A Systemic Approach to Conflict Engagement
July 27th, 2017 at I.K. Barber Learning Centre
Workshop Summary Report and Next Steps

Problem statement:
Despite the prevalence of conflict and the variety of programs that address disputes among faculty, students and staff, UBC lacks an institutional framework for conflict engagement and a systemic picture of what we are doing and why. In the absence of such a framework it is difficult to coordinate efforts to make best use of our capacities, and to improve our conflict engagement practices in service of a more respectful, inclusive, productive, and creative environment.

Response:
To begin building a systemic approach to conflict engagement through an initial participatory, day-long working session, with three objectives:
1. To gather information and populate a map of current conflict engagement efforts at UBC
2. To identify gaps, overlaps, and leverage points for better addressing recurring conflicts
3. To build relationships between colleagues in this area of work as basis for alignment and collaboration

Participants:
Invitations were extended to approximately 100 members of the UBC community – faculty, students and staff - for whom conflict engagement is a major aspect of professional life. About 50 people attended, representing a wide range of roles, from Associate Deans, HR managers, counsellors and front line staff who are approached when conflict is escalating, to researchers and educators who study conflict and teach others how to work with it proactively. While the group was fairly diverse in many ways, we noted in particular the under-representation of UBCO, the absence of Indigenous colleagues, and the importance of their voices.

The meeting was designed and convened by Aftab Erfan (Director of Dialogue and Conflict Engagement) in collaboration with Lindi Frost (Director of Employee Relations), Shirley Nakata (Ombudsperson for Students) and Tom Scholte (Professor, Department of Theater and Film).

Summary of day's activities (see details of each activity on the following pages):
1. Presentation and discussion of draft framework for working with conflict
2. Visual mapping of currently existing conflict engagement efforts across the system
3. Embodied and verbal exercises to unearth systemic and structural conflicts at UBC
4. Identification and rating of leverage points for better addressing conflict across UBC

Summary of next steps:
1. Incorporate input on the draft framework for conflict engagement, articulate a value proposition, and convene a small steering committee to further articulate UBC's approach to conflict engagement.
2. Build on the information shared at the workshop to create a user-friendly, searchable "menu of offerings" of conflict engagement initiatives at UBC.
3. Create an ongoing Community of Practice of conflict engagement practitioners on each campus.
4. Engage UBC's leaders in conversations about structural conflicts and their effective engagement.
5. Flesh out the list of Recommendations coming out of this workshop in conversation with relevant offices at UBC, and establish accountability and timelines for moving specific initiatives forward.

Description and outcomes of the day's activities:

1. **Presentation and discussion of draft framework for working with conflict**

An initial framework was presented, which included definition(s) of conflict, description of patterns of conflict escalation, theoretical and practical approaches to conflict engagement, and thoughts on potential end goal(s) of conflict engagement (Appendix A). The hour long discussion that followed revealed general resonance with the framework, particularly with the description of the patterns of escalation, which many participants recognized from their experience at UBC. There was general agreement that investigative and disciplinary interventions need to be complemented with dialogic and preventative initiatives (in what we might call an *integrated* approach to conflict engagement). Discussion also stressed that while protecting the rights of individuals to a respectful environment must be a central goal of conflict engagement, this work cannot be about quashing conflict. Participants highlighted the usefulness of conflict as a way of engaging our community in deeper and more meaningful learning, and unleashing creative and potentially transformative ideas we claim to welcome.

Participants raised questions and added their input about a number of aspects of the framework including: the need to speak more directly to issues of power and expectations; to touch on the role of vulnerability, trauma, isolation, survival and fear; to acknowledge the importance of compassion, creativity, and structure in conflict engagement; to address conflicts in the classroom environment explicitly and to frame it in relation to commitments to intellectual freedom and freedom of speech; to speak to the onus for conflict engagement and the role of bystanders. There were also two large and connected questions that emerged, revealing divergent views. These were not fully answered and may deserve their own space for further exploration:

a) How might we describe the culture of conflict at UBC? Is there one culture or are there many?
b) What are the implications of using the language of "conflict engagement" to talk about this work? Given the negative cultural implications of the term conflict, is it more useful to use the language of "working with differences", for example?

Next steps:
1.1. Revision of the framework to incorporate participants' input and subsequent convening of a small Advisory Committee to further revise and finalize the framework
1.2. Convening further conversations around the questions of "UBC's conflict culture(s)" and/or "what language do we use to talk about this work?"

2. Visual mapping of currently existing conflict engagement efforts across the system

Given that most workshop participants are providers of conflict-related services at UBC, the workshop was a great opportunity to learn about the range of current efforts in this area. Participants filled out copies of a template which asked for: name or description of the program or service being offered, who it is for/available to, who delivers the service or program, what is the nature and cost, and what the program or service intends to achieve. Participants then took a few minutes each to speak about their efforts in plenary, and to place their template on a board, along something of a spectrum from subtle and preventative interventions (e.g. training in having difficult conversations) to formal interventions (e.g. investigations under UBC's policies).

Several key observations emerged from this activity, the first of which was that there was simply far more going on than most participants were aware of, and that the visual nature of the exercise made it easier to grasp the range and volume of the work being done. An initial surprise lead to a sense of excitement, pride and celebration. At the same time, there was a feeling of being overwhelmed by the information. Several people wondered, for example, how might a busy Department Head or Director navigate existing resources and choose appropriate interventions for situations they may be facing. We noted quite a bit of overlap in some areas along the spectrum, and some gaps, particularly around the role of researchers in this area. Many participants referred to this exercise as the most worthwhile component of the day and expressed their excitement at the possibility that these efforts, now visible, can be better coordinated and accessed.

Next steps:
    2.1. Transcribe the information from the mapping exercise, check accuracy and completeness, and complement with information from others at UBC who work in this area but were not able to be at the workshop
    2.2. Identify and/or build a user-friendly mechanism and interface for accessing and searching this information (i.e. "menu of conflict engagement initiatives")

3. Embodied and verbal exercises to unearth systemic and structural conflicts at UBC

In the second half of the workshop, we used a series of short theater exercises, drawn from two different traditions (Conflict Theater, and Social Presencing Theater), to bring to life the dynamics we often observe at the university. These embodied, largely silent exercises opened space for conversations about the system-level conflicts, including the ways that differences in goals, motivations, expectations and "rules of the game" applied to various segments of faculty, staff, and students (and the two campuses) almost inevitably lead to forms of conflict. We brainstormed a number of systemic and structural conflicts observed at UBC, but did not debate these at length or come to consensus about them. Some items on the list were general (e.g. conflict over allocation of limited resources and institutional priorities; patriarchy and white supremacy) while some were quite specific (e.g. negative perception of international students; historical and political conflict of the university existing on unceded Musqueam land; deeply embedded culture of conflict among faculty in some academic units; impact of privacy laws on flow of information to community about misconduct and assault). This list was generated as a way of grounding our more in-depth conversation about leverage points and necessary actions.

Next Steps:
> 3.1. Ensure the structural conflicts identified in the workshop are brought to the attention of senior management, and work towards initiatives to address these conflicts over time

4. Identification and rating of leverage points for better addressing conflict across UBC

Leverage points are defined as places in a system where exerting a small force could make a relatively large impact. In the last couple of hours of the workshop we spent time brainstorming and briefly discussing what participants saw as promising intervention points within the UBC system to increase the ability to productively engage with conflict. We then collectively examined and prioritized list to identify potential leverage points, using a dotmocracy exercise: each participant was invited to "vote" on the top 10 most *impactful* interventions (with red dots), and the top ten most *feasible* intervention (with yellow dots). The votes were counted post-session to identify the most highly supported priorities. (Appendix B)
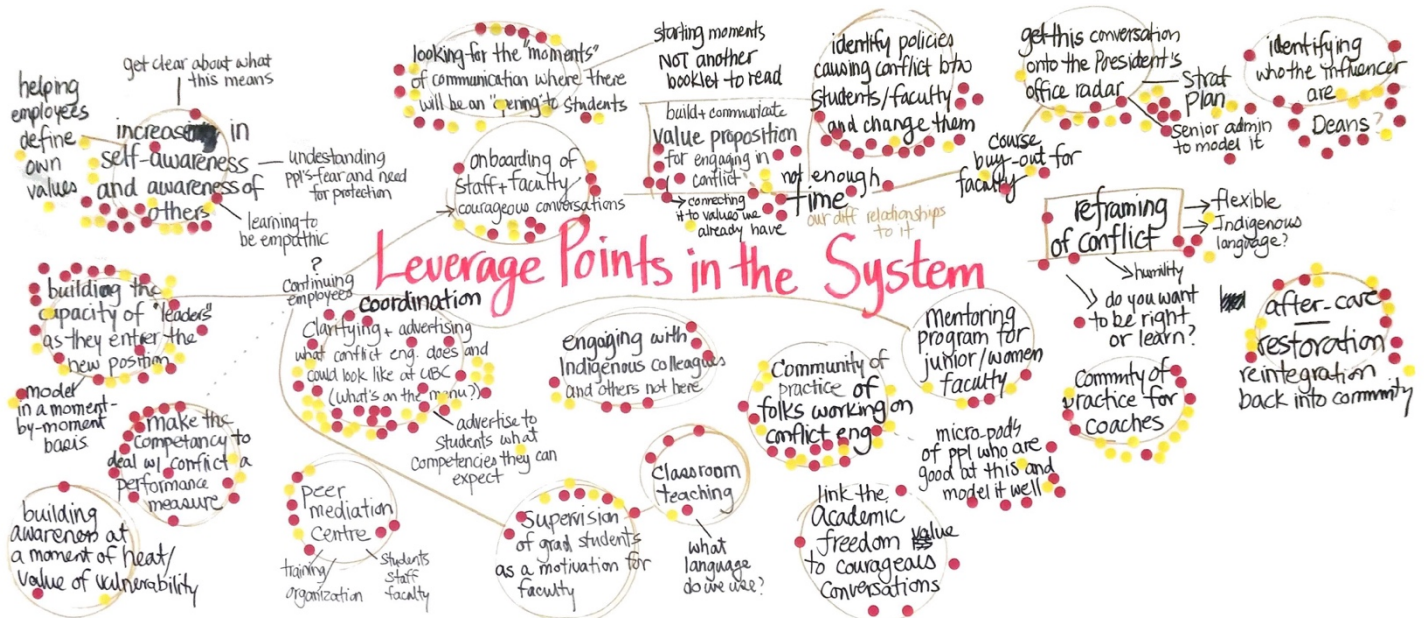
Top Leverage Points According to Participants	Impact Score	Feasibility Score
1. Clarifying and advertising what is on the "menu" of conflict engagement initiatives at UBC	22	19
2. Building capacity for conflict engagement among leaders (particularly as they enter new positions)	17	12
3. Creating a Community of Practice of those working in the area of conflict engagement	16	13
4. Building educational opportunities that focus on increasing self-awareness and awareness of/empathy with others	12	11
5. Getting this conversation on the radar of President and Executives	12	10

A few other interventions scored high on impact and were understood to have huge potential. For these items, the barriers to implementations need to be identified and intentionally engaged to make them feasible.

Leverage Points	Impact Score	Feasibility Score
6. Identifying specific policies causing conflict between students/faculty and changing them	14	2
7. Making the competency to deal with conflict a performance measure	13	2
8. Building and communicating the value proposition for engaging in conflict	12	3

Two sets of action items emerged from the workshop. The first set are to be pursued through the Director, Dialogue and Conflict Engagement at the Equity & Inclusion Office (EIO). The second set are recommendations for action, the responsibility for which would sit with a variety of different roles on campus, and the accountabilities for which need to be determined. These two sets of actions are presented below, with the understanding that the Recommendations will need to be further considered, articulated, and assigned:

Next steps for EIO:
1. Incorporate input on the draft framework for conflict engagement (Next steps 1.1 above), articulate a value proposition (leverage point #8 above), and convene a small steering committee to further articulate UBC's approach to conflict engagement.
2. Build on the information shared at the workshop to create a user-friendly, searchable "menu of conflict engagement initiatives" at UBC (Next steps 2.1 and 2.2, leverage point #1 above).
3. Create an ongoing Community of Practice of conflict engagement practitioners on each campus (Next steps 1.2, leverage point #3 above).
4. Engage UBC's leaders (President and Executives) in conversations about structural conflicts and their effective engagement (Next steps 3.1, leverage point #5).
5. Flesh out the list of recommendations coming out of this workshop in conversation with relevant offices at UBC, and establish accountability and timelines for moving specific initiatives forward.

Top Recommendations:
1. Work with ALDP, CTLT, Managing at UBC, and CSIC to expand the efforts to build practical conflict engagement skills and emotional intelligence (self-awareness and empathy) among academic and non-academic leaders, particularly as they enter new leadership positions (Leverage points #2 and #4).
2. Work with Deans, Associate Deans, Department Heads and Directors to identify internal practices and administrative processes causing the most conflict within each Faculty, department, or unit, review them and consider changes that can be made to reduce unnecessary tensions (Leverage point #6).
3. Work with HR, Unions and Associations to explore pathways for incorporating conflict engagement as a key competency into performance measurement and review for UBC employees (Leverage point #7).

Thank you to everyone who attended the first Systemic Approaches to Conflict Engagement workshop. Look for your invitation to the next Community of Practice session soon. If you have comments on the report, or if you have the energy and interest to get involved in driving the next steps and recommendations identified in this report please get in touch.

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