

INSPIRE's Community Engagement Learning Network

Session #8: Navigating conflict in community engagement programs

Featured presenter: [National Health Care for the Homeless Council](#)

December 2025

Every month, the Community Engagement Learning Network brings together a nationwide team of community engagement (CE) professionals and people with lived experience to host group discussions about improving CE efforts, present best practices for launching and maintaining CE initiatives — drawn from experts in the field, and foster community-building among participants.



Key takeaways

- Conflict is a normal and unavoidable part of collaborative work, especially in spaces that center lived experience, shared leadership, and systems change.
- Conflict is often driven as much by emotions and assumptions as by the surface-level issue. Feelings of being unheard, unsupported, or unsafe can intensify disagreements.
- Taking time to pause and cool down before resolving conflict helps to prevent emotions from driving communication and decision-making.

- Apology, accountability, and mutual understanding are essential for repairing harm and rebuilding trust after conflict and when approached intentionally, conflict can strengthen relationships, deepen trust, and improve teamwork.
- There are several strategies that can help groups to prepare for conflict including:
 - Making time for relationship building
 - Creating community agreements and documented resolution processes
 - Investing in communication and conflict resolution training.



Action steps

For everyone (professionals leading CE and people with lived experience)

- Normalize conflict as part of authentic partnership work to help reduce fear of difficult conversations.
- Use explicit appreciation (e.g., “thank you for coming back to this conversation”) to recognize the emotional labor of conflict resolution.
- Support shared accountability by naming harm, encouraging apology, and reinforcing that conflict is about repair, not winning.
- Name when you do not feel supported, safe, or heard in moments of conflict, especially when power dynamics are present.
- Take a pause during tense moments so that emotions can settle before continuing difficult conversations. Return to the table after conflict when you feel ready, rather than disengaging completely.

For professionals leading CE

- Collaborate with the PWLE you work with to create group agreements that address how to handle conflict. Consider establishing a documented grievance policy to create a shared understanding of how conflicts can be addressed within the organization.
- Provide communication and conflict resolution training for PWLE you work with.
- Build in regular relationship-building opportunities (check-ins, retreats, informal connection) so that trust exists before conflict occurs.

“Conflict becomes a doorway to deeper understanding and stronger community.”



Resources for additional learning

- [Oops, Ouch, Whoa Protocol](#)
- [12 Skill Summary of Conflict Resolution - CR Network](#)
- [IPFCC - Developing Group Agreements with PFACs](#)

inspire partners

Organizations



People with lived experience



Alan
Coker



Burt
Pusch



Laura
Carroll



Rebecca
Esparza



Savina
Makalena



Stephanie
Burdick