



Annual Meeting

FREDERICTON

2026

June 11-13

*Deep roots.
Renewed growth.*



**Member
Education Forum**

Inclusive Conversations with Difficult Characters
Shawn Conway

Land Acknowledgement

We respectfully acknowledge that New Brunswick is situated on the unceded and unsurrendered territories of the Wolastoqey, Mi'gmaq, and Peskotomuhkati peoples. We seek to repair and rebuild meaningful relationships with Indigenous peoples and honour these lands which hold the hopes of future generations.



Agenda

1. You and difficult characters
2. Who are the characters
3. What works and does not work
4. The Basics: managing yourself
5. The Basics: Inclusive listening and engagement
6. Special situations: mental health concerns, narcissists
7. Your full toolbox: boundaries, rules and cycles of engagement



Scenario

You are at meeting and have asked some questions about a financial report and how it matches the budget. A big board member jumps up and angrily and begins shouting.

What was said

“Listen, I’ve been on the board for many years. I think I know how boards are supposed to work. Who do you think are? I don’t need you correcting or questioning me, especially you – a new board member.”



Co-op Conflict

Conflict offers opportunities for:

- ❖ learning
- ❖ resolution and transforming difficult situations
- ❖ transforming relationships
- ❖ community development



You and difficult characters

Think of a couple of characters in your co-op ...

- What specifically is challenging for you?

- What are your default responses to difficult people with their accusations, demands and hostility?



Who are the classic difficult co-op characters?



Classic Co-op Characters

- Know-it-all
 - Nit-picker
- Gang leader / Puppeteer
- Aggressive conflict champion
 - Dominator
 - Victim
 - Cop
 - Advocate



Classic Characters' Behaviour

loud

uncompromising

hostile

deceptive / two-faced

controlling

intimidating

tyrannical

quietly coercive

provocative

aggressive

insistent

antagonistic

tormenting

dominating



Their behaviour is...

- Threatening
- Upsetting and stressful
 - Disabling, silencing
 - Confounding
- Collectively disruptive and divisive
- The basis for escalation and conflict



Some classic co-op responses

- Avoid – delay responding or delegate to others (staff, mediators such as me, lawyers)
- Engage with rules – try to subdue those in conflict by telling them the rules, e.g. bylaws, codes of conduct.
- We disagree poorly – this can lead to further escalation.
- We reply with hostility – this can take the form of “standing up for oneself” or “correcting” the other – this generally leads to further escalation.



How our brains work and self-protection



A world of unconscious bias and stories

- Preconceived notions and automatic associations are examples of cognitive bias and distortion.
- Bias relates to how we understand and sort and respond to information and experiences.
- They are automatic and occur in everyone to some degree.



Stories we tell...

Scenario

- Someone let's you down and it's not the first time.
- You let someone down and it's not the first time.
- Someone cuts you off while you're driving.
- You cut someone off while you're driving.

The story you tell yourself

- They are irresponsible & unreliable.
- It's because I'm overworked
- They are rude, aggressive, inconsiderate
- It's because I'm in a hurry because if I am late, I'll miss my doctor's appointment



The Dynamics of Conflict Escalation

- Others' demands, complaints and positions create fear that our needs may not be met.

“You’re not following the rules!”

“You’re incompetent.”

“Why hasn’t the board told us about this?”

“Members are tired of crappy maintenance”



The Dynamics of Conflict Escalation

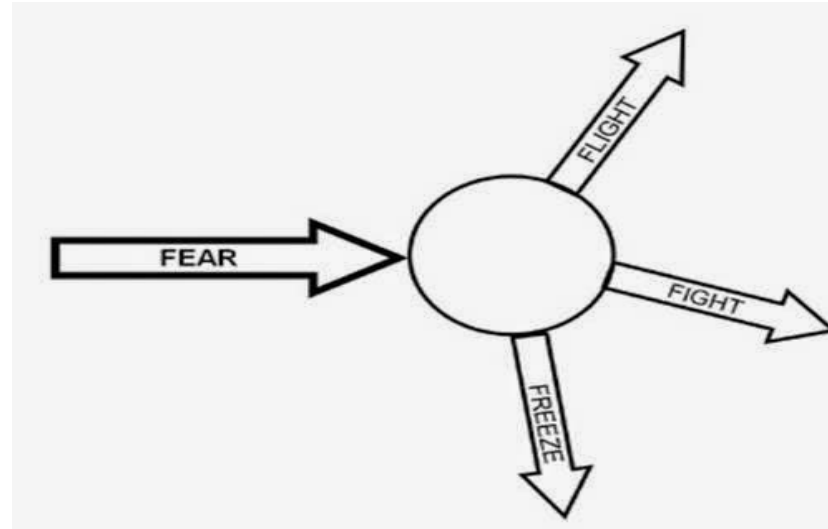
- We protect our needs by:

Defending our behaviour, character, etc.

Attacking : criticising, threatening, insulting,
minimizing others' concerns, gathering allies.



Evolution and Self Protection



- ❖ Perceived threats -- cascade of hormones
- ❖ Being “triggered” = Amygdala Hijack
- ❖ Self-protection = perspectives trapped into narrowed view
- ❖ Complex decision making disappears

Approaches to Conflict

Power Based: when pressure, force or coercion is used, e.g. use of authority, public pressure, strikes, physical force, etc.



How and when is this approach effective with a difficult member?



Approaches to Conflict

Rights / Rules Based: a general standard, or set of laws and rules is used to deal with a particular case, e.g. by-laws, policies, laws, moral codes, etc.



How and when is this approach effective with a difficult member?



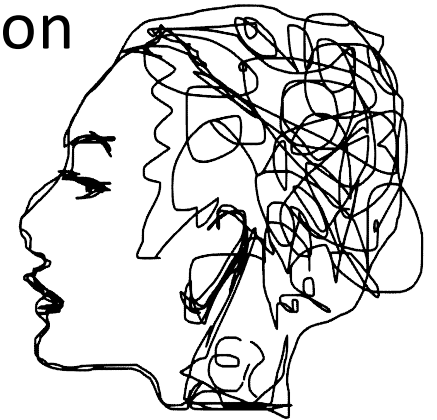
Listening for interests beneath positions, claims, demands

Needs
Concerns
Values
Feelings
Beliefs
Assumptions
Intentions



Your Toolbox: Presence and Attitude

1. Stay present: notice you're provoked, be curious
2. Park your own feelings and reactions
3. Let go of the story: let go of the thinking and judging mind
4. Adopt an attitude of curiosity: lean in, pay attention
5. Breathe: Focus on the body

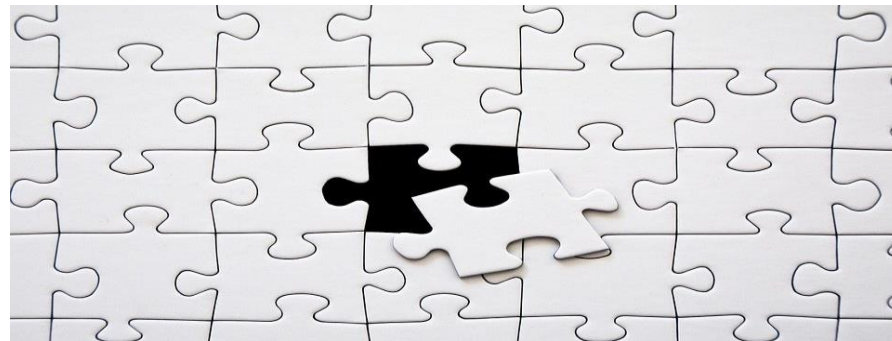


What's hard about this?



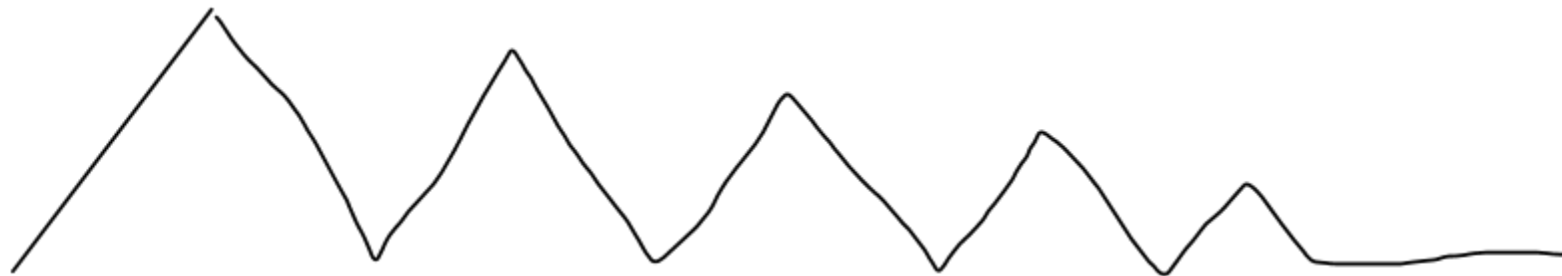
Your Toolbox: Deep, reflective listening

1. Reflect feelings
2. Restate, summarize, paraphrase
3. Acknowledge interests
4. Ask open-ended questions
5. Connect for total meaning



C.L.A.I.M.: Responding to a perceived threat or angry person

- Centre yourself
- Listen for what's important to the other person
- Acknowledge what you heard
- Invite more information
- Move to problem-solving



Note: I am indebted to Toronto Neighbourhood House / St. Stephen's Conflict Resolution and Training for C.L.A.I.M.



Restate, and acknowledge interests and feelings

Scenario

You are at meeting and have asked some questions about a financial report and how it matches the budget. A big board member interrupts and loudly begins speaking.

What was said

“Listen, I’ve been on the board for many years. I think I know how boards are supposed to work. Who do you think are? I don’t need you correcting or questioning me, especially you – a new board member.”



Restate, and acknowledge interests and feelings

Scenario

An argument arises in one of the co-op's green areas. One of the long established co-op gardeners begins to snarl at two other members who just started gardening this year.

What was said

“I took over the garden because everybody else just looked after their own little section and the whole thing was a mess with vegies all over the place and no one seemed to care. Every year it's the same. I have every right to take out the renegade plants. Someone has to.”



Working with a narcissist

- Establish limits
- Be consistent
- Don't expect empathy
- Realize they may not change
- Praise strategically and recognize strengths, contributions
- Don't be swayed by gaslighting
- Be clear, factual and direct
- Document and follow up in writing



Responding to Someone in a Mental Health Crisis

- Don't assume what the problem is or that they will be violent... people with mental illness are just like everyone else
- Treat people with dignity and respect: be sensitive and thoughtful
- Do not ask someone if they have a mental illness; wait for them to tell you
- Mental illness does not discriminate

Adapted from the Empowerment Council, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health



Responding to Someone in a Mental Health Crisis

- Decrease other distractions.
- Do not ask too many personal questions.
- Describe the behaviour you are observing in neutral language
- Explain clearly
- Be an ally



Restate, and acknowledge interests and feelings

Scenario

Your board has sent a letter (“notice to appear”) to a member to come to their next meeting. She arrives very upset.

What was said

By calling me to this meeting you are harassing me and it’s affecting my mental health. I didn’t scream at my neighbour first. She made some rude comments about my parenting and so I let it fly. I’m going to get a lawyer and fight your harassment and this defamation of my character. You are out to get me because I speak out about what’s wrong with this co-op.”



Your Examples



I Messaging (constructive assertive statements)

- Focusses on your own feelings and experiences NOT on your perspective of what the other has done or failed to do.
- Presents a clear message about your concerns and needs without blaming or sounding threatening.
“This is how it looks from my perspective”
- Intended to open up a healthy conversation rather than force the other to fix a problem



The form of I Messaging

When you.....(state observation)

I feel or think..... (state feeling)

Because.....(state need)

I would prefer that.....(state preference)

Another way:

I feel ...when you....because (why you feel this way). Can we talk about this?



I Messaging

- I feel that I am not being encouraged to participate at meetings to the same extent as others are.
 - *rather than*
- You always talk too much and do not let others participate.



I Messaging Examples

“I have just acknowledged you are very upset about the situation and want something done now. I need you to know that when you raise your voice like that, I feel stressed and I cannot concentrate on what is being said.”

“We have talked about your concerns and I hope you feel heard. I need to tell you that when you interrupt me when I am speaking, I feel angry because I want to be understood also. I would prefer that we take turns and you let me finish speaking.”



Turn these into I-messages

- “You’re freaking out and yelling about your housing charge. You can’t just barge in as if I have nothing else to do but drop everything and listen to your foul language.”
- “It’s rude of you to be late all the time. You screw up everyone’s schedule.”
- “You never listen to me and you’re not really listening now. I’m talking about the security issue from last night.”



Sometimes you need to set boundaries

- When you have tried active listening and the other's behaviour still seriously interferes with your work, OR
- When you are faced with offensive behaviour or you feel you are being harassed...
- You need to address the situation directly.



Setting Boundaries Steps

- Prepare yourself and avoid escalating the situation
- Briefly acknowledge their concerns and express willingness to help
- Describe the specific behaviour that is unacceptable
- Use clear, firm directive statements
- Establish ground rules for continuing the discussion
- Ensure there is agreement with the guidelines
- Return to the person's concerns and deal with them



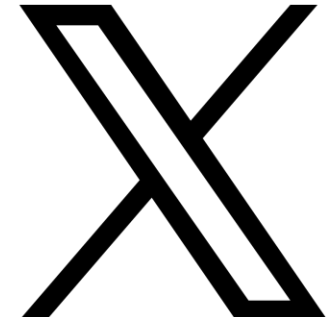
Practice

- A big man comes into the office, leans over the desk and begins telling you what to do.
- A woman starts asking you about your background during a GMM when you are making a point about subsidies. She says you people should be grateful for what you have.
- A board disagrees with you about the capital budget and begins yelling at you and insisting you do not understand how things work.



Share what you've learned on social media!

- Post photos, favourite moments, or key learnings from today's workshops on social media
- Tag us @chfcanada
- Use the hashtag #CHFCanada2026



The National Education Committee presents

ONLINE LEARNING

Self-Paced

Move through the content when it suits you.



Courses

Fulfilling your legal duties as a board director

Taking effective meeting minutes

Chair like a champion

Personal information protection

Identity affirming language

Maintenance 101

Financial statements 101

- ✔ For board directors, co-op members, and staff
- ✔ \$30 per course
- ✔ Many courses to choose from
- ✔ 30 minutes per course
- ✔ Requires internet connection
- ✔ Develop practical skills and gain knowledge



TAKE ACTION TODAY!

Youholdthekey.ca



**YOU HOLD
THE KEY**

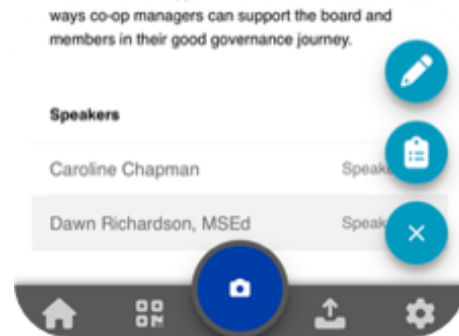
Protect affordable homes
Renew rental assistance now



Before you go

We need your help to do better!
Fill out a paper evaluation, fold in half and leave it in the room.
Or fill out a digital evaluation using our conference app.

Thanks!



When you get home

Find today's workshop materials in the resources section on our website:

chfcanada.coop/education/resources



Reminders

- **Voting in CHF Canada National Business meeting happens on Saturday.** Your co-op's delegate must be there in order to vote. The delegate can pick up a voting device at conference services.
- **All coffee breaks will be held in the tradeshow area!** Make sure you visit all the tradeshow exhibitors so that you can complete the bingo card (found in your bag) and have a chance to win prizes.

