



# We Are Oak Trees in a Storm

Exploring the concept of generative conflict and the impact of grief and trauma in the escalation of conflict in our school crisis renewal leadership

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Guidance and best practice recommendations for using the resources developed and distributed by *The Radicle Root Collective* and *The School Crisis Recovery and Renewal project*, funded by SAMHSA.





# Introduction

**Crisis is rupture, creates rupture, and thrives off of rupture. Leading school communities requires us to sit knowing how to navigate and move with harm, apology, and conflict, a core principle of renewal work.**

An oak tree's architecture is a powerful metaphor for us as leaders: its roots are interconnected underground, and its branches are furled to navigate high winds. In [Using Live Oak Trees as a Blueprint for Surviving Hurricanes | Think Like a Tree](#), the metaphor comes even more alive: how might we embrace being oak trees in the storm that is rupture, conflict, hurt, and bruise during and after crises?

Oak trees navigate the impact of conflict that could potentially be destructive (high winds, heavy rainfall, and storm flooding) by standing together, surviving, and reemerging generatively.

Our “We Are Oak Trees in a Storm” generative conflict toolkit is composed of three distinct resources to support critical reflection for facilitators and teams to make meaning of their current culture and the shifts they might want to make to better navigate conflict:

- 1. Cultivating Conflict Culture After a Crisis - 8 Individual and Collective Practices for Moving Conflict into a Generative Pathway**
- 2. Conflict Culture for School Teams: Facilitator Questions and Considerations for the Reflection Tool**
- 3. Conflict Culture for School Teams: Reflection Tool**

All materials here foster our generative conflict skills:

- **Inner work:** Exploring our relationship with conflict through the lens of our racial and other intersectional identities.
- **Outer work:** Examining the current culture of conflict in your work group and/or team.
- **Intra work:** providing tangible strategies that can be used in the moment when conflict arises and that ultimately can be used to shift the team/group's conflict culture into one that is generative.

We hope these tools will be a valuable asset to your school communities as you navigate conflicts that often come in the aftermath of crises.



## Who designed this work, and why?

**School Crisis Recovery & Renewal Project (SCRR)** is grounded in the belief that school crisis is not just a moment of disruption - it is a profound rupture that calls our assumptions into question, surfaces what has gone unspoken, and invites transformation. In the wake of crises, communities must do more than just respond; they must also recover and renew. Renewal is where meaning-making, healing, and reimagining take root.

At SCRR, we recognize that trauma interrupts the coherent narratives that help us make sense of ourselves and the world. Our role as crisis leaders, educators, and community members is to rebuild those narratives through storytelling, reflection, and collective care.

In the spirit of this work, a partnership with **Radicle Root Collective (RRC)** was formed - a visionary team of facilitators, coaches, and data experts committed to organizational healing and transformation. RRC brings deep wisdom and a values-driven approach centered on integrity, community, adaptability, mutual accountability, courage, humility, and abundance.

These guiding principles shape how they work alongside partners to foster environments of equity, justice, and repair. They hold a powerful belief that conflict, when held with intention, can be a generative force for growth, especially when communities are navigating racialized trauma and grief.

This shared commitment to transformation led to our collaboration on **“Oak Trees in the Storm,”** collaborative programming in 2022-2023.

Designed on the premise that **conflict is a natural and inevitable part of collective work**, we invited SCRR community members to explore how rupture shows up in their school communities and how to navigate harm, apology, and repair in its wake. Through deep learning, inquiry, embodiment practices, and both affinity-based and cross-racial dialogues, participants were guided through personal and professional growth grounded in generative conflict.

**Together, we co-developed resources to support the intersection of crisis and conflict, adopting a renewal-driven lens of generative conflict, where rupture meets the opportunity for purposeful and lasting repair, creativity, and opportunity.** These resources encourage users to examine their relationships to conflict, informed by identity and lived experience, and to assess how their teams or organizations collectively navigate tension and repair.

# How might these tools be used?

Each resource is designed to support the cultivation of a healthy conflict culture among school teams, especially in the face of crises. ***This is not a process to engage in during the response or recovery phase of moving through a crisis, but a strategy for deeper reflection and commitments we might make during renewal or even readiness*** (for more on the 4 R's of Crisis, [check out these modules](#)).

These tools can be used by your teams to:

## **Evaluate your conflict culture and make strategic shifts. This might look like...**

- Build a shared language around conflict, harm, and repair
- Shift from conflict avoidance or control toward collaborative, generative conflict
- Promote a healing-centered, trauma-informed culture
- Center racial equity and power awareness in team dynamics and decisions

## **Promote trust-building and radical teaming practices. This might look like...**

- Establish consistent practices and protocols for handling conflict and harm
- Develop team capacity for: repair conversations, apology, and accountability, addressing harm without punitive responses
- Introduce and normalize reflection time after tension or rupture
- Create opportunities for vulnerability and empathy through storytelling and reflection
- Strengthen psychological safety and mutual respect
- Foster co-responsibility: shifting conflict from individual blame to collective repair

## **Enhance current conversations on equity and trauma-informed approaches in your school community. This might look like...**

- Interrupt dominant culture norms (e.g., urgency, perfectionism, control)
- Support ongoing learning and feedback loops, not just one-time interventions
- Embed a generative conflict framework into broader organizational development, restorative practices, or equity work

## **Address burnout and team culture challenges. This might look like...**

- Improve collaboration and decision-making under stress or disagreement
- Reduce burnout and resentment stemming from unresolved conflict
- Support leadership development, especially for those in positions of power, to practice humility and deep listening
- Prepare teams to navigate crises with more skill and resilience



# Sequencing the process

As with any critical change work, scaffolding the learning and habits is vital for sustainable practice shifts. This work is not something to just dive into or onboard in a single staff meeting, but a reframing of culture and the collective way of being together that extends beyond conflict.

As a facilitator, you must engage in the process yourself before leading with teams.

The sequence outlined below for implementation matters; **it is important to properly orient yourself and your team to the concepts and themes for the more complex and vulnerable conversations to be meaningful and feel more psychologically safe.**

## **1 INITIATE: Cultivating Conflict Culture After a Crisis - 8 Individual and Collective Practices for Moving Conflict into a Generative Pathway**

A framework for school leaders to build a "generative conflict culture" in the aftermath of a crisis, these practices emphasize the importance of both individual and collective healing practices to transform conflict into an opportunity for growth.

Initiating the work here is purposeful because it sets up why conflict matters in healing work. It prepares you as the facilitator (and the individuals being facilitated) to think about your relationship to conflict, power, and identity before engaging in the work, and also attends to the emotional elements that empower people to prepare for reflection and collaborative conversations in a trauma-informed way.

The document introduces "right practices" such as acknowledging tension, shifting pace, holding emotions, and addressing power dynamics, that support recovery and renewal. It also incorporates reflection questions, trauma-informed and racial equity lenses, and a curated list of additional resources.

## **2 INCUBATE: Conflict Culture for School Teams: Facilitator Questions and Considerations for the Reflection Tool**

This resource aims to help anyone facilitating conflict work on their teams with preparation pointers (how to build trust, evaluate past conflict responses, and co-create more inclusive and effective conflict-handling strategies) by:

- Supporting facilitators in preparing and conducting reflective sessions with school teams about their conflict culture.
- Outlining essential setup considerations, including participant representation, facilitation dynamics, norms, timing, accessibility, and expected outcomes.
- Proposing a detailed facilitation process using scoring and discussion prompts to help teams assess their conflict culture.



### **3 INQUIRE: Conflict Culture for School Teams: Reflection Tool**

This tool distills individual and collective practices for navigating conflict in a healthy, constructive way, inviting us to ask questions, such as *Where are we in our conflict culture, and where do we want to go? How might we get there?*

It breaks down key actions like acknowledging tension, shifting pace, holding strong emotions, and addressing power dynamics.

On a collective level, it emphasizes shared responsibility, addressing harm, giving meaningful apologies, and learning from conflict.

The document is essentially a practical summary of the principles introduced in the broader conflict culture materials and can support teams in identifying concrete, actionable steps to shift their conflict culture.



### **4 INTEGRATE: Revisit Cultivating Conflict Culture After a Crisis - 8 Individual and Collective Practices for Moving Conflict into a Generative Pathway**

In strategically reviewing this resource after inquiry, new insights and connections can emerge. A revisiting of this resource:

- Bridges theory and practice, bringing back key concepts from the beginning to the top of the team's mind
- Explains the why and what behind the practices and encourages reflection on identity and power, which is helpful after seeing the results of the assessment tool
- Offers a perspective to inform how teams interpret and act on what they've learned about themselves





**INFORM: Continue to revisit these three resources and ask big, reflective questions as part of your ongoing strategy toward healing-centered, generative conflict skills that foster renewal.**

### **Values Alignment**

- Are we still living in what we said we value? How might we recommit or realign where needed?
- In what ways have our stated conflict values been embodied—or bypassed—in our recent decision-making, collaboration, or crises?
- What feels aligned right now? What feels performative or disconnected?
- What agreements have held us through hard moments—and which ones need to be reimagined or released?

### **New Data**

- What are we noticing *now* that we did not see before?
- Where has conflict emerged recently, and what did it reveal about our current culture?
- What dynamics or defaults surfaced in the “in-between” moments, when conflict was low-stakes or unnamed?
- How have power, identity, and emotion shaped the way we’ve moved through rupture or silence?

### **Patterns**

- What patterns have returned—and what have we disrupted?
- When tension arises, what has become our new default response—and is that a win?
- Where is our generative conflict culture thriving, and what might we learn from those successful conflicts?
- What old habits are sneaking back in under the surface (e.g., silence, avoidance, control over)?

### **Reimagining Ourselves: Generating a New Way**

- What is calling us forward now?
- If we saw the past few months as a “midpoint” rather than a conclusion, what would the next chapter need to include?
- What collective practices must we renew, evolve, or invent to stay aligned with our vision?
- What future conflicts are we prepared for now that we weren’t before—and what are we still not ready to hold?



# Closing

The resources offered here are not quick fixes or prescriptive answers, but doorways into deeper inquiry and possibility. When used with intention, they can support teams in transforming rupture into renewal and tension into trust.

As you engage with this body of work, remember that cultivating a generative culture is not a linear path, Instead, it is cyclical, relational, and often uncomfortable. It requires courage to be honest, humility to listen, and commitment to repair.

**Conflict is an invitation to deepen our connective relationships that are the foundation for renewal leadership. Like oak trees in a storm, we are not stronger by resisting the winds of conflict; strength comes from bending with wisdom and rooting ourselves in each other's dignity and belonging.**

