

# **Engaging “The Physical” in Conflict Resolution**

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## **I. Introduction**

### **1. How I came to be interested in this subject**

I lead an evening aerobic exercise class. I often come to it from a day of my facilitation and mediation work. Perhaps because of this juxtaposition, I regularly find myself reflecting on conflict and my physical self. I imagine how differently I would handle conflict before and after this class. I arrive at the class with my head full of the intellectual work of my day, often feeling some stress around getting to the class on time. Should someone have cut me off in traffic, I would have felt a flicker of fear then anger at this person for doing this to me. And I would likely have nursed that anger for some time. After a one hour of moving my body, breathing deeply, using my muscles' energy and stretching I know I would handle things differently. Should someone cut me off in traffic, I would feel that same flicker of fear, a flicker of anger and then compassion for this person with such poor driving skills. Then I'd forget the incident. After exercise, I handle conflict better.

My eleven-year-old son and nine-year-old daughter fight regularly. When I am called upon to mediate, I have learned to look first at the clock. If it is just before a meal, I'll suggest we put the issue “on the shelf” until after lunch when we all will have better resources to deal with the problem. After food, my family handles conflict better.

Is there learning in this for us as conflict resolution practitioners? This is the topic I examine in this paper. I share here pieces of my own experience and much that I have gleaned from talking with colleagues and reading. I believe that communication, conflict and our physical experience are closely entwined. This is a relatively unexplored area. I know there is much more to learn and I welcome contact from anyone interested in sharing ideas in this realm.

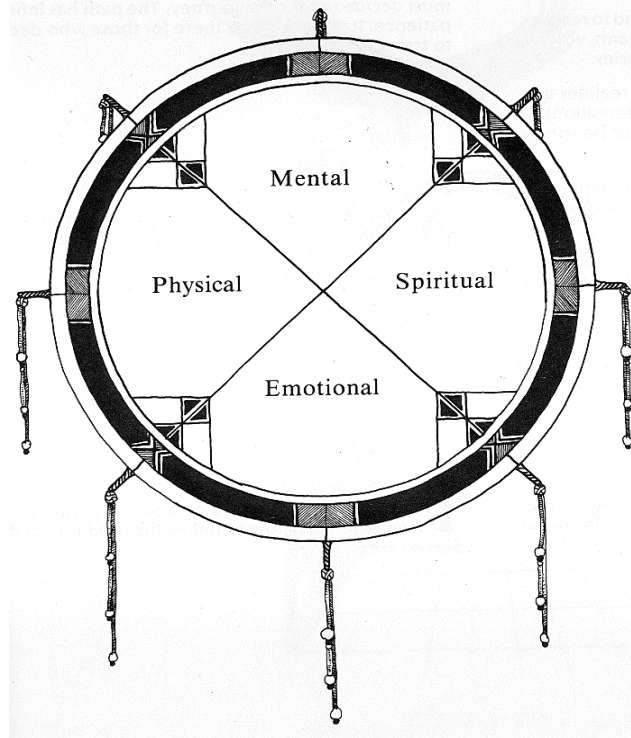
## 2. A note on the experiential aspects of this presentation

When I delivered a presentation “Engaging the Physical in Conflict Resolution” at the February 2003 Conflict Resolution Symposium, there were several points at which I lead session participants in experiential exercises related to the points I was making. These exercises are highlighted in boxes. Readers may wish to use them in conflict resolution training or in some cases, in conflict resolution processes.

## II. Why Engage the Physical?

### 1. Full participant potential is accessed when all parts of a person are used

The Medicine Wheel is an ancient symbol used by many Native peoples of North and South America. It tells us that there are four aspects to our nature: the intellectual, the emotional, the spiritual and the physical. If any of these aspects is neglected, we as human beings will not reach our full potential.



*The Medicine Wheel*

"The brain can take in what the bum can withstand!" This pithy maxim of group facilitation summarizes our knowledge that if we lose the bodies of our participants, we lose their minds. Review standard facilitation processes: think-pair-share; the human continuum, collaborative timelines, international café, team-building exercises, Open Space Technology. Most contain an element of physical movement that supports the creative intellectual processes of participants. I find it interesting that in group

facilitation we have many methods that use the physical, yet in conflict resolution, a closely related field, we are trained in relatively few.

## **2. Communication is expressed physically**

Communications research confirms that more than 90% of inter-personal communication is non-verbal. The tone of voice, gestures, posture, breathing of a speaker give us the meaning of their words. (See Goleman pages 96–110).

Focus on the physical often is at the centre of conflict resolution efforts. One of the goals of conflict resolution is to keep participants from expressing their opinions physically through violence. Assault at the person level or war at the international level mark the failure of people to communicate their needs and come to a resolution with words.

## **3. Conflict is experienced physically**

We know from our experience that conflict has a very physical aspect.

When in conflict, we feel it in our bodies. When in conflict, these physical responses are experienced:

- Constricted breathing
  - holding breath or
  - increased number of very shallow breaths
- Contracted posture
  - tightened muscles in throat,
  - pressure in the chest,
  - tight shoulders,
  - sucked-in abdomen,
  - narrowed vision

Scientists point to our primitive human origins as the source of these instinctive reactions. When we find ourselves fearful and in conflict, we have triggered within us the fight/flight response. Constricted breathing and contracted posture are the “freeze” position we take while deciding whether to attack or flee from a situation. Experiments have shown that even if we ourselves aren’t experiencing these physical responses, seeing another person exhibit these characteristics will trigger a similar alert within us.

How we physically respond to conflict provides important information for our conflict resolution work. Research in the 1990's has shown that we physically react to a threat before the decision-making part of the brain, the neo-cortex, becomes engaged. The amygdala is a primitive section of the brain which receives messages from the thalamus as taken in by the senses. Familiar and recognizable threats put the body on alert. The amygdala triggers the secretion of fight/flight hormones, it increases heart rate, lowers breathing rate, restricts muscle movements, and triggers extra secretion of hormones which heighten sensitivity (creating that “on edge” feeling.) All this happens while the neocortex, the more evolved part of our brain is still analyzing the situation. (Goleman pp 16-20.)

The ramifications for conflict resolution are significant. It isn't useful to tell people to solve things with their brains before they allow the rush of emotion to take over. It's more accurate to acknowledge that people are immediately feeling the physical sensations of fight/flight while they are trying to deal with the problem in a civilized way. Since we experience the kinesthetic response first, it would seem counter-productive to force an intellectual response without recognizing the pre-existing physical state.

*An Experiential Exercise:*

It is not hard to re-create the feeling of threat to ourselves. This is a valuable experience as part of conflict resolution training.

Ask participants to stand, pair off, introduce themselves and then chose one of them to be an aggressor.

Explain that in a moment you are going to ask the aggressor to pretend to strike at the other person, not getting close enough to make contact. Advise participants that this is a mild exercise but ask those not comfortable with this kind of physical drama to remain standing but to observe another pair and not participate themselves.

Ask the aggressor to turn away, get his/her face serious, narrowly focus the eyes, raise a hand and then turn as if about to strike the other.

Then tell the pairs to freeze. Ask the victim to become aware of what they are feeling in all parts of their bodies.

Then repeat the exercise with the roles reversed.

Debrief by answering these questions:

What reaction did you have? What did you feel in your body? Where did you feel it?

Usually a long list of physical symptoms emerges all linked to changes in breathing and increased rigidity of the body.

### **III. How does this fit within Conflict Resolution?**

#### **1. Intellectual and Emotional focus**

Traditional conflict resolution relies heavily on the intellectual abilities of participants. We assist people to use their problem-solving capacities. We encourage them to move from a defense of their demands or positions to an intellectual exploration of their real interests and the others' interests. We guide them to the discovery of common ground.

Conflict resolution practitioners work with emotions because we know that mental faculties cannot be fully used until strong emotions (especially anger and fear) have been acknowledged and calmed. While this may vary according to the context, we deal with emotions by working with participants to label and affirm emotions, allow for their appropriate expression and their acknowledgement by others. Only once this is done can people access their full mental resources for the problem-solving exercise. Just as some mediators have been hesitant to let the emotional realms enter conflict resolution, there will be work to do to increase practitioners comfort in dealing with the physical in conflict resolution.

## **2. Conflict Resolution Practitioners already use physical information in their work**

### *Conscious Recognition of Body Language:*

Some aspects of using the physical side of people is already part of our approach. Conflict resolution practitioners rely heavily on the physical messages that participants send during communication. Imagine late in a mediation session, one participant says “I agree. What do I have to sign?” Scenario One, the person speaks with a clear, calm voice, she is sitting tall in her chair, engaged in eye contact with the other participant. In Scenario Two, the person is in tears, sitting hunched over looking at the floor, the words barely discernable. In the first case we are confident that the resolution is close at hand. The second scenario calls for a caucus break or other means to check in on what’s happening within the participants.

### *Enhancing Personal Comfort:*

When people feel physically cared for, they are more relaxed and more able to do their best thinking. This points to the careful work conflict practitioners must do in setting up the physical setting of a mediation. Every practitioner does this to at least some degree. Explanation of when breaks will be provided, a location for smoking, where the bathrooms are, the source of water serve to meet the minimum physical requirements of participants.

Practitioners look for a room the right size for the group -- enough space for easy movement around the table; not so much room that the conversation is lost. The Chinese philosophy of Feng Shui tends to quantify a lot of what a mediator will have a gut feeling about in terms of the right space for a conversation. A conversation will lose its energy into a vaulted ceiling or down a gaping corridor. We know that temperature (not too hot or cold), ambient noise levels, lighting (incandescent better than fluorescent; no sun in anyone's eyes ...) are all factors affecting the ability of participants to participate fully.

Meeting these minimum requirements are just the beginning. The rest of this paper explores more enhanced ways to engage the physical in our conflict resolution work and suggests frontiers for further exploration.

## **IV. Approaches to Engaging “the Physical” in Conflict Resolution**

I have developed five main purposes for the use of the physical conflict resolution. These are offered as additions to a practitioner's toolkit. Like any tool, each has a special time and place when it would be useful and manner others when it would be counterproductive or not possible.

**1. To enhance ability to focus, and creativity**

When leading large group processes over many hours or days, energy will have natural peaks and low points. In order to keep the group as productive as possible through those low points, group process facilitators lead energizers. For me these are usually a set of stretches accompanied by words that relates the stretches to the work of the group. (See boxed sample)

*Sample energizer for a group facilitation:*

Ask everyone to stand up, away from furniture and each other. Advise them to place their feet shoulder width apart and to be very conscious of the floor supporting them. Ask them to bend their knees and bounce gently feeling that ground that supports them in all that they do.

Ask them to gently bend from the hips as far as feels comfortable reaching toward the floor ... they may touch it, they may not it doesn't matter ... tell them they are grounding themselves and their work in their group (organization, project, whatever fits).

Ask them, from that strong grounding to reach upwards toward the ceiling with arms and fingers outstretched imagining their group operating at the best it can be. Ask them to reach towards their vision of .....(fill in whatever this group aspires to).

Ask them to then stretch their arms wide towards each other because we know we can't do this alone.

Ask them then with arms outstretched to look behind them (twisting at the waist) in one direction and then the other (twist to other side) to understand fully the context in which they operate

Ask them, with that new information to once again reach down to their roots which ground them (bend towards ground) reach for their visions which inspire them (reach to the ceiling) and reach for support of others (arms stretched wide) and take care of themselves as they continue this important journey recognizing the hard work they have done (arms wrapped around selves in big hug).

Finally tell them that feeling stronger and safer let's give a "hurray" for the work they've done and the process they are in. "Hurray!!!"

Energizers raise energy levels and the ability of participants to focus. They promote deep breathing and require bodies to move as well as providing a light moment as laughter inevitably erupts as people joke about what they are doing. Participants return to the work at hand with much increased energy and feeling of comfort. In the higher tension atmosphere of a mediation, it could be suggested to participants during a break to take a brisk walk around (different?) blocks as it will improve their ability to continue the work.

Sylvia McMechan, a mediator and one of the people I consulted in preparing this presentation, says she puts great importance in “honouring the fact we’re animals.” In large group processes she sometimes provides play dough to participants to allow their fingers to be busy while they work through the issues. She also passes out chocolates to give participants the sensation of being cared for and valued.

## **2. To develop better relationships between conflicted parties**

Manipulating the space and physical relationships between parties can affect how they communicate with each other. Mediator, Juliana Birkhoff, uses several physical strategies to create a bond between opposing parties in environmental disputes. In a presentation at the Association for Conflict Resolution conference in Toronto in October, 2001, she described the benefits of long field trips. She finds that putting opposing factions on the same bus is very helpful in the building of positive inter-personal relationships. She noted that the less luxurious the bus, the closer the relationships that tended to result.

Sharing food between opposing parties is a widely used tool to build bridges between people. McMechan said she asks caterers to provide food in large serving bowls and platters and place them in the middle of dinner tables. This eating “family style” increases the collaborative, sharing energy between participants that she is also working to build with the formal conflict resolution process.

## **3. To keep parties mindful of what’s at stake**

Physical objects can be brought into a conflict resolution process when there is danger that the subject of the dispute is being lost amid the claims and counter-claims. Some family mediators, place the photograph of a child on the table in custody cases. They report that this improves the tone and the language that is used in the session. Objects from a group or community in crisis can be placed around the circle and throughout the meeting space. People pick up the objects, physically connect with the subject of their dispute and speak more directly from the heart.

## **4. To express emotion**

We work hard to prepare our mediation sessions so that no one will physically attack or threaten other participants. So even the suggestion of physical expression of emotion feels dangerous. There are situations where I have found it very useful. I have heard references to other uses, but lack detailed information. Further research in this area is required.

One application is in preparing clients for mediation. When clients are feeling overwhelmed by their anger, I encourage them to notice what part of their body is feeling the anger. I encourage them to get in a safe place and do the thing that that part of their body wants to do. For instance, if they feel like strangling someone, I'll suggest they take a washcloth and twist it hard; if they want to crush someone, I suggest they stomp around the house. A few minutes of this and their heads are clearer and able to think or they will come in touch with what is really bothering them about the situation. Both outcomes are very useful. It makes a conflict resolution process more comfortable for all if people can come without that kind of pent up energy. It also speeds up the process.

I have also heard of the physical being used in native healing circles. People are encouraged to act out the emotions they are feeling. An individual will say that they want to express an emotion or talk about a specific situation. They will choose one or two supporters to assist them. Facilitators encourage them to talk through their emotions. The participant is encouraged to physically discharge their energy by pushing on another person with whom they are angry. Their supporters hold back the person so that the energy is expressed but no one gets hurt. Practitioners have used these approaches with aboriginal and non-aboriginal groups and in both cases the approach was well-received. I am interested in further exploration of these techniques and the safeguards involved.

### **5. To moderate emotional responses**

The principle of this tool is to actively use the body in order to change the emotion; possibly the most powerful exercise for the purpose of connecting emotional states with their physical aspect. It uses this principle: how our body is, so our emotions are. At the conference, we played with this by composing our bodies certain ways and noting the emotion we felt. (See box) Amid much hilarity, people experienced how taking on the physical attributes of an emotion resulted in them feeling that emotion.

*“As our body is, so our emotions go” Exercise:*

Ask participants to lock their knees, tighten their chests, clench their fists, jut their jaw forward, narrow their eyes and turn to the person next to them and tell them how much they were enjoying the conference.

With gritted teeth (which I hadn't even requested) participants at the conference grunted out these words at each other.

During the debrief people shared that they felt anger, hostility toward the other and complete lack of connection with their enjoyment of the conference.

An inversion of this exercise using positive emotion physical stances points to potential short cuts in the conflict resolution process.



This was an outcome of the group facilitation energizer described above. By moving participants' bodies and encouraging them to breathe, we meet the bodies need for movement, but we can also affect their attitude and ability to find creative solutions.

Some practitioners use this very directly. Their philosophy being that if you need people to change in their intellectual position on something, get them to change the physical position of their bodies.

Sports therapists, for instance, use this principle to assist athletes to keep going with full focus after a bad shot or other mistake. Therapist Gay Hendricks has athletes practice these steps:

1. Take three deep abdominal breaths.
2. Change your body position.
3. At the end of the third breath, give your self a shake and relax your shoulders.

The changing of position is particularly important since the frozen body posture keeps the athlete locked in the same emotion.

Dr. Paul Linden of the Columbus Centre for Movement Studies, uses body-centered conflict resolution approaches in his work with families and small groups. His process is to have people stop, focus their breathing, relax their bodies, ground their postures and from this balanced, grounded state re-think their options.

The Breathing Body Positioning Tool moderates the emotional response in clients, allowing them to solve the problem. As practitioners become familiar with these techniques, and experience them firsthand, they can integrate them into their practice.

*The Breathing/Body Positioning Tool::*

Ask questions to increase physical awareness:

“What are you feeling in your body?”

“Where do you feel the tension?”

Prompt participants to deepen, slow and direct their breathing:

“Breathe slow and deep into your belly.”

“Breathe into area of tension”

Prompt participants to alter their body position to a grounded, powerful stance:

“Move your body gently”

“Soften your eyes (use more of peripheral vision, taking in the whole scene)”

“Hold your head gently balanced above your shoulders”

“Pull your shoulders back so your arms fall straight down the sides of your body,

“Loosen your belly further and breathe deep into it”

“Bend your knees slightly”

Not everyone feels immediately comfortable with this approach. People who are afraid of their bodies or are out of touch with their physical selves may find this kind of exercise challenging. To get full benefit, a person needs three things:

1. the intention to change the emotion
2. the ability to change breathing and body position, and
3. the willingness to surrender to the effect

When a practitioner observes discomfort in certain clients, statements encouraging them to only do as much or as little as they are ready for are helpful in diffusing tension.

## V. Conclusion

“The Physical” aspect is an important focal point for a conflict resolution practitioner. There is much we have to learn about how to use these approaches to enrich our conflict resolution practice. And I still imagine inserting an hour of vigorous exercise into the middle of a conflict mediation session ....

## VI. Resources

### On the Medicine Wheel:

Four Winds International Institute, Lethbridge Alberta **The Sacred Tree** 1985

### On the Link between Body and Emotions

Daniel Goleman, **Emotional Intelligence** Bantam Press 1995

Julie Henderson, **The Lover Within: Opening to Energy in Sexual Practice**  
Station Hill, Barrytown, NY 1999

Gay Hendricks **Conscious Breathing** Bantam Press 1995

Ilana Rubinfeld, **The Listening Hand** Bantam Press 2000

### On Using the Physical in Conflict Resolution

Julianna Burkhoff, Scott McCreary and Greg Sorbell, *“Using Joint-Fact-finding to Level the Playing Field in Environmental Mediation”* Presentation at the Association for Conflict Resolution Conference October 2001.

John Lee, Facing the Fire: **Experiencing and Expressing Anger Appropriately**  
Bantam Books, 1993

Paul Linden “Embodying Power and Love: A Somatic method of Working with Conflict ACR Education Section Newsletter Spring 2001 p 6-7.

I am also thankful for rich conversations with fellow practitioners or therapists Edith Blackwell, Terry Brennin, Deborah Conners, Theresa Dunn, Maggie Gardam, Paul Linden, Sylvia McMechan, Molly Tepper and many others who are also intrigued by this subject.