

TRANSFORMING MOMENTS OF CONFLICT THROUGH EMBODIED LEADERSHIP: A Guide for Student Affairs Professionals

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Acknowledgement

This Toolkit is developed in partnership with the UC Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement. It offers an interdisciplinary synthesis of concepts, experiences and body-centered strategies designed for Student Affairs (SA) professionals (also known as Student Services professionals), Educators and Service-Providers who actively support the social and emotional development, positive mental health and resilience of their students and constituents on a daily basis.

This Toolkit is rooted in the beliefs that as Educators, we (1) actively develop the whole person, that we (2) practice cultural humility¹ and work to unpack perspectives, beliefs, and assumptions through dialogue and communication, and that we (3) nurture diversity through mutual respect and relationship-building (ACPA, 2013).

The Toolkit highlights case stories of SA professionals who have navigated social justice conflicts in their campus spaces since November 2016. Through a deeper appreciation and examination of these stories we highlight leadership practices that include basic human needs, our biology, and our histories when responding to the complexity of free speech and social justice conflicts in campus spaces.

As the author, I acknowledge that only certain perspectives are presented here and that they occur through my lens as a first-generation Indo-American woman raised in the Southern United States whose journey of healing and liberation has been centered in internal practices of reflection and embodiment. The perspectives, stories and strategies presented here do not reflect all lived experiences, social identities, theoretical frames or ways of moving through conflict experiences. My hope is that as participants of this Toolkit, you will find ways to translate and synthesize the ideas and concepts here into your own context for the upliftment of yourself, your teams and your communities.

Thanks to the UC Center for Free Speech for supporting the vision for this project. I have gained a new home and family through this Fellowship experience.

Thanks to my amazing Project Assistants, Jessica Coates and Maya Ram who carefully helped me uphold the precious stories shared by the Student Affairs Staff through research and writing. Maya, thank you deeply for your support, reflections and advocacy.

Thanks to my Colleagues who work tirelessly to serve their communities on campus and at home. May this Toolkit honor and support your empathy and offer permission and pathways by which you can take care of your well-being while supporting others through uncertain times.

And finally, I am grateful to my students for inspiring me daily to be a better listener, to cultivate curiosity and to stay hopeful as we work to create a more loving world.

¹ For additional information, see *Cultural Humility: People, Principles and Practices*, a short documentary by Vivian Chávez at youtu.be/SaSH1bS1V4w.

Introduction

College campuses are crucial cultural microcosms that intensely reflect the shifting ideologies of our time. As critical campus helpers, Student Affairs (SA) professionals, also called Student Services Professionals, have long been positioned to support students' social-emotional development, encourage broader perspective, build community and advocate against bureaucratic barriers to success. These professionals do this work to promote both student well-being and social justice. SA professionals exist in many important domains of campus, that include diversity centers (serving individuals including LGBTQ+, Undocumented, and First-Generation College Students), counseling and wellness centers, financial aid offices, and numerous other student-centered services.

The heightened national and global socio-political climate in the United States for the last several years have increasingly put SA professionals in positions to navigate situations of social identity-based polarization and conflict between individuals and groups across all levels of the campus.

It is clear that many have witnessed an increase in social identity-based conflicts starting in 2016. Tensions are high on campuses. According to a Gallup poll comparing data from 2016 and 2018, "61%, up from 54%, say campus climate prevents people from speaking freely" (Jones, 2018). As individuals on campus worry about polarization and conflict, they freeze and may become fearful of using their voice or offending another person. They do not want to be the one to ignite a conflict on their campus.

SA professionals are often motivated to address challenges with conviction, care and responsiveness. Therefore, they also experience a high degree of overwhelm, emotional fatigue and burnout as they respond to these nuanced and often alarming situations. The yet unknowable long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the unfolding Black liberation uprising as the countdown continues to a tenuous 2020 U.S. presidential election has additionally heightened our alertness and preparation around how to prevent, navigate and cope with the chaos of social change.

The modules in this Toolkit are designed to support SA professionals in navigating social justice conflicts in campus spaces through practices of embodied leadership². **Embodied leadership** is the practice of integrating the wholeness of our body as a tool and channel for skillfully facilitating uncomfortable, intense moments. The modules present frameworks that support helping professionals to enter willingly and delicately into uncertainty, with the goals of reinforcing belonging, broadening perspective, and moving intentionally toward the very next step.

² For additional information on embodied leadership, see *Embodied Leadership: The Somatic Approach to Developing Your Leadership* (2013) by Pete Hamill.

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This Toolkit is for SA professionals who:

- Serve marginalized communities through direct service, advocacy, or administration
- Want to take effective action during times of conflict
- Feel they lack the skills to handle a conflict
- Feel uncertain about how to engage with the emotional nature of conflict
- Feel emotionally drained, overwhelmed, or burned out
- Want to shift moments of conflict into opportunities for transformation

This Toolkit serves to validate the experiences of SA professionals, honor the stories, and provide accessible perspectives and skills that can support us holistically as we tend to the emotional complexities of our current climate. Many SA professionals want to be able to take action during conflict situations, but fear they don't have the right training, language, power or answers. This Toolkit offers perspectives and skills that challenge SA professionals to grow our thinking of what is possible with conflict, and to explore how to prepare for and move through conflict by trusting instinct, honing biological awareness and creating a brave space through presence.

Toolkit Layout and Orientation

This toolkit offers four primary modules to support you in skillful facilitation during a social justice conflict between groups and/or individuals.

Module 1: Self-Preparation	Module 2: MAGA Hat Case Scenario	Module 3: Yoga Mat Case Scenario	Module 4: Conference Protest Case Scenario
Leadership Practice: Embodiment	Leadership Practice: Mindfulness	Leadership Practice: Growth Mindset	Leadership Practice: Trauma-Informed Approach
			

Module 1 focuses on preparing ourselves for conflict as professionals. Modules 2, 3 and 4 present case scenarios that are used to illustrate the related Leadership Practice. Each module offers in-depth reflection questions, tools and additional resources for continued learning. These modules can be engaged with on your own and with your team members.

About the Case Scenarios

During the development of this Toolkit, SA professionals were interviewed across multiple campuses. These SA professionals have provided a window into the conflicts they have witnessed and engaged with on their campuses. Their interviews were used to create the three case scenarios in the Toolkit. The purpose of these scenarios is not to promise solutions or detailed step-by-step processes, but instead to allow other SA professionals to put themselves in the shoes of their colleagues and learn through their experience to prepare for similar challenges ahead.

Inner Reflection from the Author, a Student Affairs Professional

For a bit of background, the first case scenario presented here was one that many college campuses heard about. In my department, we debriefed this scenario and talked about what we may have done in that situation. By the end of this meeting, we had no consensus of what our process was besides having the phone numbers of a couple of campus resources programmed into our phones. This felt frustrating and increased our confusion as a team.

But over time, I started to see threads of the scenario we debriefed in my own campus spaces. I realized that I had developed a greater readiness to handle these incidents because of the activity we did in that meeting months prior. I had gotten to explore the reality of that situation and reflect on the possibility of something like this happening to me and my team. That familiarity with uncertainty helped me to feel more empowered in my response when the time came. I hope this Toolkit can do the same for you.



MODULE 1: SELF-PREPARATION

Leadership Practice: Embodiment

Conflict is a Part of the Change Process

Many of our society's domains are in turmoil. In the U.S., the volatile political and racial climate stirs trauma and unease for many social groups. Compounding threats like climate change and the multi-layered challenges posed by COVID-19 continue to stretch us in ways that we didn't know were possible. We are being pushed to look at our personal and cultural ideologies and take collective accountability through action. In order for large-scale reorganization to occur, conflict, a catalytic mechanism for change, is inevitable.

SA Staff are positioned physically and virtually in spaces that support student expression and are by nature emotionally charged. As leaders of growth and stewards of hope, SA professionals must be ready to persist on the bumpy road ahead. We can find strength by knowing that conflict management is a part of our role and that we embody the values, mindsets and skills to lead when the time comes. It is crucial to do this without burning out and instead replenish our energy while dancing with uncertainty.

This Toolkit focuses specifically on social justice conflicts that are present in campus spaces. The strategies presented in this Toolkit can ultimately be applied to all types of conflict. **Conflict** is a clash between individuals that occurs when the individuals involved (or other parties) perceive that, as a consequence of a disagreement, there is a threat to their needs, interests or concerns. Conflict occurs in all facets of life (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008). **Social Justice Conflicts** are those in which the person(s) expressing their views are advocating for the rights of an individual/group of a particular social identity(ies). Social identities include religious, gender, sexual orientation, racial or ethnic, cultural, national affiliations.

***Example:** In a class, a student who identifies as a woman brings up how the #MeToo movement makes it difficult to be on social media because her own traumas are consistently being triggered. This activates another student, who is a man, and he tells her that she is too sensitive and that the #MeToo movement is actually just a war on men. A conflict begins.*

In this Toolkit, two of the three case scenarios presented are social justice conflicts that occurred under the auspices of free speech. The language of “free speech” is often used in campus spaces to justify statements and actions that incite conflict. **Free Speech** is the freedom of expression, without censorship or sanction of the point of view or content, with the exception of speech that creates a risk of immediate violence (Tufts University, 2018).

***Example:** Student protests erupted on college campuses across the nation following the 2016 election of Donald Trump. These students were exercising their right to freedom of speech, and therefore they had a right to protest freely as long as they were not inciting or enacting violence.*

Take a moment to assess your current relationship to conflict by reflecting on the following questions:

1. On a scale of 1-10, to what degree do you feel ready to handle a social justice conflict in your professional space? (1=not ready at all, 10=very ready)
2. Why did you choose this response?
3. What fears come up for you when faced with a workplace conflict?
4. How do you typically handle conflict when it arises?
5. What would help you grow your ability to handle conflict in the future?

What Drives Conflict

All conflict, regardless of the context, is rooted in our biological and human need for *safety, belonging and dignity* (Haines, 2019). All three must exist in order for a human being and community to feel whole. Social justice conflicts at the core are centered in a threat to one's right to exist with whole-body freedom and to have access to liberation through societal structures such as education, health care and finances.

Safety is a feeling or state of familiarity and ease in physical/material, emotional, relational and spiritual domains. What makes one person feel safe may not be the same for others. **Belonging** “reaches from the intimate to the social.” It is the feeling of having a place or being accepted within a group. Dignity is our inherent worthiness and value as a human being or as a community. **Dignity** is being valued for who you are and how you show up. It reflects our innate value and worth as human beings (Haines, 2019, p. 140-145). The moment of conflict and the simultaneous discomfort experienced in the body presents a visceral threat to these basic needs.

How Conflict is Experienced in the Body

Think back to a recent time in which you experienced or witnessed a conflict. What do you recall about how you felt inside as your body responded in that moment? Perhaps a little hot and angry? Perhaps constricted in your stomach and physically stuck in place? Or perhaps your heart was racing and had flashbacks to another time in which you felt a similar way?

Conflict is a whole-body experience. The ways in which our bodies have adapted to stress and conflict is rooted in our genetic line, our lived history, our culture, our positionality in society, and internalized beliefs. For bodies and communities who have experienced trauma because of oppressive practices, discrimination,

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racism and violence, whether complex or acute, the body exists in somewhat heightened a state as a norm³. Hence, social justice conflicts can be particularly charged because long-held traumas and pain are being expressed and are wanting healing and acknowledgement (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).

Let’s look more closely at what happens within our bodies in times of conflict. For simplicity, we can divide the brain into three parts. The first two parts represent the primal brain comprising the limbic system and brain stem which together regulate emotions and other autonomic processes such as breathing, heart rate, and digestion. The third part is the neocortex, or the top of the brain that is unique to humans in its size and ability. This part is responsible for higher level thinking and responsiveness including logic, intuition and empathy.

In a moment of distress, such as an interpersonal conflict in the workplace, the amygdala, which sits in the limbic system, becomes activated. This alarm bell turns on the body’s wise protection system whose function is to organize the body in a way that maintains and protects its safety, belonging and dignity in the moment. Such safety shaping results in the fight-flight- freeze-faint response pattern through the body’s intricate nervous system (Haines, 2019). When activated, the connection between the primal brain and the rationalizing brain becomes temporarily disrupted and emotional literacy, logic and empathy are difficult to access. Instead we become more biologically committed to self or group protection.

The fight-flight-freeze-faint response pattern occurs differently in bodies of individuals and communities. We all embody some combination of these responses in different contexts. Below are some generalized ways in which these response patterns manifest in our physical sensations, emotions and mind during conflict:

Nervous System Responses During Stress/Conflict ⁴			
FIGHT	FLIGHT	FREEZE	FAINT
Irritability, aggression, impatience, tightening in muscles, heat, perfectionistic/ critical thoughts	Leaning away from, physical or mental avoidance, numbing out, anxious thoughts	Tight and stiff, nervous, frozen, recycling of emotion and thoughts, difficulty moving body	Fogginess, confusion, feeling drained or tired, feeling wobbly, unanchored, anxious thinking

These internal response patterns can manifest in a myriad of ways depending on who is triggered, the degree of power and authority they hold in that context, past experiences of trauma, personality, etc. From the outside, they can look like shut down, aggression, stonewalling, confrontation, defensiveness, pleading, etc. (Hendricks, 2019). These reactions can feel scary and threatening, making conflict even more difficult to move through. If, as leaders, we are able to work with the biology of those in the conflict, including our own, we can relax the emotional intensity in the space. We can provide the emotional containment that is needed to touch the deeper thread of shared humanity and move with greater perspective to the next step.

³ For additional information on trauma, see SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma- Informed Approach (2014). https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf

⁴ Adapted from the Hendricks Institute: <https://hendricks.com/product/fear-melters/>.

The ways in which we react to conflict can shift and change over time. We can become more masterful in transforming the uncomfortable and overwhelming energy of conflict into something productive. We can invite a space for emotional healing, connection, and understanding, regardless of how long or short the interaction.

Reflection

Think about the last time that you were involved in a conflict. How did you feel in your body? What nervous system response was activated in you? Thoughts, body sensations, emotions? In the other(s) involved in the conflict?

Embodiment to Move through Conflict

In preparing for conflict, there is not a generalizable process or protocol to follow that can be applied to every scenario. What we can do, however, is learn how to be more *embodied*, or present and available emotionally and rationally, when conflict arises.

Embodiment is a way of being in our bodies (instead of just in our heads) and understanding the moment through our emotions, sensations and thoughts. During conflict, we can use this information from our nervous system to guide us in supporting ourselves and others. As leaders, our embodiment can be a way to foster connection, emotional regulation and belonging, while creating a contained space for what wants to be expressed. When we ground and center ourselves in the heat of the moment, we shift the energy in the space and in our collective bodies.

As an embodied leader, your ability to be present and contain the space in the midst of conflict and its accompanying emotions is key to finding a path through it. The ability for you to monitor and adjust your own behavior, emotions or thoughts in accordance with the needs of the situation is called **self-regulation**. (J.L. Cook, G. Cook, 2009). As you find presence, slow down your breath and open your posture, you will automatically help to calm the fight-flight-freeze-faint response in the bodies of others. This is called co-regulation, meaning that through the quality of the relationship, whether it is a momentary interaction or longer term, we can together resource feelings of safety, belonging and dignity irrespective of ideological differences.

Embodiment practice can move us to a space where it is emotionally safer to address conflict. It teaches us that there are alternatives to shutting down, retreating inward, or reacting defensively. Getting embodied, remembering to feel, and shifting our narratives around emotions and feelings opens up opportunities for leadership, growth and dialogue.

Self-Care is the Key to Embodiment

As SA professionals, we often come into this role through our own histories of marginalization and adversity. This work is personal. Therefore, tending to our mental health and well-being are crucial in order to fulfill our roles without burning out. This must be supported by the institution and through the daily infrastructural operations within a department. We ourselves must also individually choose to do the deep, internal work of self-care.

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

- Audre Lorde

Self-care⁵ is a way of life that includes biological renewal as part of our daily routine. It allows us to become familiar with our body's needs and inner workings. It teaches us how to regenerate our energy and find joy in the micro-moments of the day. Self-care hones our ability to trust our instinct and get comfortable with a wide range of emotion so that during conflict we can lead with whole-body presence.

As highly empathetic community helpers, our focus is often on taking care of others. We forget that giving and receiving are part of the same mechanism -- that in order to give, we must be able to receive, or replenish. To replenish and practice self-care means setting boundaries with others, pausing in nature, sharing vulnerably with a friend. It means actively nurturing a mindset of worthiness and recognizing when you are giving more than you have. It means listening to your instincts, to your need for nourishment, and need for healthy rest. Self-care as an embodied leader equally requires doing the difficult work of acknowledging our biases, understanding our limitations, and actively unlearning fixed mindsets through curiosity, dialogue and critical conversations.

When we turn our empathy inward to reflect and recharge our body and our spirit, we fuel our resilience, regenerate hope, and enhance readiness to handle challenges as they arise in the moment with grace, presence, and skill.

⁵ For additional information on self-care, see *The A-to-Z Self-Care Handbook for Social Workers and Other Helping Professionals* (2016) by Erlene Grise-Owens, Justin “Jay” Miller, and Mindy Eaves

Self-Preparation Tips to Support Embodied Leadership

The following are steps you can take toward ensuring your well-being and strength as a leader and professional:

1. **Actively prioritize and invest in your self-care** with time and effort.
2. **Seek out mentorship/counsel** within and outside of the workplace.
3. **Engage in mindful body practices that open the body system and generate energy**, like stretching, yoga, deep breathing, and meditation.
4. **Affirm yourself** daily.
5. **Express your needs and ask for support**, even when it may be scary to do so.
6. **Say “no”** to extra responsibilities, especially when your capacity is low.
7. **Make time for reflection**, both alone and with others.
8. **Take intentional breaks** during the workday.
9. **Arrange your workspace** so that you are comfortable and have items around you that support your wellness.
10. Identify and seek out practices for **rest, nourishment and re-energizing**.

Now that we have explored embodiment and tips to support embodied leadership, it is important to commit to practicing embodiment. To start, choose one or two Self-Preparation tips to work on and try to create a consistent practice. Start with small steps and be kind to yourself as you begin this journey of shifting inward and caring for yourself. The work of embodiment is a process. Trust that as you continue to practice embodied leadership, you will see growth and transformation.



MODULE 2: MAGA HAT CASE SCENARIO

Leadership Practice: Mindfulness

The names of all key players in this scenario have been changed to protect the privacy of the students and staff who experienced this moment.

At the beginning of fall quarter in 2017, a video from UC Riverside went viral on social media. The video shows a student of color, Alex, entering the Office of Student Life while clutching a MAGA hat. The video is being filmed by a white student, Sam, who follows Alex into the office claiming that his hat was taken off his head just now at the Summit. Sam says he wants his hat back because it is his property and he has a right to freedom of speech. The students argue back and forth. Alex, still holding the hat, says, “Your freedom of speech is genocide, homeboy. Is that what you’re trying to represent?” Sam responds, “It doesn’t matter. My freedom of speech allows me to wear

that hat as much as I want.” The video goes on with the students arguing about respect versus freedom of speech. We see staff members making multiple attempts to calm and appease the students, making phone calls, and standing present as the conflict unfolds. The students both then turn their demands to Staff, asking how they can allow such things to happen. Eventually, Alex hands the hat to a staff member who then returns it to Sam. Alex is additionally upset by this and decides to leave instead of talking further to the support Staff present. As Alex turns to exit the office, two police officers block the exit. Sam stopped filming almost as soon as it appears that Alex is going to be questioned by the police.

CONTEXT:

Location: UC Riverside

Date: Early September, Fall Quarter 2017

Time: 12:30pm

Setting: This event took place at Student Organization Summit at the beginning of the school year. Student organizations attend this Summit in order to register for the year. Many diverse groups are present.

Political Climate: On September 5th, 2017, a memorandum was issued for the rescission of DACA, which would roll back protections for DACA recipients and make them potentially vulnerable for deportation after six months. This affected many students on UC Campuses.



Configuration of the Conflict

View the entire interaction as filmed by the student who was wearing the MAGA hat, by visiting this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HDFD5U9BYg>.

Please note that the video is emotionally charged and can be triggering to some viewers. As you watch this on your own or with your team, actively take care of your well-being by breathing more deeply and grounding yourself in the present moment.

The following reflection is provided by a SA Professional Staff who witnessed the igniting of the conflict. Here they shared more detail of what happened before and after the events captured in the viral video. Their inner reflections and reactions are also represented, showing the intricate relationship between our inner responses and our outer experiences, and the degree of nuance and attention that is required by Staff when navigating conflicts on campus.

What Happened?

The Summit had just started that afternoon. One of the first things that participants were guided to do was an interactive activity in small groups. The activity started, and the student wearing the MAGA hat was sitting alone.

Eventually he stood up and joined the small group activity. The activity concluded and the next presenters were invited to come to the stage and talk about their resources.

As I was closing out this session, I saw that the student with the MAGA hat was at the front of the room. Someone then runs by, takes the hat off his head, and runs out. It happened so fast.

After I had finished talking and passed the mic to the next person, my colleague and I went out of the room to find the students, but couldn't find them. We were thinking, "Okay, where did they go?"

Inner Reflections by Student Affairs Staff

← As people were checking in, several of us [staff members] noticed that the person who was wearing the MAGA hat sat in the back of the room. And so many of us were anxious. I thought, "Okay. Let's see what happens."

← When the hat was taken, I couldn't just drop everything and run out with the students. I didn't want to alarm the students who were present. So, I had to remain calm and finish doing my job before I started handling the crisis.

← Right when the hat was taken, I felt that the interaction was so heated that it could potentially result in violence. The tension was palpable. A colleague and I thought, "She might hurt him." She was that angry. The body language and expressions were clear.

SA Professional's Note

We were looking for the students and someone finally tolerated us that they were in the Office of Student Life. But as soon as the students entered the office, one of our administrative assistants got scared and immediately dialed the police. While some staff members were trying to get a hold of the Student Affairs response team, the police had already been called.

What Happened Later

After the video went viral, people wanted to know “What happened to her? Why was the hat given back?” We were getting calls from other offices asking, “What? Why did you think that calling the police was the answer?”

The debrief experience was consistent and intense. We talked with several campus departments, but we were also getting phone calls from off campus and there was a lot happening on social media because the video went viral.

The student who took the MAGA hat was feeling unsafe and uncomfortable. The student with the MAGA hat was potentially picking up sponsors and getting paid for reposts of the video. There were a lot of legal components popping up, around pressing charges and counter suing.

We, as Student Affairs staff, were in a position because of the viral nature of the video. A colleague who was thought to be in the video turned off all his social media accounts for almost a year because of the fear of threats. As part of the Student Affairs response team, we were trying to offer support to the student who took the MAGA hat. But we were also told to check in with the other student to make sure they were safe, and people were questioning that.

Inner Reflections by Student Affairs Staff

← When I found out the police were called, I was concerned. It's hard because I wasn't actually there for the conflict and the handling of it. I wouldn't have handled it that way. But I didn't have control over how other people acted in the moment of crisis. I had to focus on dealing with the outcomes. Because conflicts on campus continued to manifest in different ways for at least two or three weeks after the main crisis.

← I experienced lots of stress during this time, and that had an impact on me and the family and my life outside of work. What I needed was to be able to debrief my work experiences outside of work, but I wasn't able to at that time. I wasn't in a good space. I don't think that I was practicing good self-care. I was just having to push through and do things.

Takeaways: A SA Professional's Perspective

The video stops at the point where it looks like the next step is that the student will be taken into custody or at least that the police were intervening. This made it seem like the student who took the hat was the one that was going to wind up getting in trouble. But there was more to it.

The student was not detained. The police asked some questions. And it was also a problematic situation. There were some things the officers said that were completely inappropriate during that situation. One of them said something like, “Well, if you don't like it here, then why don't you go back?” There were complexities and clear power dynamics in this situation. But this was not seen by the outside world like the viral video was.

What I learned from this incident is knowing that everything that I do as a SA professional and how I respond to conflicts can go viral. And so, am I role modeling good behavior? Am I role modeling effective communication? Am I demonstrating my ability to support multiple parts of a complex situation at the same time? These are things I have to think about and reflect on a lot more because of this experience.

Analysis and Strategy

What we can learn from this situation?

This situation demonstrates the very complex role of SA professionals as mediators and facilitators in campus spaces. In this space, SA staff had to hold space for two competing truths at the same time, while managing their own value systems internally. It was a challenge and it had a significant ripple effect of outcomes on many people on and off campus.

The truth is that campus life is unpredictable, especially in our current climate of heightened tensions, threats to existence and the uncertainties of change. We see this after elections, during student protests, and even amid national pandemics. We never know when a conflict like this one could happen. So, what can we do?

SA professionals are the essential gatekeepers to student support. This is made clear as Alex and Sam start to direct their communication away from each other to the support staff. It may seem obvious that SA professional staff should first help a student whose property was taken, but in the larger context of what drove the conflict, it is important to look into the complexities of this situation beyond the surface.

Not only was DACA just rescinded before the student Summit, but the Summit was hosting Undocumented Student organizations and Chicax student organizations on that day. This was a sensitive time for any student directly affected by the rescission of DACA, whether personally or through their close relationships. The time and place that Sam chose to wear the MAGA hat symbolically mattered and no doubt fueled this conflict.

Alex is the one who first went to the Office of Student Life looking for support in this situation, but at the end of the video, she turns to leave instead of talking to a SA staff member. It is clear that she felt unsupported. The scenario reveals that there were not prior structures or processes of support in place for Alex, the student of color. The moment Alex entered the office, a staff member, reacting to the intensity of Alex's anger -- called the police. It is clear by Alex's behavior in the video that they are not intending to cause physical harm, but simply are seeking support and safety -- both from the SA staff and from student peers.

Through the video footage and the aftermath, we see that Sam, the White student, got what he wanted in the end. The police were on his side. He controlled the narrative of the video which then went viral. Alex, on the other hand, did not find safety in the supports that were offered at that moment. *What could have been done differently to bring safety for Alex in that situation while upholding free speech policy?*

Leadership Practice: Mindfulness

Part of the SA staff role is to uphold campus policy while simultaneously helping to remove barriers to student success. This duality often creates confusion on how to respond in such situations. If we allow ourselves to be *present and mindful* in the gray area for a little while longer, we can uncover ways to nurture safety and growth while still upholding policy.

Mindfulness is a powerful practice, which teaches us to be present in uncomfortable moments⁶. Biologically, mindfulness fosters the collaboration between the primal/emotional brain (limbic system + brain stem) and the logical/intuitive brain (neocortex) to help the body system find equilibrium, or self-regulate, in times of disruption. It allows us to contain the space for emotion that comes from trauma, without reacting from a place of fear. Mindfulness allows us to find openness and compassion. This reflection from a campus leader demonstrates the benefits of mindfulness in difficult moments:

“Mindfulness meditation & deep breathing techniques have allowed me to remain nonreactive during times of high stress & chaos. In the past, it has been a challenge for me to remain calm when approached with harsh words, criticisms, or controversial views. [Recently], I have had many difficult conversations in which people have revealed deeply rooted, long hidden prejudices. Before I really honed in on controlling my reactions through deep breathing and staying present, I would not have been able to hold my tongue and remain consciously detached from the conversation. Because of skills I have developed, I instead responded to this challenge with an open mind, and an empathetic, respectful response.”

As seen in the viral video, SA staff demonstrated mindfulness by slowing down their voice and inviting the students to calm and to sit and talk. This was not wholly effective, however, because the larger focus remained on returning Sam’s property. Sam had no incentive to stay and be present for a conversation because staff were allied around getting the hat back first, then talking.

Mindful Coaching To create greater safety for Alex and make another attempt at diffusing the situation, another strategy rooted in mindfulness is coaching. Coaching is an essential skill that SA professional staff use on a regular basis when supporting students. **Coaching** is a process of empowering an individual to grow perspectives through their own process of self-reflection. Coaching requires generous listening, empathy and compassionate curiosity. It is a powerful tool that can be used to interrupt a situation, create inclusion and support safety in the space. Below are some examples of coaching questions that could be asked in such a moment of conflict. Asking these questions out loud to the students would open the possibility for creating safety for Alex and inclusion of Sam in a process of deeper perspective taking and understanding, regardless of the outcome.

⁶ For additional information on mindfulness, see *The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness* by Rhonda V. Magee

Coaching Questions to Diffuse the Situation

1. Sam, this hat is your property and it's meaningful for you. What do you think this property represents to Alex?
2. Yes, Sam, you have a right to free speech. How does expression of your freedom of speech impact a space like ours in which there are others who hold different views than you?
3. Alex, when you saw Sam's hat, what came up for you?

Once you have worked to diffuse the initial reactivity by focusing reflections on the representation of the conflict, in this case the hat, there may be opening to shift focus now to the larger context of the conflict. A deeper reflection may be appropriate only at a later time, as in this case where the conflict persisted for weeks after the initial moment. In going deeper, we invite a more vulnerable sharing of history and create a space in which each of the key players can embody the others' perspective. This is important to the SA professional role. We must continue to find ways to allow presence to multiple perspectives in a reflective space as a neutral facilitator while simultaneously honoring our personal beliefs (and emotions) that may be triggered by conflict. You may have resistance to nurturing both sides, as SA staff alluded to in the case scenario reflection. Part of mindful coaching is noticing your inner resistance and biases and letting them pass as you stay present with the people in front of you. At a later time, pause to explore and learn from your resistance. Resistance is normal in this work. It teaches us where we can grow perspective, empathy and compassion, which are crucial as agents of transformative engagement.

If the situation is sufficiently diffused, questions for deeper engagement can be asked if appropriate and timely. Such coaching questions can start to include the larger contextual conversation and move away from focus on the original object of contention, the hat.

Coaching Questions to Broaden Perspective

1. How does our political climate right now impact you and your community on a daily basis? (Ask this of both Sam and Alex)
2. What about their story is familiar to you? Unfamiliar? (Ask this of both Sam and Alex)
3. How might you respond in this situation if you were in Alex's shoes right now? If you were in Sam's shoes?

These are just a sampling of questions that may be posed to interrupt such situations in order to support the well-being of all in the space. The practice of mindfulness will help you access the right wisdom in these moments, when the time comes. We simply have to be ready.

Team Preparation

In addition to the critical self-preparation practice discussed in the previous module, it is imperative that administrators and leaders prepare for conflict as a team and create preventive spaces to discuss such situations before they happen. We can walk through different scenarios, such as this one, as individuals and as a team, debriefing our values and best practices. We can negotiate our departmental values and boundaries around how we take procedural steps to ensure safety and prevent re-traumatization of the communities we serve, while upholding freedom of expression. We can make sure that we and our teams are cared for holistically before, during and after a crisis happens.

There are many questions we can ask within our teams to organize our philosophies and values into processes of practice. Think through these questions through anti-oppression and healing-centered lenses. Take time in team meetings to do this reflective work on a consistent basis, concurrent with the changing landscape of our social climate.

10 Questions to Discuss with Your Team

1. What are personal values and philosophies that drive you in your work?
2. What are the institution's values and practices that align with yours? That do not align?
3. How can our departmental processes better reflect our personal and institutional values in practice?
4. What social dynamics do we need to be aware of as we structure our programs/events?
5. What is happening in the geo-political landscape right now, and how does that impact the people in our space?
6. In what ways do you currently foster safety, dignity and belonging in your work?
7. What processes can we put into place or redesign to best support the needs of the communities we prioritize?
8. What are grey areas in our process development for which we do not have answers yet?
9. How can we take care of ourselves as a team during this time?
10. What do we need to thrive together? How can each of us personally support this effort?

Team preparation and team care are vital to conflict preparation. Entering a conflict already burned out can have serious consequences on both you and the people around you. Cultivating a culture of active reflection, community care, and engagement can help create resilience across all of our campus communities.

Module Debrief Questions

The questions below will help you and your team to walk through the nuances of this case scenario and reflect on your personal and team sentiments for how to prepare for a similar conflict in your campus space. The questions will also invite you to reflect more deeply on the leadership strategies presented and how you and your team can integrate these into the context of your work. The questions are laid out in three categories. Feel free to focus on one category, draw questions from all of them, and create your own questions for reflection.

Examine the Scenario from the Outside

1. Who are the key players (individuals and/or groups) in this scenario?
2. What key complexities/challenges are present in this situation?
3. What power dynamics are present in this situation?⁷
4. What complexities are added by the fact that this incident went viral on social media?
5. What are key players experiencing *internally* as the situation is unfolding? (i.e. what might be their nervous system response--see Module 1 for reference)
6. What basic needs - safety, belonging, dignity - are the key players looking to have met in this situation?

Examine the Scenario from Within

1. What is your internal reaction to this scenario (identify thoughts, emotions, sensations)?
2. Which key player(s) do you empathize most with in this situation? Least? Why?
3. How would aspects of your own social identity influence or be influenced by this situation?⁸
4. What campus resources could support the needs of key players in this situation?
5. What campus resources might be harmful?

Leadership Practice Questions

1. What strategies for embodied leadership are you taking away from this case analysis that you can apply in your daily practice?
2. What is your current personal approach to managing conflict? Your department's approach?
3. How do you respond internally and externally when you are interfacing with someone who has clearly different beliefs than you do? What would help enhance your neutral facilitator skills in your professional role?
4. What steps do you need to take in your own self-care and self-reflection to be able to manage a conflict like this one? *Think about your inner reactions to the conflict in this scenario and your current work environment.*

⁷ "The term **power dynamic** is used to describe how the relative levels of power of two or more people/groups impact their interactions with one another (Hanna-Wayne, 2019)." In this context it is important as a facilitator to be mindful of social power dynamics which, by their mere existence, influence the direction and outcome of a conflict. **Social power dynamics** are "different degrees of power are sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, north-south; and through institutions such as family, religion, education, media, the law (Batliwala, 2014)."

⁸ For example: "As a brown woman facilitating a conflict related to race between a white student and a student of color, my own experiences of race and racism can influence this situation and how I am perceived by both students." A social identity is a category that groups people together who share a range of physical, cultural or social characteristics (categories include race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, size, ability, nationality, etc.).

5. What helps you feel grounded? How can these practices help you stay grounded during moments of conflict?



MODULE 3: YOGA MAT CASE SCENARIO

Leadership Practice: Growth Mindset

The names of all key players in this scenario have been changed to protect the privacy of the students and staff who experienced the series of moments in this conflict.

Julia, a highly reputed Diversity trainer who is Latinx, is a SA professional who supervised a peer-to-peer Diversity Education Program (DEP). The DEP student leaders planned a day-long healing justice retreat for students. The retreat was slated to open with a brief meditation and yoga session, facilitated by Sona, Julia's supervisor. Sona, who identifies as South Asian, is also a wellness program director on the campus.

CONTEXT:

Location: UC Campus

Date: End of Spring Quarter 2018

Time: 12:30pm

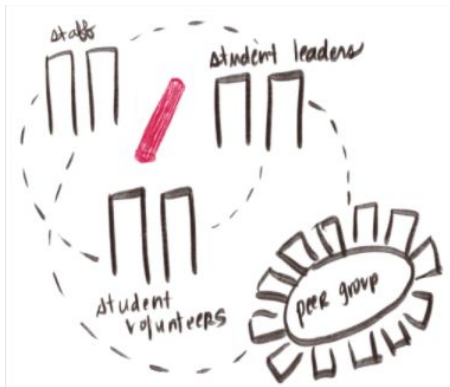
Setting: This conflict occurred in a Student Affairs office.

Larger Context: For students in their final year of school, the end of the school year is a period of major transition and accompanying stress. SA Staff are also quite exhausted by the end of the year, and the potential for burnout is high.

Participants at the retreat would be incentivized with a free yoga mat for attending. A couple of weeks before the retreat, Sona informed Julia that she would not be available to facilitate the opening meditation. In her place, Sona invited two of her students, who are trained in meditation, to facilitate instead.

Three days before the retreat, Sona received a phone call from Julia. Julia, practically in tears, expressed that two of the DEP student leaders aggressively demanded that yoga mats be removed as incentives for the retreat. The retreat was around the corner and Julia had worked hard to secure the yoga mats and bring them to campus from her home two hours away. When she asked for clarification as to why, they told Julia that the yoga mats were cultural appropriation, especially since Sona was no longer available to teach the meditation.

Julia reminded the DEP students that Sona recruited two student volunteers in her place to facilitate the meditation instead. Therefore, the mats would still be useful. Julia named the two student volunteers, who by chance also identified as South Asian. The DEP student leaders reacted with disgust, saying that Julia was now being racist for assuming the student volunteers knew how to teach meditation just because they were South Asian. The conflict heated with back and forth email communication that only aggravated the situation. The yoga mats were not handed out at the retreat and tension remained between Julia, the DEP peers and the rest of the DEP cohort through the end of the academic year, which was a few weeks away. As the conflict escalated, the DEP student leaders demanded that Julia make a formal apology for disrespecting the DEP student leader cohort and the two South Asian student volunteers that Sona recruited.



Configuration of the Conflict

The following reflection is provided by Sona. Here she shares more detail of what happened during her phone call with Julia and the steps taken to work through the conflict in the following weeks. Her inner reflections and reactions are also represented to show the multi-layered complexity of this situation and the impact it had on mental health and well-being.

What Happened?

Julia called me on my day off, exasperated and unsure of how to proceed after the DEP student leaders stated that giving out yoga mats at the healing justice retreat was a form of cultural appropriation.

The DEP student leaders demanded to Julia, their Supervisor, that the yoga mats be returned. Julia was confused because from what she recalls, they had approved these items when the retreat was being planned.

They called Julia racist after she mentioned that the two student volunteers who would take Sona's place were South Asian.

As the supervisor, I had to step in to help both my staff and the students. I had multiple conversations with my own supervisor about the situation. I had many conversations with Julia. I had conversations with my student volunteers.

Inner Reflections by Student Affairs Staff

← At the time, I was the assistant director of the department, I was running a wellness program under the department, and I was overseeing other programs, including Julia's. I was completely overwhelmed. When this situation came up on top of everything else, I didn't know if I could handle it.

← As I heard this, I was surprised and perplexed. "Would it work if we called it an exercise mat?!" I exclaimed in my head. What about the value of making these practices accessible to others so they can find healing?

← I sensed Julia felt deep hurt that she would be so quickly dismissed. She had been working in spaces of dialogue and social justice for decades and was being told she was racist and insensitive. She herself was born to immigrants. I felt upset for Julia.

...At the same time, my resistance to the students' statements told me that there was something I needed to examine within myself.

← The conflict impacted my body and my well-being. It went on for several days, and I remember I went home every day with pain and tension in my jaw and neck. I had a lot of restless nights.

What Happened Later

What proceeded to unfold was many more conversations with the students -- one-on-one, in small groups, and then finally a large group conversation with all of the DEP cohort and Julia - around 18 people. It felt important to try and come to some understanding before the end of the year.

I shared my perspective of what happened in the situation, and where communication broke down on my end. And that, as a wellness educator, my goal is to make the practices accessible to anyone who wants them. I let them know too that I had thought about their perspective a lot in terms of how, going forward, I will acknowledge the history of mindfulness practices when I teach.

The DEP student leaders talked about the moments they felt dismissed. Julia also shared her perspective. Tension was high when we started but as we started to go deeper into our experiences, the space felt less constricted. There would be a final meeting the following week that Julia would lead with the cohort.

In the end, most of the students involved in this conflict graduated. This incident influenced the shape of the program for the next year. Staff updated their contract for incoming student leaders with parameters that more clearly defined professional guidelines and etiquettes for the kind of activism that this program promoted.

Inner Reflections by Student Affairs Staff

← This was helpful to some of the DEP student leaders who were not involved in the conflict but had heard bits and pieces of what was occurring in their space.

← I was scared to tell my part of the story. I didn't want to cause more frustration in the group by saying the wrong thing. I wanted to be seen as an ally to both the students and staff.

← Having the conversation was helpful in clarifying and painting the picture of what happened from multiple perspectives. It was a very intense experience for all of us, but it was necessary for us to be able to move forward.

← It was important to make it clear that while we are activists in this work, we also believe in inclusivity and empathy. Conversation and dialogue around complex issues was a central part of this program, and we wanted to ensure that peer leaders were committed to this process in the next academic year.

Takeaways: A SA Professional's Perspective

I'm not sure how much common ground the student leaders and the staff found by the end of it all. Some students still felt that they were not given what they wanted. It was clear to me that the experience also impacted the morale of my staff. This conflict was multi-layered and had many points of tension. It had to do with mental health, inconsistent or indirect communication, past conflicts, and the already volatile social justice climate on our campus. Students were highly emotional and on edge as they prepared for finals and the huge transition of college graduation. There were other dynamics in their lives that we didn't know at the time, including some family challenges at home. The staff members, who had been coping with an increasing workload over the course of the year, were physically and emotionally drained, while also managing personal responses to the social climate at the time. When looking at this more broadly, it is not surprising that this situation escalated the way it did. Still, I'm glad that we took the steps that we did. It felt right to do this as an educator. It was not easy, but it was necessary. I am now a lot more equipped to handle something like this in the future.

Analysis and Strategy

What we can learn from this situation?

Many complexities exist within this conflict. Burnout in both staff and students influence how the conflict unfolds and escalates. Julia's social and professional identities are challenged suddenly by student leaders who were also her employees since last year. She struggled to find the right action to take between serving as an educator and supervisor to the students. The racial essentialization of the South Asian individuals in the scenario highlighted another common challenge that many affinity groups face. Each of these individuals had different perspectives and emotional responses to the situation. Both the student volunteers and Sona felt that they were being pressured to align with DEP student leaders (one of whom is South Asian) based on their shared racial identity. Sona felt torn as a South Asian-American and a wellness educator whose goal is to make healing practices accessible to all. In the case of Julia, herself a second generation American, she felt that all the years of practice and dedication to the work of equity was not enough for her to be given dignity in her role.

What parts of this story feel familiar or similar to you in your experience as a helping professional?

Leadership Practice: Growth Mindset

As Student Affairs professionals, it is our job to remind students that they are at a university to grow and learn. And this reminder is beneficial to us as well. In fact, Student Affairs professionals are in a constant process of growth as we work with unique individuals and nuanced communities, learning how to best support their needs while navigating the institution. In times of conflict, operating from a **growth mindset** means that we are willing to allow and learn from uncomfortable emotions, our own or those of others. It means that we are respectfully curious to learn new ways of thinking and operating. It means that we can bear witness to critical feedback and reflect on if and how we can grow from it. We can see conflicts as opportunities for growth and action, instead of withdrawing and hyper focusing on what we didn't do "right". Mindsets are key in orienting our biology to stay open to moving through challenges with a willing presence.⁹⁴

In this scenario, Sona felt frustrated by the rationale of the students to not provide yoga mats at the retreat. Her initial response was of internal defense. She took time to calm down and reflect on her resistance. She knew her values were centered in supporting both Julia and the students in finding some resolution. In speaking at the large group DEP meeting, Sona set aside her initial dichotomous thinking, and courageously moved forward with opening up a space where all voices could be heard. She first shared her perspective of what happened as the wellness facilitator for the retreat opening, and then stepped back as a supervisor in order to give the students and Julia space to express. Through this, Sona claimed her personal views of the situation -- which was important for her own sense of belonging. And she set up a platform from which Julia and the students could share their recall of what transpired, thereby helping to restore both the dignity lost to Julia and the sense of belonging lost to the students.

When we see conflicts on campus arise, we can choose to trust that attitudes of humility, curiosity and compassion will move us through the unknown and bring us to the next step (Gupta, 2018). Applying growth mindset principles help us to not react to our biases and create a container of compassion for those involved.

⁹ For additional information on mindsets, see *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006) by Carol Dweck.

Our mindsets can support us in fostering authentic engagement and modeling healthy freedom of expression. When we create a brave space for the energy of conflict to play out, we can open up opportunities for people to be seen, heard and validated deeply in ways they may have never been before.

Growing Your Mindsets

Mindsets are powerful beliefs that we hold, both consciously and unconsciously, that cue our bodies to react to situations in specific ways. Someone with a fixed mindset of scarcity may not believe that they have the ability to handle a difficult situation when it arises. Behaviorally they may limit themselves from engaging with such situations, thereby reinforcing their belief.

Lessons Learned

- Honor your reactions and let them come up
- Adopt a growth mindset by exploring your reactions and fixed mindsets
- Have difficult and honest conversations
- Gain an understanding of all sides of the perspective
- Claim your own perspective in the process and share it

Mindsets are imprinted into our biology. We all carry both limiting and expansive beliefs. As we recognize the beliefs that operate within us as helping professionals, we can work to revise this programming and update our brain with new seeds of thought that prepare our biology for a new outcome.

The following is a list of Embodied Leadership Mindsets that are often supportive to helping professionals. These affirmation statements can be applied in a number of different ways. Here are some examples:

- State them out loud or internally in the morning to set your outlook for the day
- State them out loud or internally when you feel overwhelmed or anxious (like in a sudden conflict situation)
- Integrate them in your physical space: write them on your mirror (with a dry erase marker) or on a post-it note and stick it in your car to read daily.
- Integrate affirmations in spiritual practices of meditation or prayer

10 Mindsets to Support Embodied Leadership

1. I accept that every challenge is an opportunity to learn and grow.
2. I release my need to be perfect. I honor what I know and what I do not know.
3. I challenge myself to grow my perspectives through critical self-reflection and lifelong learning.
4. I trust my body's innate intelligence to guide me during uncertain moments.
5. I allow myself to make mistakes and trust the process. I am willing to be accountable to my areas for growth.
6. I release the need to "fix" or "know". I allow myself to witness others' stories and learn from their experience.
7. I stay present in my own lane. I will not compare my journey to other people's success.
8. I embrace my potential, even if it makes others feel uncomfortable. I choose to exist fully.
9. I can find support by sharing with others. I am not alone in my experience.
10. I deeply love and honor myself and my basic needs. I am enough.

With repetition over time, your biology begins to operate from the vantage point of these mindsets, and your personal power and leadership will grow.

Have a Team-Supported Plan for Conflict Engagement

In addition to doing the inner work of embodying a growth mindset when facing conflict, we can build a growth mindset practice into the infrastructure of the department. In this regard, a formalized conflict engagement plan for how to navigate interpersonal conflict can allow us to move forward responsibly and effectively with the principles of growth mindset guiding the process. These principles include leaning into challenge, persisting in the face of setback, valuing effort regardless of the outcome, and learning from critical feedback (Dweck, 2006). A conflict engagement plan is a valuable prerequisite to formal grievance procedures that are vetted through typical Human Resources mechanisms. Such a structure reinforces a culture of growth mindset practice and demonstrates a value for the success and well-being of the campus community it serves.

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Elements of a Conflict Engagement Plan

1. Come up with guidelines as a department for how you will address conflict when it comes up.¹⁰
 - Write out your guidelines for dispute resolution -- a built-in process for handling future conflicts so that you have a system in place when a conflict arises
 - Include those guidelines in your start of the year retreats and trainings
 - Check in with the team during the year to see if these guidelines are working
 - Update your guidelines yearly

For example:

 - Within your department, designate a person(s) who you can speak to when you are experiencing tension or a conflict.
 - Outline communication guidelines and ground rules to support authentic communication.
 - Determine your values around conflict within your department. What does conflict resolution in practice? (i.e. mediated meetings 1x1, small group, or large group)
2. If you work with students, bring conversations of conflict and accountability to those spaces before a conflict occurs
 - Talk about conflict. What is conflict? How does conflict make us feel?
 - What is accountability? What does it look like?
 - What are our guidelines for relating through conflict in our space?
 - Give out a document outlining accountability practices at the beginning of the year.
 - Encourage students to contribute to the accountability practices in their spaces.
 - Check in with the group to address issues and concerns on a consistent basis.
3. Create an infrastructure of practice where 1x1 or small group connection check-ins are routine.
 - This will serve to create an atmosphere of authenticity, reduce potential harm and bolster our ability to move through conflict together as a group when it does arise.
4. Carve out time to have important discussions when harm comes up.
 - Have one-on-one conversations to get a better understanding of a conflict as a facilitator.
 - Have group discussions to create bridges and understanding between people in conflict.

Conflict is a symptom of a problem or dynamic that has already been in existence. It may be a result of something that started long before you got there. That tension that gets passed down to the next group if it is not resolved. Having a plan for managing conflict helps bring ease to the groups currently in place and will set up future groups with a model for constructive engagement and transformation.

¹⁰ For additional information on creating inclusive spaces, see *Healing Justice Practice Spaces: A How-To Guide* by Autumn Brown & Maryse Mitchell-Brody.

Module Debrief Questions

The questions below will help you and your team to walk through the nuances of this case scenario and reflect on your personal and team sentiments for how to prepare for a similar conflict in your campus space. The questions will also invite you to reflect more deeply on the leadership strategies presented and how you and your team can integrate these into the context of your work. The questions are laid out in three categories. Feel free to focus on one category, draw questions from all of them, and create your own questions for reflection.

Examine the Scenario from the Outside

1. Who are the key players (individuals and/or groups) in this scenario?
2. What key complexities/challenges are present in this situation?
3. What power dynamics are present in this situation?
4. What are key players experiencing internally as the situation is unfolding? (i.e. what might be their nervous system response--see Module 1 for reference)
5. What basic needs - safety, belonging, dignity - are the key players looking to have met in this situation?

Examine the Scenario from Within

1. What is your internal reaction to this scenario (identify thoughts, emotions, sensations)?
2. Which key player(s) do you empathize most with in this situation? Least? Why?
3. How would aspects of your own social identity influence or be influenced by this situation?
4. What campus resources could support the needs of key players in this situation?
5. What campus resources might be harmful?

Leadership Practice Questions

1. What strategies for embodied leadership are you taking away from this case analysis that you can apply in your daily practice?
2. What mindsets do you hold about conflicts? Of these, which ones limit your leadership ability? Which ones enhance it?
3. How can you shift your fixed mindsets to ones of growth?
Example: I do not know what to do if a conflict comes up between my students. (Fixed) → I can take small steps to learn how to lead through conflict. (Growth)
4. What are some signs that you have observed in yourself when you are emotionally burning out? What self-care strategies can support you in these times?
5. How willing are you to communicate how you are feeling to your co-workers and supervisors? What would support you in this process?



MODULE 4: CONFERENCE PROTEST CASE SCENARIO

Leadership Practice: Trauma-Informed Approach

The names of all key players in this scenario have been changed to protect the privacy of the students and staff who experienced this moment.

This situation occurred in January 2020 at an Educational Conference for students, staff and administrators. The conference was held in a medium size room that held around 500 people. The conference stage was slightly raised from the floor, with attendees sitting only a few feet away. As the opening speaker, a high-level Campus official, was delivering her remarks, four students of color moved in front of the speaker's podium. Facing the audience at floor level they held up signs demanding justice.

CONTEXT:

Location: UC Campus

Date: January 2020

Time: 12:30pm

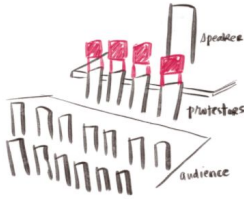
Setting: Educational Conference for Administrators, Staff, and Students

Social Climate: Graduate students had been on strike for months to demand financial aid that would help them mitigate food insecurity, homelessness and massive student debt. Tensions were rising as administrators have not taken steps to meet students' demands.

Such protests were making waves across the U.S. during this time. Students from across campuses rallied in solidarity, demanding policy changes, defunding of campus police, and greater financial aid to support student basic needs, like food and shelter.

The students who were exercising their first amendment right to protest took up the full length of the stage. Their signs were large and were at the same level as the podium. The speaker was hardly visible at times. Police were visibly present in the back of the room, prepared to intervene if needed.

The Campus official continued reciting her speech without pause, introducing the events of the day. After several minutes she concluded and walked off the stage. The conference organizer, who had been alerted ahead of time of a possible protest, stepped in and let the student protestors and audience know that: *"Protest is welcome so long as it doesn't unduly interfere with the ability of the speaker to deliver the message or the ability of the audience to be able to receive the speaker's message."* The protestors were directed to shift their protest to the sides of the stage where they stayed for a while. They were also provided a space outside of the conference room to convene if they chose.



Configuration of the Conflict

The following reflection is synthesized from the perspectives of two SA staff who were attending the conference together. Here they share more detail of what was witnessed during the conflict. Their internal reactions are also represented, revealing their processing of a tense situation in which their empathy and attention was pulled in multiple directions.

What Happened?

Protesters appeared in front of the stage as the Campus official began her speech. Because of the layout of the space and the proximity to the stage, it was impossible for the audience to ignore the protesters' serious facial expressions and the messages on their signs. One student's sign expressed that her father had been deported by ICE. Another protestor periodically snapped their poster -- which demanded defunding of Campus police -- creating a jarring sound that kept the audience engaged with their demands while the speaker continued.

As the protest ensued for several minutes, audience members started pulling out their phones to take pictures and video record the scene. The speaker carried on with her speech. She didn't shift her tone or acknowledge the protesters in any way. She eventually concluded and walked off the stage. There were whispers in the audience. The room felt tense.

The students continued the protest, holding up signs. They were exercising their right to free speech and were respectfully told to move to the sides of the stage. They were reminded of their rights, that they cannot disrupt or block the speaker, however that they have a right to their protest.

Throughout the day protesters exited and re-entered the conference room. They were committed to protesting when certain Campus officials were present in the room either speaking or in the audience. The conference organizer had to re-read the official statement of protest guidelines numerous times throughout the day.

Inner Reflections by Student Affairs Staff

- ← The energy in the room immediately felt constricted. It seemed that the entire audience was frozen, wondering what was going to happen. I was thinking: "Is this going to intensify? Is the speaker going to acknowledge the students? What are the organizers going to do?"
- ← I felt really bad for the student protestors. They are our students, the ones we are here to serve. I was shocked that the speaker carried on as if nothing was happening. It felt as if the protestors were invisible, that there was a wall. I was disheartened by her glaring choice to not recognize the people standing in front of her. The power dynamic here was a very clear too -- white female Campus official, and four students of color.
- ← Students sitting next to me were particularly concerned for the well-being and dignity of the protestors. One of the students got up and spoke to the conference organizer to ask if the protestors could have the opportunity to speak publicly.
- ← I was comforted by the respect and kindness that the conference organizer displayed while being firm about the boundaries of what's allowed under free speech rights.
- ← Even though the event carried on per schedule, whatever the following speakers were saying went in one ear and out the other. I couldn't focus on much at all. I was worried for the physical well-being of one student who held their arms and their sign high without breaking form during the entire protest.
- ← It was an emotionally tough day. I was sad to see that Campus officials reinforced practices of dismissal that students of color face in institutional spaces. It brought up my own emotional pain and past experiences of being dismissed as a woman of color.

Transforming Moments of Conflict Through Embodied Leadership

Some sessions were more relaxed because the protestors moved to the designated room outside the main one where they could convene and restore.

As the conference continued the protestors persisted. They began actively taunting the speakers and Campus officials in the audience by calling their names, asking for justice. Each time, the campus organizer reminded the protestors that they would have to leave if they disrupted the speakers again.

The situation escalated to where the campus organizer's statement was not enough to keep the protest "peaceful". Some members in the audience got involved. One White man exclaimed "I can't hear the speakers. We are here for a conference." The protester responded by telling that White audience member to check their privilege. The session awkwardly ended. The speakers and protestors left the room.

My attention was fixed with the protestors and how they were doing. I stepped out of one session and went to their protest space. I wanted to acknowledge them as a campus staff member and as a person of color who understands what they want. The students seemed energized around their efforts. They were planning what to do next and we acknowledged each other. I checked in on their well-being and they said they were ok. There was not much more for me to do there, but I felt better knowing that they were supported by each other and within the space of that room.

After such a long day, things had still been escalating. The approach of the conference organizer didn't seem to ease the protestors' growing intensity. This was disappointing too. I felt for the organizer and the people who had put so much work into preparing this event.

What Happened Later

The last session of the conference, in which Campus officials were to return together to the stage for one final panel discussion, ended up being canceled due to time constraints.

After the conference, there was a happy hour outside of the main hall. Conference attendees mingled and reflected on the day. Students and staff talked a lot about the protest, how that impacted their experience of the conference, and what their opinions were about the situation. There was some discussion about the content of the conference, but that seemed to be less important.

Inner Reflections by Student Affairs Staff

While it wasn't formally stated, I'm assuming that the decision was likely influenced by the tension between the protestors and the Campus officials.

Many of us had the initial reaction of "Why couldn't the Campus Officials just have ACKNOWLEDGED the protestors? That's all they had to do!" Others had adverse reactions toward the protestors "It was really too much. They ruined my experience of the conference."

Takeaways: A SA Professional's Perspective

I saw the student protestors talking to some Campus officials at the end of the day. They were able to move forward with getting a meeting with the persons they wanted to speak with. I was curious and asked my colleague what was happening. The role he plays on another campus is to holistically support student protests within the laws of free speech. He shared that he visited the protestors in their debriefspace. He asked them about their well-being. He asked them if they had a plan for what to do if they get arrested. They said no, they had not even thought that far ahead. My colleague proceeded to help them come up with a plan for how they could get what they wanted -- a meeting with Campus officials -- without being arrested. And if they did get arrested, to call him. He handed them his card. He did an amazing job of validating their need for belonging and promoting healthy next steps in support of their activism. There was no longer a need to disrupt the conference because they learned how to move forward in a new way. This is the role we play in the lives of our students. We are their bridge to and through the institution. I felt very proud.

Analysis and Strategy

What we can learn from this situation?

The tension of the conflict between the speaker and the protesters impacted everyone in the room, approximately 500 people, for the entire day. Everyone's nervous systems were on heightened alert. The conference attendees had to filter through a variety of stimuli -- the signs and sounds from the protesters, the intellectual material that the presenters were attempting to share, the internal anticipation of how this tension would play out. Many people experienced diminished capacity to learn from the conference itself because biologically it was not possible.

Much of the escalation could have been mitigated or avoided altogether if steps to intervene mindfully were taken at the beginning. The longer we delay, the more our primal safety system becomes activated and tensions rise. Since social justice conflicts are at their root about the fight for equity and resources and the freedom to exist as a people, we must include in our approach an *assumption of trauma* that marginalized groups carry in their bodies from their lived experiences. This assumption orients our attention to signs of trauma and invites us to behave in ways that are compassionate. It removes the need to justify and rationalize why someone may be responding the way they are. This assumption does not mean that we pity, coddle or enable, but instead we hold others as we come forward together, responsibly and with accountability.

In the case of one of the student protesters, the sign about their father signals that they are connected to the Undocumented community. The struggle to survive and get basic needs met through a system that was not constructed for them is a matter of life and death. The Undocumented community has experienced egregious acts of political, emotional and physical violence under the current administration. These protests are one of the few mechanisms of power that some of these community members can exert in a larger context to find belonging, safety and dignity. While we cannot expect ourselves to fix the history of abusive systems on vulnerable groups in a moment of conflict, we can at minimum create a tiny space of empathy and compassion in which to acknowledge and witness the emotion behind their expression. A trauma-informed approach can successfully de-escalate a conflict in seconds, and it can offer an experience of belonging to someone who was previously denied this need.

Leadership Practice: Trauma-Informed Approach

A **trauma-informed approach** is one in which we, as organizations and individuals, acknowledge the wide-spread impact of trauma and work to strategically (re)design processes, infrastructures and policies that minimize re-traumatization in our work and community spaces (SAMHSA, 2014). A trauma-informed approach includes an understanding and recognition of trauma and its deep impact at the individual, interpersonal, community and policy levels. It is a conscious investment in dismantling racism, sexism, and other social injustices that are embedded in institutional structures, practices and protocols. It includes leveraging the value of diverse cultural beliefs and practices. It actively promotes environments of healing and recovery, knowing that this will only serve to elevate the culture, outcomes and satisfaction of an organization and its people.

The following is a generalized list of trauma-informed practices an organization can adopt. Each practice contains numerous strategies and processes that can be implemented to reflect these values:

10 Practices of Trauma-Informed Care as an Organization

1. Set up a culture of care.
2. Give space for choice.
3. Create a safer space.
4. Build mutual support.
5. Use language of empowerment.
6. Practice inclusivity.
7. Honor time to process.
8. Acknowledge individual & collective trauma.
9. Practice consistent assessment.
10. Commit to accountability and flexibility.

Upholding a trauma-informed approach in your daily practice will prepare you to apply these principles in a heated moment of conflict. *In this scenario, what could have been done to bring down the tension in the space quickly, before it escalated to the point that it did?*

Address Moments of Disconnection with Authenticity

One way in which trauma and distress are aggravated is by avoiding emotional issues. In the American English language, we have clichés that reflect this all-too-common phenomenon when facing complex situations: “*Pay no attention to the elephant in the room...*” or “*Walking on eggshells...*”. An avoidance of emotional tension is a choice (whether conscious or unconscious) that is valuable in some instances and may backfire in others. It comes from not knowing how to deal with emotional disconnections. It can come from fatigue and burnout. It

can be used as a tool for power and control. In this case scenario, there were many factors known and unknown that contributed to the prolonged tension that built in the conference space.

Think of the last time you experienced the very moment of interpersonal disconnection -- maybe at a family dinner when someone offers a political opinion that differs significantly than that of others in the space. *What did that moment feel like in your body? What did that moment do to the space? To your subsequent interactions?*

We must use the cues that our body gives us (the muscle constriction, the sharpening of senses, the icy feeling in the room) to guide us in acknowledging what happened, without necessarily getting into the details of the story. It can take simply a moment. We can diffuse the tension with respectful humor, or by simply naming part of your felt experience. The moment we do this, our biological alarm bells become quieter, and we start to regain trust (Siegel, 2009).

In this scenario, the conference organizer addressed the tension by reading an official statement that acknowledged the protesters' right to demonstrate. These guidelines offered a containment for how the protest could look and what to expect. This helped the protesters understand their rights in the space and assured conference participants that they would still have the opportunity to hear the speakers. By the end of the day, however, the repeated statement was not enough to further resolution or connection between the protesters, speakers and audience.

Later we learn that a SA staff member stepped in to coach the student protesters on a plan of action that ultimately would benefit them and the conference attendees. He validated their needs for belonging through a demonstration of empathy plus practical procedural options that they could choose. This allowed the conference to continue to its end without further disruption from the protesters.

Interrupting the disconnection right from the start would have set a powerful tone for the rest of the day. For example, the moment the first Campus official stepped onto the stage, protesters lined up. Instead of continuing on in her speech as if nothing was going on, she might have responded with a validation statement followed by an action step:

"Let me pause my talk and acknowledge the students here protesting. I see you. And while we are not able to address your concerns immediately, my team here is available to help understand what you need. Would you like to do this?"

Regardless of how the protestors responded, the group would no longer be emotionally frozen in the original moment of disconnection.

It's normal for any human to freeze at the moment of conflict -- this is a function of our biological safety response. Perhaps that was the speaker's initial internal response. If one person on the team misses the opportunity to address the point of disconnection because they are themselves coping, someone else can step in and do it at a later moment. A support staff may say something direct, like:

"I noticed that earlier there was a moment of tension and unease in the room when the protesters came up and the presenter continued speaking. We acknowledge that moment and recognize the students here expressing

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their concerns. We are not able to hear them out in this space, but there is a separate room for gathering if people want to connect on these issues.”

Here the staff member acknowledges the past moment of disconnection and offers a space where people can go to process what is coming up. Recall that witnessing the protesters triggered the SA staff members' own emotional pain and histories, limiting her biological ability to focus on the conference at all. Such an option can support a return to the present moment and allow her to be present for the conference while embodying a feeling of greater safety and belonging. There would be many others who could also benefit for similar reasons.

A support staff may alternatively stop the Campus official in the middle of her speech and invite them to address the tension. They may say quietly to the speaker:

“Can we take a moment to acknowledge the protesters presence? I think it’s needed in order for us to go forward here.”

Regardless of how the speaker responds, we have taken an important step to advocate for re-creating safety in the entire room. That is a powerful act.

It is important to acknowledge that there may be power dynamics at play preventing a staff support person from approaching a high-level speaker. For example, a young professional, Black transgender woman may understandably feel intimidated to approach a White cisgender man who is several steps above her in the institutional hierarchy for fear of backlash. These are unfortunate realities that SA professionals must continue to navigate within the institution. In spite of this, we must continue to challenge ourselves in gentle ways to grow our confidence in bringing authenticity to campus spaces, and as a team continue to foster a trauma-informed approach so that all members of the campus feel empowered to exist fully.

The following are some practical tips for restoring connection and safety in the group during instances of conflict:

Recognize Signs of Disconnection in a Group

- Participants are restless/fidgeting in their body
- Participants seem tired or spaced out
- Participants seem troubled following a significant national/global event or crisis
- Facilitator feels that their words are not being received
- Sudden silence in the group
- Lack of energy in self and others
- Body language looks shut down, or sad
- Participants look uncomfortable in facial expressions

Statements Acknowledging the Disconnection

Following are some general statements/questions you can verbalize to acknowledge disconnection. Anchor your statement in your experience of that moment. If addressing a single person, state their name first (if you know it), to establish rapport and respect (Gupta, 2017, p. 3).

- I'm noticing that the group feels scattered. How are you all doing?
- (NAME), I noticed that your body language shifted after that discussion. What's going on?
- Are you ok? I'm sensing some frustration in your voice.
- Based on the look in your eyes, it seems like you are in another world today. Am I sensing that correctly?
- I'm feeling a little queasy in my stomach because it feels tense in the space. Is anyone else having a similar experience?

Mindful Inquiry Questions for Deeper Reflection

If you have the opportunity to go deeper with those involved, whether in that moment or at a later time, some mindful inquiry questions include:¹¹

- Was something said that is impacting you right now?
- What are you feeling right now?
- What angered you about what happened?
- What hurt you about what happened?
- What's familiar about what happened?
- How did that affect you?
- What do you need or want?
- What can we do to support you right now?

Be aware that not all situations warrant deeper reflection for a number of reasons. Maybe you are not the right facilitator for such a space. Or perhaps trust and safety have not been recovered enough to venture deeper. Honor and meet the individual/group where they are at. You will grow in your embodiment and application of these perspectives. Pay attention to the nuances of your interpersonal interactions. Listen for what people most need. Notice body language. Notice shifts in energy within yourself, in others and within the interaction. As we gather more information from the moment, we can use each piece of information as a point of reference for navigating the innate unpredictability of conflicts.

¹¹ Adapted from Stir Fry Seminars & Consulting: Innovative Tools for Diversity Training by Lee Mun Wah. For additional information, see <http://www.stirfryseminars.com/>.

Module Debrief Questions

The questions below will help you and your team to walk through the nuances of this case scenario and reflect on your personal and team sentiments for how to prepare for a similar conflict in your campus space. The questions will also invite you to reflect more deeply on the leadership strategies presented and how you and your team can integrate these into the context of your work. The questions are laid out in three categories. Feel free to focus on one category, draw questions from all of them, and create your own questions for reflection.

Examine the Scenario from the Outside

1. Who are the key players (individuals and/or groups) in this scenario?
2. What key complexities/challenges are present in this situation?
3. What power dynamics are present in this situation?
4. What are the key players experiencing internally as the situation is unfolding? (i.e. what might be their nervous system response--see Module 1 for reference)
5. What basic needs - safety, belonging, dignity - are the key players looking to have met in this situation?

Examine the Scenario from Within

1. What is your internal reaction to this scenario (identify thoughts, emotions, sensations)?
2. Which key player(s) do you empathize most with in this situation? Least? Why?
3. How would aspects of your own social identity influence or be influenced by this situation?
4. What campus resources could support the needs of key players in this situation?
5. What campus resources might be harmful?

Leadership Practice Questions

1. What strategies for embodied leadership are you taking away from this case analysis that you can apply in your daily practice?
2. In what ways do you practice trauma-informed approaches in your work currently? What areas can be improved?
3. Think of a conflict in which you felt unresolved. What authentic statements could you say in hindsight that would help transform the tension of that moment in order to find greater safety, belonging and dignity?
4. What environment do you want to create for the students you work with? How do you want them to feel? What steps can you take to create that environment?

5. As a SA professional, you can set an example to your students in the ways you incorporate self-care and self-reflection into your spaces. What practices can you bring to your students to support their wellbeing?

Conclusion

Embodied Leadership in Practice

The stories presented in this toolkit offer a window into the complexities of social justice conflict as they occur in our campus spaces and the impact they have on our well-being. There are many more layers within each of these stories that are deserving of unpacking, respectful exploration and reflection. These stories are valuable learning tools for becoming embodied leaders, teams and institutions who can transform moments of conflict while minimizing burnout.

Think of the stories that you have collected over time. How can your stories be told and retold for the benefit of learning for yourself and others?

"Spelling is a spell."

- Erykah Badu

In each of these stories, there was a tussle for power, for the right to exist and for the right to belong. Each story had an object around which the conflict was centered -- the MAGA hat, the yoga mat, the protest signs. Each object held the heaviness of history, emotional pain and pride for the initiates of the conflict. Symbols such as these, are no

different from the symbols of words. Words carry with them power, meaning and vibration. When they are released, they land and create a ripple effect.¹²

Free speech is more than an act of freedom. Speech is a biological act that can have system-wide, whole-body implications on the safety, belonging and dignity of ourselves and others. As we continue to engage the practice of upholding free speech policy on our campuses, let us stop pretending that words don't have impact. Let us lean into our inherent interdependence and uplift one another through conflict. Let us actively engage the other side of free speech practice -- creating safe and brave spaces in which to nurture human connection, navigate dissonance, and stimulate growth and thriving for all.

"You have the freedom of speech, but you don't have the freedom of consequences from that speech."

- W. Kamau Bell

Prioritize Self and Team Development





As SA professionals, educators and helpers who are part of institutional spaces, it is important to invest in the kind of mentorship, training and growth opportunities that allow you to enhance your emotional literacy, uplift your mental health, and dream for the future. This can look like working with a therapist or practicing

¹² The law of conservation of energy states that energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed: *"Energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another."* - Albert Einstein

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alternative/ancestral forms of healing outside of work. Within your institutional spaces, set aside a budget to dedicate to such work. Through research conducted for this Toolkit, it is clear that SA professionals desire training and education specifically in the areas of conflict management, self-care and positive mental health. There are many dedicated healing-centered educators offering this service to institutions today.

Recap of Strategies in this Toolkit

Module 1	Module 2
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Preparation Tips to Support Embodied Leadership 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindful Coaching • Team Preparation
Module 3	Module 4
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindsets to Support Embodied Leadership • Elements of a Conflict Engagement Plan 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 Practices of Trauma-Informed Care as an Organization • Addressing Moments of Disconnection

Each of the skills and strategies presented here open up realms of further nuance and exploration. Do not get overwhelmed and feel that you have to know everything in order to be a good leader. Start now by gently holding, in the center of your awareness, that uncertainty is a revelatory part of the human life cycle. And that we are already built with biological capacity for resilience and intuitive intelligence to handle uncertainty. *Relax.* Let these practices and perspectives seep into the fabric of all of your relationships, especially the one with yourself. The rest will come. As we prepare, adapt and mobilize for the long haul, may we continue to find daily joy and inspiration to help us willingly move bravely through the unknown.

Additional Resources

This resource list will help support you in deepening your understanding of conflict, embodied leadership, and self-care.

- *Breakaway Learners: Strategies for Post-Secondary Success with At-Risk Students* (2017) by Karen Gross.
- *Conflict Across Cultures: A Unique Experience of Bridging Differences* (2006) by Michelle LeBaron and Venashri Pillay.
- *Embodied Leadership: The Somatic Approach to Developing Your Leadership* (2013) by Pete Hamill.
- *Leadership Embodiment: How the Way We Sit and Stand Can Change the Way We Think and Speak* (2013) by Wendy Palmer and Janet Crawford.
- *Leading With Emotional Courage: How to Have Hard Conversations, Create Accountability, And Inspire Action On Your Most Important Work* (2018) by Peter Bregman.
- *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006) by Carol Dweck.
- “SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach” (2014) by SAMHSA.
- *The A-to-Z Self-Care Handbook for Social Workers and Other Helping Professionals* (2016) by Erlene Grise-Owens, Justin “Jay” Miller, and Mindy Eaves.
- *The Choreography of Resolution: Conflict, Movement, and Neuroscience* (2013) by Michelle LeBaron, Carrie MacLeod, and Andrew Floyer Acland.
- *The Conflict Paradox: Seven Dilemmas at the Core of Disputes* (2015) by Bernard S. Mayer.
- “The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement” (2018) by Shawn Ginwright.
- *The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness* (2019) by Rhonda V. Magee.
- *The Mindful Guide to Conflict Resolution: How to Thoughtfully Handle Difficult Situations, Conversations, and Personalities* (2019) by Rosalie Puiman.
- *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (2019) by Staci K. Haines.
- *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others* (2007) by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk.

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