

## CONFLICT WAR GAMES:

how groups who organize together can practice conflict

- do you find that groups you organize with have a hard time building trust?
- do you find that people in your group talk about others behind their back?
- do you have legit criticisms of others in your group but don't know how to bring them up?
- is conflict SCARY??!!??!!

Then this zine is for you.



[foothillfire.noblogs.org](http://foothillfire.noblogs.org)

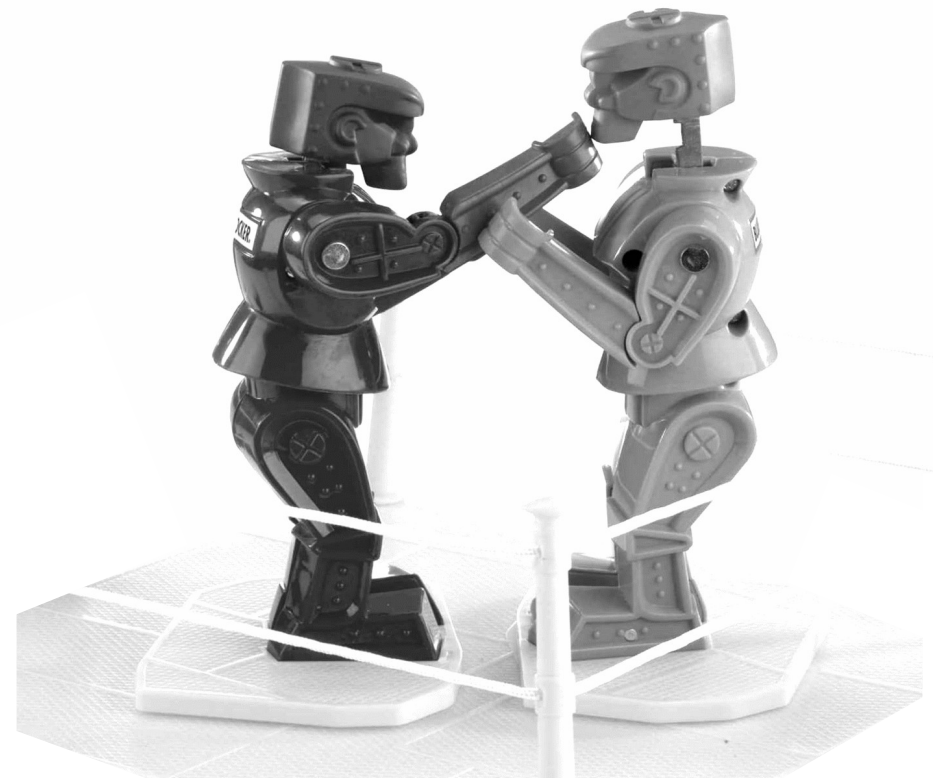
Ⓐ January 2025, reproduce as desired.

Foothill Fire is an organization of anarchists and communists fighting for a stateless, classless society. They want to burn our world, but fire travels up, and we're coming for the top – *that's what's up!*

foothill fire presents

## CONFLICT WAR GAMES:

how groups who organize together  
can practice conflict



This zine was created from an exercise that we have practiced in our group, with the understanding that:

- Most people are not used to healthy conflict
- Conflict can be very scary/confusing, and is often avoided at all costs
- Conflict is necessary and useful for growing relationships and our movement

We have also used this rule:

**“If you’ve talked about the person with two other people, it’s time to talk directly to the person.”**

Conflict springs from the simple fact that we have differences--of ideas, of habits, of lifestyles, of time demands, of identity, of upbringing. Criticism (in this zine) is the sincere bringing up of those differences to others IN THE MOVEMENT who you would like to continue working with. It is intended to be a way for the movement as a whole to become stronger, more resilient when things change, and ultimately more accepting of our differences through our mutual understanding.

Criticism/Conflict should be brought to and by people who are:

- Having a misunderstanding, difference, and/or emotions like anger, sadness, frustration
- Wish to keep working together or staying in each other’s orbits
- Have “good faith” with each other--that is, believe each other to be trustworthy

If someone brings criticism to you, you can feel *grateful* that they care about keeping your relationship, and the movement, strong.

A lot of the following information is synthesized from *Constructive criticism: a handbook* by Vicki Legion.

“The most important part of giving criticism happens before you ever open your mouth. It involves checking your head by asking yourself this question: Is my intention to protect and educate this person or is my intention to punish and coerce?...I have to be able to deliver a clear, convincing argument as to why and how I think the change will benefit the person and the movement.”

**Situation 4:** Max said that they would have supplies for an action ready; when the time for the action came they didn’t have them, and the action suffered

*Person Bringing Criticism*

**Concrete:** “She said, “\_\_\_\_\_” or “She did “\_\_\_\_\_”

**Feelings:** “I feel (emotion word) because I think (subjective understanding of the event)”

**Wants:** Who do you want to do something? What do you want the person to do or say concretely? State what you do want rather than what you don’t want.

**Purpose:** Why will this changed action help you/the group/the movement?

*Person Responding to Criticism*

**Paraphrase:** Rephrase the situation in your own words

**Empathize:** Imagine why someone would be upset in this situation and reflect how you would feel if it was happening to you

**Situation 5:** Elvin was hanging out with people not in the group and told them some sensitive information about another member of the group

*Person Bringing Criticism*

**Concrete:** “She said, “\_\_\_\_\_” or “She did “\_\_\_\_\_”

**Feelings:** “I feel (emotion word) because I think (subjective understanding of the event)”

**Wants:** Who do you want to do something? What do you want the person to do or say concretely? State what you do want rather than what you don’t want.

**Purpose:** Why will this changed action help you/the group/the movement?

*Person Responding to Criticism*

**Paraphrase:** Rephrase the situation in your own words

**Empathize:** Imagine why someone would be upset in this situation and reflect how you would feel if it was happening to you

**Situation 6:** Laleh is withdrawing more and more from the group--not speaking in the meetings or chats, not coming to events, but when asked about it she says everything is fine

**Situation 2:** Marciana only takes on tasks when the rest of the group asks her to, and when they do she says “Wow, I don’t know, I’m really busy (sigh). I guess if it has to be done I don’t have any choice.”

#### *Person Bringing Criticism*

**Concrete:** “She said, “\_\_\_\_\_” or “She did “\_\_\_\_\_”

**Feelings:** “I feel (emotion word) because I think (subjective understanding of the event)”

**Wants:** Who do you want to do something? What do you want the person to do or say concretely? State what you do want rather than what you don’t want.

**Purpose:** Why will this changed action help you/the group/the movement?

#### *Person Responding to Criticism*

**Paraphrase:** Rephrase the situation in your own words

**Empathize:** Imagine why someone would be upset in this situation and reflect how you would feel if it was happening to you

**Situation 3:** Devon talks for long chunks of meetings, often without a clear point, often explaining things people already know

#### *Person Bringing Criticism*

**Concrete:** “She said, “\_\_\_\_\_” or “She did “\_\_\_\_\_”

**Feelings:** “I feel (emotion word) because I think (subjective understanding of the event)”

**Wants:** Who do you want to do something? What do you want the person to do or say concretely? State what you do want rather than what you don’t want.

**Purpose:** Why will this changed action help you/the group/the movement?

#### *Person Responding to Criticism*

**Paraphrase:** Rephrase the situation in your own words

**Empathize:** Imagine why someone would be upset in this situation and reflect how you would feel if it was happening to you

We do not expect anyone to be perfect in this process, either at giving or receiving criticism. Emotional reactions can be expected. It is okay to ask for time to reflect or process before responding to criticism.

A good practice might be setting up a structure in your group for regular conflict/criticism sessions (with the option to take time to think about and respond in a timely manner).

## **HOW TO GIVE CRITICISM:**

**-Be Concrete.** An observation about someone is a concrete description of something they said or did, rather than an abstract idea about what they are, feel, or think.

**-Describe Feelings.** Get a handle on your feelings so they don’t go outside of your consciousness, “underground,” where they could burst out in destructive ways. Let the other person know where you’re at in a way that makes you humanly accessible to them without putting your feelings in command.

**-State Wants.** Say directly who you want to do something, rather than leaving it vague. Specify concretely what you want the other person to do and say, rather than what you want them to be or feel. Stress what you do want, rather than just what you don’t want.

**-Explain the Purpose.** Instead of punishment or bribery, this point focuses on education based on the dialectical conception that the process of change begins primarily with internal commitment. It relies on educating others about the purpose of the desired change.

## **HOW TO RECEIVE CRITICISM:**

**-Paraphrase.** Rephrase the criticism to make sure you’re understanding what’s being said. Unless the criticism is accurately received and understood, the communication is not complete. There’s a difference between paraphrasing and agreeing.

**-Empathize.** Empathizing is a way to receive vague or one-sided criticism as a statement of the criticizer’s observations, feelings, wants and purpose without counter-attacking defensively, and without laying down

## DEFENSIVENESS & MISCOMMUNICATION

A lot of defensiveness originates not in resistance to the content of the criticism, but rather in resistance to what the receiver hears as the *intent* behind the criticism.

When someone believes that a criticism is really a personal attack, or a demand, threat or guilt-trip, defensiveness comes to the fore. On the other hand, some defensiveness is rooted not in misinterpretation, but rather in self-interest. If I'm afraid I have something to lose by changing, I may fall into individualistic self-protection rather than wanting to really understand what is best for the whole. This kind of defensiveness can only be overcome through political education, coming to see the reasons for guarding the interests of the collective above my own individual comfort.

When someone responds with defensiveness it can be helpful to:

1. ask the person to paraphrase what they heard you say
2. ask the person to tell you how you might express your position in a way that's less likely to provoke a defensive reaction next time

From our earliest days, we have been subjected to name-calling and labeling. This kind of "criticism" really is dangerous; it's used as a weapon against us. It's no wonder, then, that we come to expect each other to categorize and call names, and often hear personal attacks even when they aren't intended.

Often people will hear wants as demands and bitterly resent what they hear as an **order**. So, in reacting against authoritarian social relations, we may begin to confuse any kind of assertiveness or leadership with domination by an oppressor.

A third common misinterpretation comes when people hear each other's wants as guilt-trips or obligations.

## GROUP EXERCISE

- 1) Get into small groups (2-3 people)
- 2) Each group reads through a situation
- 3) Take on roles, observers can flag if someone is not following the steps
- 4) Act out the criticism using the steps below
- 5) Come back together and share experience as a group

These exercises do not include the necessary back and forth that is going to come with criticism, or the longer process of reconciliation that may be involved. Criticism/conflict likely goes both ways, is messier than the examples given, and can take up a lot of energy.

**Situation 1:** Craig is often late to meetings and needs to be caught up, taking time away from the meeting continuing and derailing conversation/momentum

*Person Bringing Criticism*

**Concrete:** "She said, "\_\_\_\_\_" or "She did "\_\_\_\_\_"

**Feelings:** "I feel (emotion word) because I think (subjective understanding of the event)"

**Wants:** Who do you want to do something? What do you want the person to do or say concretely? State what you do want rather than what you don't want.

**Purpose:** Why will this changed action help you/the group/the movement?

*Person Responding to Criticism*

**Paraphrase:** Rephrase the situation in your own words

**Empathize:** Imagine why someone would be upset in this situation and reflect how you would feel if it was happening to you