

***Executive Summary:***

**Building Conflict Resilience Through *Theatre for the Living*: Exploring UBC Experiences of Engage 'Conflict Theatre' as a Workplace Learning Strategy**

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In support of UBC's strategic objectives around developing an inclusive workplace, the Organizational Development and Learning unit of the Human Resources department created Building Conflict Resilience Through *Theatre for the Living*: Exploring UBC Experiences of Engage 'Conflict Theatre' as a Workplace Learning Strategy (henceforth, Building Conflict Resilience) in 2011. This is an interactive, forum theatre project situated within the Managing@UBC program and inspired by the work of Vancouver-based forum theatre director David Diamond. Building Conflict Resilience serves as recognition of and an effort to engage the inevitability of interpersonal workplace conflict within a diverse, intercultural context. By drawing on the experiences and engagement of members of the many communities that constitute the larger UBC community, interactive theatre promotes direct involvement from varied constituents and, in doing so, aims to build capacities and foster skill sets that strengthen people's abilities to constructively address conflict. Within the context of workplace development and learning initiatives, the experience of forum theatre strives to be empowering for both individuals and communities, and, as a result, contributes to social sustainability as communities become equipped to address difficulties as they arise. It is held by the Building Conflict Resilience team that the ability to effectively work through challenges promotes ingenuity when a multitude of voices has the space to come together and generate and play with different strategies to address emergent issues that take into consideration the specific and contextual elements shaping a community.

Thus far, the Building Conflict Resilience project has engaged two theatre troupes consisting of UBC faculty, staff, and students who co-constructed scripts that address conflicts experienced within the UBC workplace. These scripts were performed to a UBC audience where spectators were invited to be spect-actors through physically engaging with the materials by joining the stage and playing out different ways to address the rising tensions. The explicit aim of this effort is to promote organizational development and learning around the skills and capacities necessary to engage conflict constructively. Based on feedback from these troupes, this initiative is well received, and participants assert it has had a positive impact on their abilities to meaningfully engage conflict. In order to support these claims within the literature, through the 2015 Summer Sustainability Scholar Program, two literature reviews have been conducted to better situate the work of the Building Conflict Resilience project within other organizational development and learning efforts to address conflict and to understand how and why forum theatre can be a valuable method to develop and support socially sustainable relationships.

The two literature reviews conducted were designed to understand 1. the historical framing of workplace conflicts and the practices used to address them and 2. the contemporary landscape of organizational philosophies and approaches around workplace conflict. In the first literature review, the purpose was to gain a broad, historical perspective on conflict in the workplace, whereas the second literature review was more explicit on understanding organizational learning and development initiatives in relation to

workplace conflict. While the literature reviews demonstrated there have been several significant shifts, common across all approaches is the notion that conflict is inevitable. Yet, historically there have been efforts to resolve conflict quickly while transforming the resolution into more productivity and efficiency for organizational operations. In contrast, more recent approaches to workplace conflict are beginning to focus on conflict as a process that has potential to lead to generative insights for individuals and groups as interdependent entities. These distinctions, while not necessarily fixed and absolute, demonstrate a shift in values that results in concretely different organizational behaviours in addressing workplace conflict.

Emerging from the contemporary context is an increased use of arts-based methods for organizational development and learning. Theatre is one strand of this type of engagement. The literature on theatre in organizations discusses a spectrum of approaches from management directed to participatory involvement across all levels of employment. While there is a critique of strictly management influenced theatre projects as cloaked behavioural manipulation for the benefit of the organization, empowering benefits have been highlighted when employees across levels are able to participate in all aspects of a theatre project. These latter uses of theatre promote the development of capacities and skills to directly and constructively work with conflicts they experience.

Several insights about the broader context and value of the Building Conflict Resilience project at UBC's Human Resources department have come to light through the literature reviews. First, the philosophical approach taken through this project understands conflict as a process with potential worth engaging from multiple perspectives. This framing situates Building Conflict Resilience within a contemporary turn in workplace conflict rather than a continuation of a model that aims to resolve conflict efficiently and increase productivity for the organization. Second, within this turn, and in particular the use of forum theatre as an arts-based method, Building Conflict Resilience engages participants meaningfully throughout every aspect of a theatre production from scripting to performing. Based on the extensive involvement of participants from content to execution of tasks, this project addresses critiques of theatre used in organizations as a form of behavioural manipulation, and it has the potential to more fully embody the empowering capacity and skill building potential of this method of organizational learning.

This research indicates that conflict engagement supports the development of social sustainability through fostering skill sets and capacity building that enables resistance in difficult situations. Further, the effectiveness of a project like Building Conflict Resilience can be attributed to the opportunity for participants from diverse positionalities to actually embody and practice working through difficult situations. In this sense, organizations can work towards social sustainability by creating the space for people to practice and explore different kinds of relationships in order to identify what works best for particular communities.