

Holding Conflict



A resource pack for arts organisations, cultural sector workers, and practitioners



Aylwyn Walsh with Jo Nockels and input from the participants of Holding Conflict University of Leeds Summer 2026



Intro: Fighting Talk

In the last few years, we have experienced escalating conflicts around the world, and multiple forms of escalation of 'culture wars' or hot topics within the UK that seem to shake the firm ground we may once have taken for granted. We are exposed to terrains of fear, stress and dehumanisation in multiple, diverse ways, and there is more polarisation than we are perhaps accustomed to.

Many of these conflicts are stoked by polarisation in media and everyday politics alongside precarious and changeable Party Politics resulting in new policy agendas. Often these are sudden, vicious, and urgent conflicts. The issues become incendiary rather than just a spark of disagreement. In the cultural sector, we have seen this result in schisms in programming decisions, uncertainty from organisations targeted by an open letter, or a protest campaign. We have experienced challenges to governance when such issues cause changes to programmes. There are internal conflicts within staff teams, between staff and governance structures around similar issues and confusion about which values to appeal to at which point.

Our remit here is not to rehearse or seek to resolve the content of these hot topics. After all, some of them emerged suddenly as headlines and no doubt we will face different issues we have not yet anticipated.

Instead, we are looking towards the practices behind fighting talk that can support taking heat out of the issues, and how teams can take up different ways to hold and manage conflict. Taking as a starting point that we don't need to get stuck in communication patterns or mired in unhelpful structures, we see the potential of 'holding conflict' to disrupt dynamics.¹ The framework and activities offer a chance to explore what happens, what are the impacts (for different parties), and what are the concerns for leadership?

Artist/ scholar Hans Abbing says that 'artists have an ideological and psychological investment in thinking about their labours as something other than work' (cited in Shukaitis & Figiel, 2021: 293).² If precarious workers struggle to articulate themselves as workers, they may also miss out on the legal rights and social benefits that go along with being recognised as a worker. This also suggests something about how the interpersonal aspects of workplace conflict can strike deeper than a seemingly simple disagreement in other industries. We are on the edges of ideological, values-based interactions quite often in the cultural sector, and that can make it seem that there's more at stake when conflicts turn up.³

Intro:

Acknowledgements

Holding Conflict is Co-produced, and developed by ally walsh, Jo Nockels, with the support of Leeds Arts & Humanities Research Institute, The Cultural Institute, and the School of Performance & Cultural Industries.

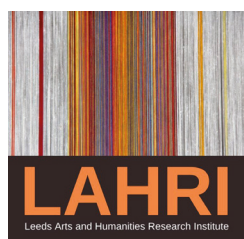
Contributions from Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, Adam Baker, Diana Damian-Martin and Dani Abulhawa.

This resource reflects the content and learning gained through two workshop events held in 2026 in Leeds. The first worked with four Leeds based arts organisations to scope the issues: Yorkshire Dance, Red Ladder Theatre Company, Yorkshire Contemporary (a visual arts organisation), and Leeds Playhouse. The second included galleries and museums as well as some academics in cultural industries, expanding participation to decision makers in arts organisations across the region, with 15 organisations of different scales, constitutions, field, and types of activity represented. As such, this resource cannot be definitive as all organisations are different.

¹ See for example Kantor's 4-player model: a theory of structural dynamics heartoftheart.org/?p=5629

² Shukaitis, S. and Figiel, J. (2020). Knows no weekend: the psychological contract of cultural work in precarious times. *Journal of cultural economy*. 13(3), pp.290–302.

³ For more on how the increasingly precarious arts & cultural sector experience work, see the recent Freemuse report: Artists worldwide face deepening crisis. Available at: freemuse.org/freemuse-report-artists-worldwide-face-deepening-crisis. This draws from the Freelancers Make Theatre Work FLTW (2025) Big Freelancer Survey 2025. freelancersmaketheatrework.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2025-Executive-Summary.pdf



1

Why conflict? And Why Holding Conflict?

I have been interested in conflict (and what it takes to repair) since I first started working in participation and engagement jobs as a young artist facilitator in the early 2000s. My first job after university was with community groups and in a maximum-security prison in Johannesburg, South Africa. With those groups, I was always exploring conflicts that were external, using a social justice lens to support 'rehearsing' the skills we may later be able to use together to repair trust and build community.

Later, when I was working in UK prisons as a writer in residence, I noticed a form of bravado in the kind of prison-yard conflicts I would overhear as I would walk through the prison. People would yell at each other and repeat the same catch phrases that claimed each of them was correct.

'I told you, you can't talk to me like that'

'Yeah? I'm the Big Man'

'You can't say that to me though'

'I'm the Big Man'!

The arguments would escalate even while the two sides just repeated the same exact words to one another. It felt endless, cyclical, and a bit impossible to escape. Each person taking turns to assert their position over the other. It felt familiar.

One of the books I read to support our Holding Conflict activities is by Adam Kahane, who uses a bit of a clumsy word to describe this entrenched positioning: 'enemyfying' - by which he means producing and reproducing the other as an enemy, which in turn, leads to oneself feeling righteous to continue to take opposition, perhaps disdain or even seek to hurt, the other.⁴ More than that, it also means one can refuse to engage, even ignore other perspectives, which doesn't help resolve conflict and can entrench it.

Mediator and facilitator Adam Kahane says:

'Embracing conflict as well as connection requires accepting the legitimacy of the different collaborators' perspectives and positions – that every person's actions, no matter how repugnant we might find them, make sense to that person' (2026: 117)

Thankfully, most arts and cultural organisations don't resemble the prison yard in terms of bravado or threat of violence, but I do notice that when our egos become bound up with our righteous positioning, it can easily tip into the kind of intransigence that used to stress me out (even if I were just overhearing it and not directly involved).

Instead of staying in those positions and bullishly sticking to our position, I started to wonder how instead of avoiding conflict or ignoring it, or else doggedly pursuing resolutions, we might work towards holding it. What skills and resources might we need to develop for conflict not to be a death knell for a team dynamic, or the end of an organising relationship? How, in other words, might we collectively pool our experiences to learn how to 'hold conflict'?

We have access to plenty of resources and tools for managing conflict when we are clear about who does harm and who is affected by harm. Often these are neatly positioned as 'perpetrators' and 'victims' and the 'answer' is policing. But in this moment, we are facing more messy circumstances where harm is done (and claimed) by opposing sides, and working to repair when positions are entrenched is difficult. It's also difficult to attribute whose responsibility it is for various aspects of holding conflict. We also acknowledge there are times when policy inflicts harm on those who have little power to change it.

We have adopted an approach that lightly fictionalises situations because this is about pragmatic skills to apply rather than the (of course important) tangles (and emotions) of the particular.

ally walsh, 2026

Professor of Performance and Social Change, University of Leeds

⁴ Adam Kahane's book is (2025) *Collaborating with the enemy: How to work with people you don't agree with or like or trust*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

2

The Holding Conflict Framework

A values led framework for working with controversy, power, and disagreement without avoidance or deepening harm.

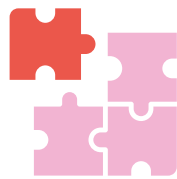
Holding Conflict is not a one off response but capacity an organisation or team builds over time. This framework is structured around five interlocking domains, each with guiding questions and practices.

How to Use the Framework

This framework is not definitive or exhaustive but can be used as:

- > A decision-making check under pressure
- > A training and rehearsal tool
- > A governance and policy lens
- > A shared language across staff and trustees
- > A reflection and debrief structure to support evaluation

Six Domains for Holding Conflict:



Values & Position



Power, Accountability
& Governance



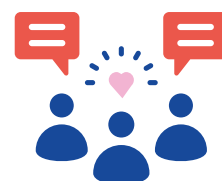
Reflection, learning
& Evaluation



Preparation, Resources
& Infrastructure



Emotional Wellbeing
& Aftercare



Practice, Communication
& Care

We noticed that holding conflict effectively is about taking time. Organisations, arts leaders, and project teams know this is key. However, across the sector, we often struggle terribly with taking time over preparation, decision-making, reflections, and can be rushed into internalised cultures of urgency⁵ which can perpetrate all we find difficult about conflict: dampening down, diminishing concerns, leaving people feeling unheard. We acknowledge both the difficulty and the value of taking the time and advocating for it in this area.

These resources outline some practical ideas to enable organisations to pick up some of the practices without working them out from scratch. Some are developed in more detail than others, and organisations might wish to create their own that are context specific, but in each area, we pose guiding questions, offer some actions, and point to resources that may be helpful. Section 3 has some very practical resources that may be particularly useful when time is tight.

Double responsibility: what the research says...



‘The challenge ... is institutional: How can organizations expect disagreement, sustain it, and still preserve shared purpose and legitimacy? While there is no single approach to effectively managing and benefiting from disagreement, cultivating diversity and creating an environment where everyone has a voice are valuable practices across all contexts—regardless of organizational type—and at the individual, organizational, and civic levels.

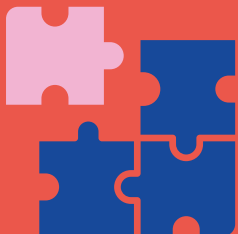
Leaders must attend to two related responsibilities. Internally, they must protect and encourage voice by clarifying decision rules, distinguishing disagreement from disloyalty, and building routines that prevent conflict from hardening into factionalism.

Externally, they must establish clear guardrails for responding to dissenting public voices, including those from activists, shareholders, elected officials, and the media. When organizations become the object of public disagreement, the question is not whether pressure will arise, but whether their principles are strong enough to guide their response.’

— Levine, P., & Cunningham, D. L. (2026 Online). The Civic Stakes of Organizational Disagreement. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. doi.org/10.48558/EYWC-EA67

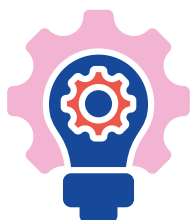
⁵ See Temu Okun’s amazing work ‘Divorcing White Supremacy Culture’ for more insights whitesupremacyculture.info/

Domain 1: Values & Position



Why are we doing this, and what do we stand for?

Conflict becomes unmanageable when values are assumed rather than stated. We recognise there is great variability in the ways trustees support/hold organisations to account, for reasons including experience, diversity, representation of differing positions and capacity.



Key Practices

- > Articulate clear organisational values, mission, and intent
- > Name that neutrality is not possible; all choices are values based
- > Align programming, governance, and communications to values
- > Make values visible internally and externally



Guiding Questions

- > What aims are we trying to uphold, and for whom?
- > What does acting with integrity look like under pressure?
- > Where might our values conflict with 'reputation management'?

Values in practice

Value, vision, and mission statements should be made clear and accessible.

- > As part of a test of how accessible these are, might you hold a workshop with the youngest or the most diverse group you engage with as participants/ audiences to explore whether they understand, and perceive, these values?
- > Might their input invite new framings or different language for some of what you value?

Consultation with staff and co-creation is good preparation. This ensures appropriateness and ownership, also counterbalances over-reliance on trustees who are conventionally holders of power.⁶

- > Such approaches demand care, time and openness to what people might want to change. Publish such statements openly online to increase accountability and transparency.
- > Organise times for revisiting them (and integrate any feedback that may have happened between times).
- > Map organisational values with the practice so that the vision and mission statement is a living document, not static on the shelf.



To explore this further, a resource:

Check out a *reparative agreement* for artists and arts workers generated by Deveron Projects in Scotland. It was collectively designed 'to 'call in' artworkers and art institutions to reparative practices and commitments. It grows from the shared recognition that the conditions of artistic labour are shaped by unequal power, and that this imbalance isn't inevitable.' deveron-projects.com/news/a-reparative-agreement-for-artists-and-artworkers

⁶ For more on the challenges of approaches to participatory governance, see Helen Graham's (2026) academic book *Deconstituting Museums: Participation's Affective Work* available online.

ACTIVITY 1

Grounding

A guided process to support grounding when emotions are activated and folks forget we have support.

This can be narrated by someone who leads others towards feeling grounded or just spoken out loud and practised by individuals (like a meditation). The key is to hear, embody and try and enact the steps towards de-escalating emotional charge.

1

Sit with both feet touching the floor. Close eyes, or soft focus eyes on the floor at a middle distance. Rest hands on knees and take a breath for three counts, hold for two counts and release for four counts.

2

Repeat 2 more times

3

Staying in the moment, feel the ground beneath your feet. Envision the floor holding and supporting you. Feel yourself being held up by the chair.

4

Remember the deep, fresh breath: breathe in for 3 counts, hold for 2 counts and release for 4 counts.

5

Envision a gathering of supportive arms, leaning to hold your back, your shoulder blade, 'having your back.' These could be real supporters – a trusted colleague, mentor, friend, or wise guide. They could be the ancestors who have borne struggle who can support you in yours. As you breathe, feel how that support will guide into and through any difficult conversations.

6

Come back to the sensation of the chair beneath you and the floor.

7

Wiggle toes and have a deep sigh before opening eyes.



Maintaining 'right relationship' – a view from activist/ author –
a view from activist/ author adrienne maree brown

'... when I say 'right relationship,' it is shorthand for relationships that are authentic, organic, healthy, present, healing, nourishing, well-boundaried, interdependent, and just.

If we learn the lessons of emergent strategy, we understand that change is constant, and one element of our human work is to apply our reasoning capacity to the changes we must make together, in ways that are life supporting. If we understand that we cannot cancel other living beings from the world, then how do we find dignified ways of being in communities that face, address, and evolve beyond harmful patterns? If we accept that each of us has some responsibility for holding the massive changes needed for our survival, then how do we hold each other close enough to learn our hardest lessons? Loving Corrections is about learning to attend to the quality of connection, knowing it is fortified by our direct and timely communication.' (2024: 5)

— (2024) Loving Corrections. AK Press



To explore this further, a resource:

The basis for this meditation comes from the workbook
*Fumbling Towards Repair: A Workbook for Community
Accountability Facilitators* by Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan.

Domain 2: Power, accountability & governance



Who has power, who is harmed, and who is accountable? Conflict often escalates when power dynamics are invisible or denied. This means it's helpful to make lines of accountability explicit as a way of supporting good governance.



Key Practices

- > Map power across staff, board, freelancers, artists, funders, audiences
- > Define lines of accountability (especially board vs staff)
- > Use governance tools: codes of conduct, risk registers, clarify trustee responsibilities
- > Shift analysis from individual failure to structural conditions



Guiding Questions for reflection

- > Where does responsibility sit and where is it being avoided?
- > Are our structures fit for ethical decision-making under sudden or extreme pressure?

When 'Charitable Status' is used to quell conflict ^B

An extract from a helpful explainer by Adam Baker, University of Leeds Law lecturer.¹⁴ We asked him to help illuminate why cultural sector orgs seem to interpret the directive not to undertake political activity:

“ The Charity Commission's (CCs) guidance cannot be treated as the law of itself. This law is based on the Charities Act 2011 and court decisions that help explain how the Act applies. The guidance is the CC's interpretation of this. There's always a small risk in theory that a court decision might go against an aspect of the guidance (which would then have to be updated). However, enforcing charities rules is in the first instance a matter for the CC, so its view of the law tends to be important in real life practice. It is rare for its guidance to be contradicted by the courts.

A common point made about the law in this area is that it is a bit ambiguous. That may be part of the difficulty faced by cultural organisations (and other charities). This might make them uncertain about the rules, and so to act in a cautious way.

Limits on political activities can sometimes be frustrating to charity trustees. However, they do have the merit of avoiding drawing charities into other controversies which often arise (e.g., whether to say something about other conflicts around the world, or other social justice issues, etc).

Domain 3: Preparation & infrastructure



How ready are we to hold conflict before it happens?
Prepared organisations respond deliberately. Unprepared ones panic.

Expecting and preparing for conflict

Be proactive in pre-empting potential conflict, taking care in preparing the audience/ public/ collaborators, by, for example, taking the initiative to build relationships around potentially sensitive issues. Some ways this could happen include invitations to conversation, programme notes, public engagement talks or workshops etc. Consider inter-personal dynamics, which would shape how conversations unfold.

However, it is helpful to remember that arts organisations are not 'neutral', and that 'both-sides' debates can perpetuate harm if more vulnerable and marginalised groups are forced to debate their humanity or defend themselves against folks with more power to shape their lives.



Key Practices

- > Scenario planning and 'stress testing' decisions (see Activity 2 below)
- > Conflict rehearsal and training (staff at all levels, trustees, FOH)
- > Clear policies (safeguarding, harassment, audiences, complaints)
- > Pre agreed public statements and sign off processes
- > Conflict-readiness tools (e.g. confidence surveys, litmus tests)



Guiding Questions

- > If backlash happens publicly tomorrow, what do we do?
- > Are we rushing decisions without due process?
- > Do staff feel equipped and supported to hold conflict?

ACTIVITY 2

Interrupting Assumptions: A starting activity for teams (60 – 90 mins, facilitated)

(extended and adapted from the materials shared by Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan at our Holding Conflict event).⁷

Assumptions:

- > are often invisible
- > can be unspoken
- > are often taken for granted
- > can shape what feels 'risky'
- > come to shape what seems 'realistic'
- > can be structural NOT personal

We can find assumptions of common mindsets are revealed to be false when demanding, conflictual situations arise. We can also experience how assumptions about intention don't always match the impact of certain decisions, or shorthand ways of communicating, or actions. Assumptions can erode trust and engender harm.

To effectively 'rehearse' you could start with the example scenarios below or develop your own. Facilitator to introduce the scenarios and then use the roles described below to take starting 'positions' that may reflect vastly different positions/ assumptions/ ideologies than your own. The idea is, by working through a position, that the kinds of argument or conflict that may be produced can be tackled from different perspectives (so we don't just end up 'stuck' repeating our firmly held views).

Senario A:

- > Your organisation has programmed a work addressing a politically sensitive issue (migration, Palestine, policing, racism)
- > Media criticism has emerged
- > A funder has raised concern
- > Staff are divided (values vs safety)

You are in an internal meeting deciding how to respond.

Scenario B:

Your organisation has opened or updated an exhibition (e.g. colonial history, war, medicine, archives). Some audiences/press accuse it of being

- > 'political' or 'rewriting history'
- > Others say it does not go far enough
- > Staff and collaborators disagree internally

You are in a meeting to decide whether to adjust interpretation, stand firm, or respond publicly.

Scenario C:

An artist, speaker, or participant involved in your programme has made public statements that are controversial or harmful to some groups.

- > Media attention is increasing
- > Staff and stakeholders are divided
- > There are contractual and reputational implications

You must decide how to respond.

Roles

Defender

(could be in a powerful position. High stakes and needs to get folks 'on side')



- > Starts the conversation - argues for the statement using realistic pressures (funding, staff, media, time, consequences, other constraints)
- > They might not want to explicitly state the pressures (using tactics like veiled terms or vagueness)

Interrupters (2)

(This can be the classic agitator or 'team provocateur' position – they may have high stakes and lots to lose)



- > Post questions and short reframes – what is being assumed here?
- > The aim is not to 'win' but to reveal the real problem
- > They may see patterns and notice connections to wider injustice

Observer

(someone who is a classic 'bystander,' lower stakes)



- > Tracks assumptions, shifts in conversation / turning points, effective / useful language
- > Be specific, be attentive



To explore this further, a resource:

NCVO: ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/running-a-charity/employing-managing-staff/managing-developing-staff/handling-conflict/

Debrief

- > What felt realistic? What assumptions showed up?
- > What felt hard to question? When did things open/close?

Round 2

If you have time, you could always deepen the discussion by taking a second round in which these positions are gently nudged. This time, defenders 'are open to hearing open questions and exploring the issues' and Interrupters 'want to open up the issue through discussion.'

Suhaiymah suggests some ways to probe the positions:

- > It sounds like we're assuming 'neutrality' protects us – can we test that?
- > We're assuming the public is one group – what happens if we challenge that?
- > What would we need to do things differently? (resources/ support/ something else?)

| ⁷ Thanks to Suhaiymah for letting us replicate this activity here.

Domain 4: Practice: Communication, Relationships & Care



How do we act in the moment of conflict? Holding conflict is relational, emotional, and communicative work. This is where teams can find that dynamics become untenable so it can be worth the time and effort to engage with this, delicate as it is.

- > Caring for oneself and colleagues
- > Build space to pause together and decompress (that doesn't have to mean obligatory Karaoke!)
- > Position and reflect on ourselves, recognising the unique and complex sets of power dynamics we are navigating, to uncover our oppressions and privileges
- > Recognise that responsibility often lies with mid-level/ junior members of staff, e.g. front of house or stage managers and needing to include them in communication and care
- > Adopt different methods to help sustain well-being: letter to self, embodied grounding (approaches used by Migrants in Culture, see Activity 3), or even a tea ceremony
- > Checking bias and assumptions (see Activity 2)
- > Consider adopting a tool such as the FailSpace project's 'wheel of failure'⁸



Key Practices

- > Active listening and open-ended questioning
- > Transparent reasoning, even when decisions are difficult
- > Differentiating public messaging from internal care
- > Relationship building with audiences, critics, and partners
- > Trauma-informed, person centred approaches
- > Clear boundaries to prevent harm
- > Reflexive practices



Guiding Questions

- > Who needs to be listened to before anything else is actioned?
- > Have we got the right balance between speed and care?
- > How do we avoid escalating while still taking a position?

See organisations such as Alternative Justice who 'support individuals, communities, and organisations who are navigating harm, conflict, or the desire to build more just and caring ways of being together': alternativejustice.org/offerings

⁸ Leila Jancovich and David Stephenson produced a toolkit about how arts organisations can better learn when things go wrong in their FailSpace Project. Find their 'wheel of failure' evaluation prompts here: culturalvalue.org.uk/wheel-of-failure/

Domain 5: Emotional Wellbeing & Aftercare



How are people impacted both during and after conflict? Conflict consumes time, energy, and emotional capacity, often invisibly.

This resource explores this within organisations, though we each have a personal response to conflict. How might we reflect on our own archetypes of conflict and how that shapes responses? e.g. has conflict for someone always been heated, uncomfortable or felt unsafe, what words do people associate with the word conflict?⁸

- > Recognising unseen labour
- > Consider staff capacity and what material resources may be needed.
- > Cultural workers already hold tacit knowledge.
- > Normalise embodied knowledge and not treat it as different (e.g. see Activity 3)
- > Creating space to allow growth
- > Facilitate non-judgemental space for expression and hear imperfect thoughts, not debates to try and win an argument. This is especially valuable for younger communities



Key Practices

- > Acknowledge emotional labour as real work
- > Build in protected time for reflection and decompression
- > Aftercare following incidents ('after shock')
- > Shared responsibility, not individual burden
- > Compassionate leadership and peer support
- > Set rules for conversation and shared values (such as the 'courageous spaces' approach below)



Guiding Questions

- > Who is carrying the emotional load right now?
- > What support is available after the conflict subsides?
- > Are boundaries protecting people or exposing them?



‘Leaders can build trust between team members by handling tension well. Even when trust erodes, they can rebuild and even strengthen it by acknowledging the importance of relationships, repairing harm, and taking deliberate steps to create or restore the interpersonal capacity for candor, collaboration, and future disagreement.’

Conflict-avoidant leaders may be inclined to simply forget moments when it is clear that trust has eroded, such as when someone bursts out during a verbal disagreement, does not feel accountable for a mistake, misunderstands expectations and intent, or causes relational harm. But leaving these moments unaddressed allows tension to accumulate, making future disagreements more difficult and personal. Rather than asking, ‘How do we move on?’ leaders should ask, ‘What would it take to repair the relationship?’

Turn disagreement into deliberate practice. Leaders reinforce learning by creating opportunities to reflect with honesty after difficult conversations. They talk to team members about what worked and what did not, and what they would do differently next time. These debriefs turn isolated experiences into shared knowledge and build organizational muscle to navigate differences over time.’ (2026: online)

— Brown, A., Loevy, D., & Corbett, R. (2026). Teaching Disagreement Is Leadership Work. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. doi.org/10.48558/3342-ZG34



To explore this further, a resource:

Kazu Haga ‘how we transform conflict into healing’
spotify.com/episode/4LQTnrzHjbR2beWyFlyW9m?si=_ly4Aw4DQqSulbU-YLORMA

ACTIVITY 3

How can translation and word play help us navigate conflict?

From an activity proposed by Dr Diana Damian Martin, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

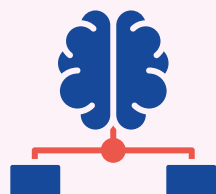
We often think of translation as something that occurs when mediating between languages; translation, however, is something that always also moves through the body, and takes a creative and critical relation to how we hold meaning. We are all translators, in diverse ways.



PICK a word or phrase that in your own working environment, comes up a lot. This might be something quite mundane – ‘meeting,’ for example - or it might be something broader, like ‘culture.’ Write down your own understanding of this word. What story does it tell? How does your body feel when you read this? What do you notice? What associations do you have with this?



OBSERVE. Take that same word, and consider what it might mean, or hold, in your broader context. This might be in your team, organisation, or other work encounters. For example, what is the culture around ‘meetings’ in your workplace? Or how many ideas are attached to the word ‘artist’ in your organisation? What do they each hold, or mean? How does your body feel? What do you notice? What stories, then, does this word hold in your encounter with it? This can be a helpful starting point to notice how our own stories and desires conflict within language in our broader environment.



IMAGINE another word that might closely align what you felt or noticed the first time around. This might be a word that feels closer to what you feel or notice; you might find ‘gathering’ feels closer to you than ‘meeting.’ It might be you play and invent a word; it might be you translate into different language that feels closer to you; or it might simply be you need more words to come close to your story. Does this sit in your body differently? What do you notice?



SHIFT. Consider how these multiple stories held by words can offer other ways of communicating and moving forward together – in your team, or your relations, or your organisation. Explore one way that you might bring this knowledge in your day-to-day work. How might that look like? What might you need? What might shift as a result? What needs to happen for this shift to take place?

This exercise concentrates on the ways in which language holds ideas, feelings, and the relations between language and the body. It is a tool for reflection. It can be used by individuals who feel rifts between them and their organisations; teams that are stuck in a particular form of conflict; or when navigating complex conversation with funders, policymakers or leaders. Consider variations of this process in each of these situations. The core invitation is to explore how words expose multiple stories; and how being attuned to that helps us have both an ear in – to ourselves and what we see – and an ear out – to what else might be held. How might we reimagine through language play?

Domain 6: Learning, evaluation & adaptation



What did we learn — and what changes because of this? Conflict only strengthens organisations when learning is integrated, not avoided.

- > Challenging the idea of 'neutrality'
- > Neutrality is often assumed to be possible or positive.
- > Staying 'neutral' is siding with position of power or implies a lack of care.



Key Practices

- > Structured reflection and evaluation moments
- > Review assumptions, decisions, and impacts
- > Revisit shared aims and values post conflict
- > Update policies, training and systems
- > Treat conflict as cultural learning, not reputational damage alone



Guiding Questions

- > What assumptions were challenged?
- > What would we do differently next time?
- > How has this changed our understanding of our role?
- > How can we learn most from this situation? How do we avoid papering over difficulties *and* personal criticism?



To explore this further, a resource:

Dialogue Road Map: workplacehuddle.com,
centreforpeacefulsolutions.org

All things conflict — The art of facilitating
difficult conversations:

[open.spotify.com/episode/3iU7vy8fcYh0vPu16rU
SFv?si=mlj3Eq1GSFaBEd0KhvxbDg&t=0](https://open.spotify.com/episode/3iU7vy8fcYh0vPu16rUSFv?si=mlj3Eq1GSFaBEd0KhvxbDg&t=0)

3

Tools & resources

3.1 Courageous spaces principles (generated with Holding Conflict participant organisations)

- > We aim for courageous sharing; open peer discussions grounded in desire to learn collectively. (c.f. Dr Dani Abulhawa's Courageous Programming research).
- > Presume and value shared purpose (from Interrupting Criminalization & Dragonfly Partners).¹²
- > Confidentiality: some of what we will discuss may be sensitive and difficult. We all agree not to share each other's words outside this room in any way that could be attributed.
- > Diversity: We will likely not agree, and our diverse backgrounds, lived experiences, positions and privileges or marginalising factors may be visible or not. We will approach one another with openness to diversity.
- > Discomfort and transformation don't exist in the same moment: sit with any discomfort, see how you can hear despite it, but always feel free to take any space you may need (Healing Justice London).¹³
- > When conflict arises, we will practice listening and reckoning how we can collaborate when things are hard. (This is a principle of not disposing/ retreating/ stonewalling, see Dean Spade).
- > We are here to both give and gain (Phakama), so active engagement is encouraged, but take the sessions as you need.¹⁴
- > Community Care: We recall that trust takes time and is relational. We can practice (re) positioning ourselves towards just, generative and thriving communities (adapted from Healing Justice London).

We can achieve these shared principles in the following ways
(thanks to Yorkshire Dance for letting us refer to their 'Braver Space Policy')¹⁶

- > We will not tolerate racism, ageism, sexism, homophobia, hetero-sexism, transphobia, ableism, classism, body-shaming, non-consensual touching, or any other behaviour or language that may have a negative or oppressive impact on others.
- > Where declared, respect the pronouns, names, and identities of all. Try not to assume.
- > Understand the importance of acknowledging and discussing painful and difficult experiences, rather than avoiding or eliminating them. That said, we trust our community to look out for signs of enthusiastic consent and recognise when to change the topic of conversation.

- > Be aware that we are all individuals with different experiences and who may have multiple, overlapping identities.
- > Be responsible and accountable for your actions and approaching interactions with respect and non-judgement.
- > Recognise and acknowledge your own biases and assumptions to understand their effect on others.
- > If overwhelmed, to remove oneself from any conversation, event, or meeting at any time. Take care of yourself; listen to your physical, mental, and emotional needs and limits; express and honour your boundaries as needed.

3.2 Practical resources: A decision-making check under pressure

- > Are we clear about the actual issue/s? (there may be smokescreens or deflections!)
- > Can we map out the issue(s) and their impacts on the various parties?
- > Who holds responsibility vs who is facing the risk?
- > Can we identify what is urgent or time sensitive and what needs slower more careful work?
- > Can we take a clear and decisive action that is about care and values?
- > Do we have our comms strategy lined up to support holding, not escalating conflict?
- > Do we need to do any resourcing of teams to support any process?

3.3 A training or rehearsal ‘pick n mix’ (for teams or participants)

Holding conflict doesn't always have to be a discussion, you could adopt creative modes to enable people to express without resorting to words.

- > A doodle of the emotional impact of something;
- > Collective exploration of an object that embodies the issue for those involved;
- > Consider having an external facilitator for this (a sociodrama practitioner for example).
- > Check in and check out to top and tail sessions, create room for grounding and expression.
- > Regular survey to ‘check temperature’. This could inform a co-designed approach, supporting how to make explicit a ‘received culture’.
- > Letter to self - recognising one's multiple identities, how one is positioned in the issue
- > Acknowledge the work already going on to address things.

- > Understand the 'why': stress test across the organisation, frontline and trustees, make public the values and explore how accountability is made visible.
- > Ensure there are clear policies and procedures to communicate with audiences.
- > Commit to trauma-informed practice.
- > Adopt a reflective approach (e.g. Kai Cheng Thom's Loving Justice framework).¹⁸

3.4 Prompts to support a shared language across staff and trustees

- > Ensure there are clear communication channels, mechanisms to challenge management, ensuring feedback loops.
- > Whether formal staff contracts or temporary engagements with participants, be sure to generate terms of participation that establish the basis of mutual agreements, and behaviours.
- > Are these contracts and terms made explicit and accessible?
- > Clearly written mission, vision, values statements can be a touchpoint in moments of conflict.
- > These statements become workplace cultures when they are consulted with, devised, apparent not hidden.
- > Prepare frontline staff to face conflict and to 'rehearse' responses that do not accept or assign blame.
- > Resources are needed to support this.

¹¹ See Dani's website for more on this: daniabulhawa.com/courageous-programming

¹² See Interrupting Criminalization and Dragonfly Partners (n.d.) *In It Together: A Framework for Conflict Transformation In Movement-Building Groups — Interrupting Criminalization*. interruptingcriminalization.com/in-it-together

¹³ healingjusticeldn.org/methodologies/

¹⁴ For more on this you can read about Phakama in a chapter by McAvinchey, C., Richardson, L., & Santos, F. (2018). *Give and Gain*. In *Phakama: Making Participatory Performance* (pp. 54–61). London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama. Retrieved May 14, 2026, from dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474223652.0017

¹⁵ See: healingjusticeldn.org/methodologies/

¹⁶ [Yorkshire-Dance-Braver-Space-Policy-FINAL.pdf](#)

¹⁷ For example, Collective Encounters in Liverpool run regular workshops or Consent Collective hold trainings consentcollective.com/circle

¹⁸ Cheng Thom, Kai (n.d.) *Loving Justice Framework* abolitionist.tools/Loving-Justice

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Holding Conflict and culture wars

Within the culture wars, the conflict becomes most acute around 'freedom of speech'. There are some themes and topics that ignite fears of conflict that are exaggerated beyond the scale of the everyday, even though most of these issues are also people's lived experiences.

In recent years, there have been sustained attacks on minoritised groups with their opposers using arguments about 'freedom of speech' and 'de-platforming'. So successful have these attacks been that, for instance, legal guidance has narrowed further the spaces for trans folks in our communities.

There is a job of work for organisations to do to tease out the differences between 'Big P' politics and the fundamental role of the arts and culture as political, as questioning and often critiquing power. It is worth referring back to work on values and policies (Domain 1) as this is fundamental but can be glossed over without rigour.

Case Study:

QueerCircle's recent report cites 'anxieties around 'taking a side' within arts organisations echo the language used by successive governments to criminalise dissent. The same frameworks that suppress political demonstration also shape the conditions under which artists and institutions operate, with the arts serving as both a mirror to, and a casualty of, broader democratic erosion' (*Let's Create Change report*, 2025)



To explore this further, a resource:

- > For more excellent material on grounded decision-making that does not shy away from discomfort or difficulty, see Jewish Artists UK website on courage and care.¹⁹
- > Artists for Palestine UK have produced an ethical policy that could be adopted.²⁰

Courageous Programming: a practical prompt for arts organisations

Dani Abulhawa

“ *There is risk in platforming politically pressured work, but there is also risk in avoidance: the erosion of trust, the narrowing of public culture, and the quiet exclusion of artists and communities whose stories are already marginalised.*

This prompt is based on research I initiated, which began with Palestine-related performance in the UK. Its findings speak to wider questions about institutional responsibility, anti-racism, freedom of expression, and how arts organisations respond under pressure. Across interviews with programmers, producers and organisational leaders, one thing became clear: fear is shaping the cultural sector. Fear of saying the wrong thing. Fear of complaints. Fear of reputational damage. Fear of personal attack, trolling or doxxing.

That is all real. But fear cannot be the only organising principle for programming. When it is, the work most likely to disappear is often the work closest to structures of oppression.

My findings pointed to an imperative for producers and venues: to be courageous in their commitment to anti-racism, values-led programming.

— Dani Abulhawa

Key principle coming out of my research

Programming is never neutral. Every programme expresses values: whose stories matter, which histories can be named, and which audiences are imagined as central.

Courageous programming asks organisations to move beyond abstract commitments to inclusion, diversity or access, and to test how those values hold up when there is pressure, complaint or uncertainty.

Questions to ask before a crisis

- > Which communities are treated as ‘too risky’ to programme?
- > Are we asking artists to soften, translate, depoliticise or suppress parts of their identity in order to be seen as acceptable?
- > Do our stated values give us a clear basis for making difficult decisions?
- > Have we discussed politically sensitive programming at board, leadership and front-of-house level before a complaint arrives?
- > What support will artists and staff receive if they become the focus of hostility?
- > Who do we go to for informed advice, peer support or community accountability?

When a complaint is made

Do not assume that every complaint is evidence of harm. Complaints can raise legitimate concerns, but they can also be used to intimidate, silence, delay or derail work.

A useful values check is:

Would we respond to this complaint in the same way if it targeted another marginalised community?

If the answer is no, the organisation needs to pause and examine what assumptions are shaping its response.

Do

- > Take complaints seriously, but do not panic.
- > Speak with the artistic team before making decisions about their work.
- > Investigate the substance, context and intention of the complaint.
- > Distinguish between harm, disagreement, discomfort and discrimination.
- > Use your organisational values as a decision-making framework.
- > Record how decisions are made and who is responsible for them.
- > Communicate transparently with artists, staff, audiences and partners.
- > Prepare staff, including front-of-house teams, for possible questions or hostility.
- > Build relationships with relevant communities before moments of crisis.
- > Offer care, debriefing and follow-up after difficult incidents.

Don't

- > Treat 'neutrality' as a substitute for ethical decision-making.
- > Ask artists to remove political language simply because it makes the organisation uncomfortable.
- > Allow vague concerns about 'risk', 'tone' or 'complexity' to mask exclusion.
- > Let the loudest complaint override your values, process or duty of care.
- > Make artists prove their humanity, legitimacy or right to speak.
- > Leave individual staff members to absorb institutional pressure alone.
- > Assume the work is finished once the event has taken place.

¹⁹ Their website has tools and resources <https://www.jewishartists.uk/>

²⁰ Artists for Palestine UK have written about the Model Ethics Policy for Cultural Institutions: <https://artistsforpalestine.org.uk/model-ethical-policy-for-cultural-institutions/>

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Further resources for Holding Conflict

Reports

- > An article in a series 'Because We Need Each Other, Part II: Understanding Cancel Culture' By Kazu Haga, Celia Kutz, Erika Sasson and Shilpa Jain published: April 9, 2025, convergencemag.com/articles/bwneo-part-2-understanding-cancel-culture/
- > *Freemuse report: Artists worldwide face deepening crisis*, freemuse.org/freemuse-report-artists-worldwide-face-deepening-crisis
- > *Freelancers Make Theatre Work FLTW (2025) Big Freelancer Survey 2025*. freelancersmakeetheatrework.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/2025-Executive-Summary.pdf
- > Kelly Hayes, healingjusticelineages.com/kelly-hayes/
- > Aebischer, P., and Gray, K. (2024) *Pandemic Preparedness in the Live Performing Arts: Lessons to Learn from COVID-19*. Project report. freelancersmaketheatrework.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Pandemic-Preparedness_G7LitReviews.pdf
- > Project Nia (2022) *Loving Justice: Embodied Conflict Resolution & Transformative Justice (Kai Cheng Thom)*, youtube.com/watch?v=V4-Gg9NkJ7o, Part of Project Nia's series, 'Building Your Abolitionist Toolbox: Everyday Resources for a Punishment-Free World.' For more information, visit abolitionist.tools

Organisational development / training and resources

- > *Southern Poverty Law Center Learning for Justice*, splcenter.org/dialogue-and-critical-conversations
- > *Dialogue Road Map*, workplacehuddle.com, centreforpeacefulsolutions.org/
- > NCVO, ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/running-a-charity/employing-managing-staff/managing-developing-staff/handling-conflict/
- > *Thematic sections and tools in the Collective Imagination Practices Toolkit*, collectiveimagination.tools/toolkit-index#introductory-talks

Podcasts

- > *Movement memos: Rupture and Repair Under Fascist Conditions*, podbean.com/ew/dir-sgqhb-2c771a20
- > *Finding our way* podcast- Prentiss Hemphill and Kazu Haga, transformharm.org/ca_resource/navigating-conflict-with-kazu-haga/
- > *All things conflict - The art of facilitating difficult conversations*, open.spotify.com/episode/3iU7vy8fcYhOvPu16rUSFv?si=mlj3Eq1GSFaBEd0KhvxbDg&t=0
- > Podcast: Kazu Haga, open.spotify.com/episode/Omy9XOzHM0KMXTktsbwB5e?si=17PRmjlmTvGuDkz9gyyl0A
- > Kazu Haga 'how we transform conflict into healing', open.spotify.com/episode/4LQTnrzHjbR2beWyFlyW9m?si=_ly4Aw4DQqSulbU-YLORMA

Books and academic sources

- > brown, a.m. (2021) *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation*. AK Press
- > Gill, R. and Pratt, A., 2008. Precarity and cultural work: in the social factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness, and cultural work. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25 (7–8), 1–30.
- > Shukaitis, S. and Figiel, J. (2020). Knows no weekend: the psychological contract of cultural work in precarious times. *Journal of cultural economy*. 13(3), pp.290–302.
- > Tomlin, L. (2025) *Staging Class Conflict in the UK*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Photos by Annabel Cohen