

The Brighter Side of Conflict

Interview with Activist George Lakey

Carl Hughes
George Lakey

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How Conflict Encourages Growth

Most of us don't like dealing with conflict in movement politics. There are times when our projects are rolling along smoothly and then we hit a point of contention and suddenly the room is full of tension and discord.

For many people, the reaction is to try and restore order by quelling the discontent and moving onto other matters.

Carl Hughes spoke with author George Lakey, a veteran activist who has collaborated with anarchist organizers like Starhawk and David Solnit, and thinks people who take this approach may be missing out on the benefits conflict offers. Lakey has been active in the civil rights, anti-war, anti-nuclear weapons, anti-patriarchy, and LGBT liberation movements since the 1970s.

Fifth Estate: Most people would do almost anything to avoid conflict in a group setting. How can it be beneficial?

George Lakey: Healthy conflict in activist groups is important because that's how they achieve their maximum effectiveness. First, conflict supports evaluation of what the group is doing; otherwise, groups fall into groupthink where the wish to belong and fit in overrides the need to analyze what works and what doesn't.

Second, conflict supports innovation, because conflict often shows up when one or two people think of something new, then experience resistance to the new idea. They may need to engage in conflict to get the group to consider it seriously, and sometimes the outcome is that the group agrees to try it and likes the result.

The third way I've experienced the healthiness of open conflict is that it supports growth. The group's mainstream sets the norms and values and provides most of the leadership in getting things done. The margin consists of those who are different in some way but still belong to the group.

That might be a difference in identity (for example, brought up working class, or being racially different), or a difference in the way they tend to think about things, or a difference in how recently they joined the group. But whatever the difference might be and however subtle it is, all groups—even very small ones—have a mainstream and one or more margins.

In one group the mainstream might be noisy but, if you watch closely, you'll notice some members are quiet. In another group it might be the reverse. In another group the "cool kids" share preferences in music and culture and are the mainstream, while the marginal folks have different tastes.

In one group the mainstream is people steeped in political theory who quote the great anarchist writers, while the margin organizes the demonstrations and prefers dance parties.

How this plays out for activists does matter for our success. The key is that all mainstreams are clueless; that is, they don't know what the felt experience is of those on the margins. Even though I have plenty of experience as someone marginalized in U.S. society (gay, working class upbringing, arrest record, now my being of advanced age), when I happen to be in the mainstream of a group I'm as clueless as anyone about what a margin's experience of the group is.

FE: What gives the margin a special insight?

GL: Because marginal members experience the ecology of the system from a different niche, they sometimes observe different things from what is observed by the mainstream. They might see different kinds of trouble ahead; they might be more likely to see alternatives to the strategy being implemented by the mainstream. That makes them frequent sources of helpful evaluation and innovation that benefit the whole group.

Margins might also experience rude and even oppressive behavior from the mainstream. Ask a woman in a group whose mainstream is men, or a person of color in a group whose mainstream is white. If the margin includes bold members the margin may erupt and make an issue about mainstream cluelessness, and may notice with amazement how genuinely clueless mainstream members seem to be.

If the mainstream has a norm that makes conflict behavior wrong, as many activist groups have, then the mainstream has legislated against margins rising up and confronting the clueless mainstream about this or that issue.

Whether the margin's point of view is correct is unknown; on any particular point, the margin may be completely wrong. But the mainstream won't have a chance to take a fresh look at anything, and change course, if it legislates against conflict, let's say in the name of community or solidarity.

Actually, the rule against fighting makes community less likely because it works to keep the mainstream clueless of the concerns held by the margins—and how is an ignored margin part of the community?

Conflict aversion is anti-growth. Marginalized people are prone to drop out. Some members of a margin might raise their voice and be squashed, and disappear, and the group shrinks. Growing groups do the reverse.

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