

Healing Our Cuts

Anthony J Nocella II

Over the last 16 years, I have learned a lot from my involvement in a number of intense social movement-based conflicts and from the field of conflict studies. Most of my knowledge is experience based rather than what I have read or been trained to believe. In this article, I share some of my thoughts on social movement conflicts and some methods of managing and transforming them through constructive processes.

All social movements have internal tensions, some more explicit and more entrenched than others. Quickly reading social movement history we notice many very hostile and destructive conflicts. These conflicts are often based on ideology, due to personal relations gone bad, or established strategically by paid government and corporate provocateurs. Where tensions encourage open debate and constructive dialogue, these interventions can be extremely constructive and empowering for the movement in question. However, if simmering tensions are left unchecked and unresolved these may well lead to openly destructive conflicts that not only severely compromise the impact and effective nature of the movement, but may ultimately lead to the implosion and terminal demise of the movement itself.

The animal advocacy, environmental, and anarchist movements are, of course, no stranger to divisions and critical debate around a wide range of issues from underground activism versus working within government structures to short-term goals versus longer term goals, to the concept and nature of direct action and, of course, many more. Given the desire for strategies, tactics and processes that work to harness constructive and collaborative discussion and outcomes, this short piece is based on two goals.

First, this article considers the many factors and causes of destructive behavior and, second, it highlights ways to actively transform conflict and reunite the animal advocacy movement into a solid, unified front. This does not mean that we all have to

conduct or condone the same tactics or engage in the same strategies. We need strategies and tactics across the spectrum of the movement to ensure that its presence and impact will make maximum and long-lasting positive change in the global community.

Causes of Conflict

- The uniquely constructed (and partial) system of ethics and values, beliefs, opinions, perceptions, experiences, and interests of every activist can be the primary cause of division between other activists within the same movements.
- The identity and social context of the activist (such as being transgender, a person with disabilities, non-citizen, parent, poor, or a person of color) are factors that must be considered as potential sources of conflicts because of being marginalized, silenced, and/or repressed.
- The cultural and sub-cultural processes for activists handling of conflict may cause divisions when dealing with conflicts. For example, an activist from an Italian family might be raised to handle conflict differently than an activist from a Native American family.
- The various relationships outside the movement, such as relationships with family and friends, romantic relationships, and organizational membership, are factors that may cause conflict.
- The comparative lack of education or experience on a particularly important topic can contribute to conflicts. If those involved are incapable or unwilling to understand, listen, or enter into a committed constructive dialogue — that which allows not only for understanding the attitudes and beliefs of other activists, but their own positionality — this factor is difficult to overcome.
- The emotional state or well being of an activist may cause conflict within a social movement. This state might be altered or influenced to the detriment of the activist's capacity to engage with those around them because of alcohol, drugs,

medication (or lack of it), sleep deprivation, or other external factors such as work or relationships.

Transforming Conflict

Within a social movement conflict must be transformed into positive and constructive outcomes wherever possible. Activists should strive to:

- Seek opportunities to engage openly, empathetic ally and respectfully with other activists. This means entering into a committed dialogue that emphasizes the willingness to listen and understand.
- Respect individual experiences due to unique identities of race, gender, economic status, sexuality, ability, culture, or spirituality.
- Recognize that activists are not perfect (or impartial) due to being raised within systems of domination that promote competition, retribution, sexism, homophobia, ableism, ageism, nationalism, classism.
- Acknowledge that corporations, security, and law enforcement infiltrate organizations and movements, in order to divide and destroy them.
- Refrain from “hanging the laundry” of the movement out for the broader public and law enforcement to see and exploit. This means not posting negative, defamatory and insulting information about those within the movement on websites, blogs, list serves, or social networking sites.
- Handle communication in person, whenever possible, rather than on the phone or via e-mail. Not only does this minimize the risk of communication being limited or tapped, it also prevents information being misread, misinterpreted, or taken out of context.
- Avoid personal debates that drain energy and resources which should be directed towards shared goals.

- Avoid talking about others behind their back when not in the position to defend or justify their point.
- Avoid supporting any scenario where someone is punished or excluded. Only support that which leads to mutually beneficial opportunity.
- Take a moment to step back and reflect rather than react negatively when faced with a provocation or challenge.
- Respect the diversity of opinions, tactics, and strategies within social movements.
- Encourage debates and arguments that can be resolved in a constructive and mutually acceptable manner.

These accessible, inclusive and hopefully useful points can help minimize the opportunities for divisive and destructive conflicts. In the long term, negative conflicts may destroy and divide the movement to such an extent that it could lose some, if not all potency and dynamism, and ultimately cause it to fall far short of achieving the ultimate goal of total liberation for humans, other animals and the Earth. It is up to each of us to be the best we can in our work for liberation. Having awareness of the causes of conflict, and how to transform them, such as committing to transform debates and arguments in a constructive and inclusive manner, waters the soil on which a social movement grows and encourages others to join in, thereby developing and strengthening the movement.