferences. The 1st option (e.g. having a difficult conversation with a colleague) and 2nd option (e.g. asking a manager to mediate) are essential for building relationships of trust and strengthening joined problem solving. The 3rd option (e.g. filing a complaint) and the 4th option (e.g. taking a story to media or social media) may be needed to address complex conflicts, breaches of protected rigths and cases of abuse. The misuse or over-reliance of any of these approaches can be damaging. This Framework calls for building and strengthening conflict engagement practices across this range of approaches, and in particular for making the relationship-centred options easier and more appealing through a focused and widespread capacity building approach.

Modalities for Addressing Differences

At UBC, Heads of Units are responsible for ensuring compliance with UBC's policies. When a conflict leads to a grievance or complaint process, Heads of Units, sometimes supported by specialized administrative functions, conduct investigations and address any wrongdoings in accordance with UBC policies.

But in most cases, Heads of Units and other leaders are in a position as third parties to help address conflicts among members of the UBC community outside of a grievance or complaint process. Aside from the compliance lens, there are a number of other modalities that may be useful to the situation. They include:

The Critical Mode

We can analyze and deconstruct conflict in the context of current and historic systems of power and oppression. We use a social justice lens to identify abuses of power even if policies do not recognize them as wrongdoings. We hold oppressors and aggressors responsible and socially protect those with less power.

The Dialogic Mode

We bring parties together to explore conflicts in a non-judgmental space using a facilitated or mediated approach. All sides of the story are seen as valid, there is no need to establish right and wrong, and the focus is on each party taking responsibility for their own contribution and moving towards joint problem-solving.

The Embodied Mode

We work through the differences relying on non-dialogic tools ranging from ritual and ceremony, to the use of the arts, cultural immersion, and sports. The natural power of sharing space, experience and activity helps parties understand each other, see each other's humanity, and negotiate their differences.

It is uncertain whether any of the above approaches are effective on their own in helping parties work through their differences and improve their selves, relationships or structures. Each modality has certain strengths and weaknesses. As they grow their skill and comfort with conflict engagement, leaders and third parties can creatively weave these different modes together to meet the needs of specific conflict situations.

A Capacity Building Initiative

This Framework is a major call for widespread capacity building across our institution in recognition of the educational mission of the university and the challenges that conflict invites us into. It proposes that we put systems in place to develop appropriate skills, competencies, and bodies of knowledge according to the nature of roles within the structures of the university. It is crucial to recognize that the responsibility for bringing up and engaging differences cannot rest

entirely or even primarily with those who have relatively less power at the university. Instead, the responsibility to invite and hold space for conversations around differences that matter should increase along with the level of power and position at the university.

This Framework calls for a tiered capacity building approach in which:

Every member of the university community is equipped with conflict literacy.

Conflict literacy is defined as the basic awareness, knowledge, skill and practical wisdom for productively engaging in conflicts in which we find ourselves. Conflict literacy includes, but is no limited to: emotional management, ability to name power and positionality, ability to take different perspectives, and basic knowledge of relevant policies and resources.

All leaders of academic and non-academic units develop their conflict fluency.

Conflict fluency is defined as leadership competencies for assisting parties who are in conflict with one another. Conflict fluency includes conflict literacy as well as: a thorough understanding of institutional policies, convening power and skill, conflict coaching, and preventing escalation through day-to-day leadership.

A small, dedicated central team of specialists can be called upon for their conflict mastery.

Conflict mastery includes conflict fluency, literacy, as well as the ability for creative and timely interweaving of embodied, dialogic, critical, and compliance approaches to conflict. The specialists are called upon when complex conflict situations require their advanced competencies.

Final Thought

This Framework sets an ambitious vision for UBC in the realm of conflict engagement. We have the possibility to become a leading institution in this area if we can establish a living lab in which we do not only talk about engaging with conflict, but we do it effectively. In leaning into and facing our conflicts we can create a more desirable reality. As James Baldwin once said:

"Not everything that is faced can be changed.
But nothing can be changed until it is faced."