



# Cultural Clashpoints.

NEUTRALIZING THE BARRIERS TO PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT

**playbook**  
game changer



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## NEUTRALIZING THE BARRIERS TO PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT

The most daunting challenges in our communities and companies can be solved when diverse groups from engaged sectors collaborate and aim their collective energy and expertise at those challenges. The same is true when an organization convenes all of the right stakeholders to solve a persistent business problem. Meaningful change happens when those teams come together to share insights about the problem and then apply their combined strengths and influence to improve or innovate across the system.

But most groups struggle with the natural tension that is created when the norms and beliefs of the diverse cultures they represent collide. Whether it's a unique team identity, a company's way of thinking, distinct ethnic traditions, or generational differences, when diverse stakeholders are brought together, a wide array of cultures – values, beliefs, and priorities that drive behavior, decisions, and actions – come in to play.

They can, at best, create productive tension and, at worst, halt a conversation before progress can be made.

The question on the minds of business and community leaders is: How do we navigate or negotiate these points of conflict and get the results we need?

In over a decade of facilitating hundreds of teams confronting this situation, PlayBook Consulting Group has observed that in learning more about those dynamic, conflicting cultural traditions, and then leveraging them effectively, groups can improve trust and connection that bypasses obstacles to productivity and results.

In other words, the key to collaborative game changing solutions is to leverage elements of a culture to breakthrough barriers created by those same cultures and ensure rich, collaborative discussion.

## CULTURE CLASHPOINTS

Bring a group of diverse people with competing (or even complementary) interests together to solve a problem and you're bound to quickly discover what PlayBook calls "clashpoints". These are flashpoints where dissonant elements of culture collide and threaten a group's ability to be productive or to affect positive change.

Based on where, how, or when they were raised, people have different beliefs, traditions, values, customs, and even language that define their culture. We're referring to the culture of a people, a community, a country, or a team or organization. Broaden the scope a bit and you'll find that these also define culture across the spectrum:

- Purpose
- Worldview
- Clothing/dress
- Music
- Jokes
- Celebrations
- Food
- Art
- History
- Laws & Rules

Good leaders understand that to solve a broad-based problem, the most effective solution will come from a wide-ranging group of representative stakeholders. But that same quest for diversity can stop a collaborative team in their tracks when people hold vastly different beliefs.

It can be as simple as participation in a meeting. An extrovert with a clear point of view may overwhelm the discussion, over represent his or her position, and overinfluence the outcome with sheer volume, passion, and presence. At the same time, a well-informed introvert in the group may have learned at some point in his or her development that offering a contrary opinion can be career-limiting or even dangerous. With those two beliefs in play, a team may overlook a brilliant insight.

It's important for leaders to anticipate these kinds of challenges inherent in diverse workgroups. As CEO's and middle managers prepare a team for disruptive change, they often miss critical opportunities to improve a team's resilience, relationships, and bottom-line results. If only they could seize the moment through cultural awareness and behavior negotiation.

But if you can identify the potential clashpoints and clarify a centerline where all parties can agree to a larger ideal that supercedes cultural differences, you'll define a core story that grounds the team in a common purpose or concept. Then in moments of disagreement and friction – an unavoidable dynamic with all of the different viewpoints in the room – the team can be reminded of where they agree and start from that shared space again.



## A FRAMEWORK FOR HEALTHY DISAGREEMENT

Cultural norms can always threaten to inhibit a collaborative workgroup's progress. Therefore, it is important to understand the prevailing cultures, connect how they will play out in your project dynamics, and plan accordingly.

Much of PlayBook's work is focused on designing and facilitating forums aimed at solving high stakes cross-sector problems. In each case, convening the diverse set of stakeholders necessary to generate the best outcomes often creates distinct culture clashpoints in these settings.

As an illustration, working with the Aspen Institute and a U.S. state government agency, PlayBook was hired to develop a change management plan that would get 2,000 department employees – civil servants – to transform how they deliver human services programs across the state. The team's new director was keen on changing the system and the way change happened within the department. A familiar dynamic we see in government work was at the heart of the organizational change: Civil servants are typically more inclined to comfort with the status quo. This team was no exception and about 50% of the group was expected to resist the proposed change. Unless we developed a plan that could overcome or mitigate that stance, the initiative would collapse.

PlayBook partnered with the state agency's leaders and a team of 40 hand-picked change agents within the department to design a change management plan to drive the system-wide transformation. The cultural variances became apparent early on. There were five divisions with their own distinct team cultures built on legacy leadership. We saw counterproductive learned behavior in response to innovation, divergence, and individual empowerment.

Over decades each division had developed its own siloed approach to human services delivery and there was some mistrust and misalignment about accountability across the agency as a result. Apathy, defeatism, and a fear of change had been institutionalized. It's important to note, though, that with a new director, there was a deep commitment towards a healthier, more energized, and collaborative environment.

In addition, our small workgroup contained four generations of leaders with different priorities and points of view on the agency and the people the department served.

But the most divisive clashpoints were found in the intersection of each ethnic group's beliefs about vulnerability and conflict. The team struggled with how to stay engaged in a space of disagreement long enough for a breakthrough to happen.

The Samurai culture (Japanese immigrant influence) dictated that women and younger men defer to the elder patriarchs of the team. Quiet respect, a need to have a great deal of processing time before making a decision, and a tendency to publicly agree with positions while privately disagreeing with them were all prevalent behaviors.

The Dominant/Missionary culture (mainland US influence) valued passion, decisiveness, and clarity. Their assertive behavior – and dominant energy – often overshadowed the quieter stakeholders. They were frustrated by what they perceived as a lack of clarity, evasiveness, and even duplicity when working with other participants.

The Host culture (native Hawaiian influence) represented a more peaceful, inclusive, generous stance. A more deliberative, flowing process based on learning about each other and how individuals fit into the overall community or system was important to this subgroup.

As facilitators, our challenge was to create and sustain a safe, productive environment in which everyone’s ideas would be heard, understood, and respectfully considered. In that space, we knew that the team could achieve the best possible and most innovative change management plan.

## TRAIN THE CHANGER

It was clear that the dynamics playing out in our 40-person workgroup was going to occur in teams across the department throughout the change management process, too. So our strategy was a modified version of “train the trainer” which we coined “train the changer”. We adopted a hyper-transparent approach to facilitation. We intentionally called out all of the devices we were using to heighten their awareness of not just what we were doing, but how and why. Much of our focus was on recognizing and defusing culture clashpoints.

Change can be tectonic or evolutionary, but it will always be a disruptive force unless teams shift the way they think about and manage change.

It’s always a great investment for organizations to build leader capacity and resilience around change management – specifically cultural dynamics awareness. Change can be tectonic or evolutionary, but it will always be a disruptive force unless teams shift the way they think about and manage change.

To enhance your team’s skill in this area, the first thing to do is inventory the cultures and associated beliefs, customs, and behaviors that show up in your workplace. Once you determine whether they enrich or detract from a cohesive, productive team, devise a plan for how to neutralize the clashpoints.

## DEFUSING CULTURE CLASHPOINTS

As mentioned previously, a safe environment in which the best possible and most innovative solutions flourish offers the greatest value to everyone participating in a collaborative setting. We've all been in situation in which a difficult conversation escalates to volatility that derails the meeting's purpose.

Responsible leaders understand that productive dialogue generates not just great ideas, but also uncommon value to everyone involved. They'll engage more often and with deeper commitment when they feel an inherent return on investment (which happens long before real results can be observed).

Clashpoint awareness, appreciation, and adaptation are key elements in our cultural dynamics playbook.

Strategies that cultivate and sustain these constructive conversations amidst disagreement reinforce the vital relationships that fuel collaborative problem-solving. Clashpoint awareness, appreciation, and adaptation are key elements in our cultural dynamics playbook.

The first step in any engagement like this, though, is to engage the entire group to co-create the structure and framework for an effective collaborative environment. This may include meeting agreements, team member expectations for participation, rules of engagement (especially handy for difficult conversations), decision-making protocols, and a strategy screen that evaluates solutions and options the group generates.

As a team progresses in its discussions, it's important to invite stakeholders to call out the different beliefs and underlying values that create tension. We watch for use of language, rigidity in process or thinking, non-verbal cues, and a certain "stuckness" during discussions.

With our client, we took on the role of witness – gently calling out behaviors we observed without judgment, but instead with an earnest curiosity of what might be driving the behavior. We asked powerful questions to drive their reflection: "Why do you see it that way?" "What's going on for you that brought out that emotion?" "What just happened that triggered such a response?"

This approach, while nurturing and non-confrontational, is incredibly effective at increasing awareness of the different perspectives and personalities that need to be managed. It encourages active self-awareness and accountability to the group. Being the witness instead of the judge promotes mindfulness while signaling commitment to a generative collaborative process. Most importantly, it assures the prioritization of that safe, productive environment so important to this work.

We acknowledge and validate individuals' beliefs, customs, and expectations that derive from their cultural background and experience. Taking time to explore them and to understand why they hold so much importance for a person is essential. This practice helps that person connect with their intention while they reflect on the impact of their behavior on the rest of the team (their impact rarely equates to their intention). It helps everyone involved recognize and appreciate how each person's contribution can either add to or inhibit a process. In our work with the state agency, from the first workgroup meeting with change agents until the close of the project, we presented opportunities for individuals to share their backgrounds, motivation, beliefs about the issue, as well as people's comfort with conflict and change. Insight into themselves and their teammates increased empathy, trust, and vulnerability that built overall team cohesiveness.

To create space for this connective work, we devoted time to the storytelling process. All of the cultures represented in the group relied on storytelling as a core method of connecting deeply, teaching "outsiders" about beliefs and norms, and expressing themselves through mutual experience. It was remarkably useful to identify this common cultural practice and leverage it to help continually return to the touchstone of their shared humanity when conflict threatened progress.

Finally, we recognized that as each of the different immigrant cultures evolved alongside Hawaii's host culture, another unifying tradition stood out: Food. Making food together and serving one another at mealtime was seen as a humbling and equalizing action. So our lunches were never catered; they were potluck and family style. We asked the people seen as leaders and authority figures within the group to dish out the salads, casseroles, and cookies. The coaching about eye contact, conversation, and connection we expected to have to do wasn't necessary. These leaders were part of the culture, too. It came naturally.

That powerful combination of storytelling, connection, and appreciation brought them all together and accelerated the group's work. As a team's sophistication grows in this space (which can happen quickly with focus and dedication), awareness and appreciation of the different cultural norms and friction points at play naturally create an adaptive environment. Individuals and groups find ways to modify their behavior to elevate productivity. They begin working together to hold one another accountable to the group's purpose and guiding principles, effectively taking on much of the conversation monitoring responsibility from the facilitator.

That transfer of group management is a powerful turning point. It's a sign that the team will be able to adapt and apply the same tactics to navigate challenges in other areas of the organization. They will have integrated what they've learned about group dynamics and the impact of cultural norms to recognize clashpoints that can derail high stakes solutioning.

## CULTURAL CLASHPOINTING AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

With consistent application, a leader can operationalize the practice of identifying and neutralizing clashpoints so that this mindset becomes the cornerstone of the organization's culture.

Developing this as a core competence takes time. It takes time to build the safe, productive environments that encourage thoughtful, risky, honest debate. It takes time to work through the raw, abrasive clashpoints where cultural norms of one group shut down the contributions of another part of the team. And it takes time to prove that this commitment to full engagement isn't just the flavor of the month – that what you're modeling and asking them to risk doing is here to stay.

But the payoff is nothing short of extraordinary. Creating a culture that values diversity in thought and expression makes revolutionary results possible. The generative discussions that this mindset empowers just might spark the brilliant game-changing idea to blow the doors off of your competition and propel your team to the next level.

So what cultural clashpoints are holding your team back and what will you do about it?

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Leslie Mullens, founder and leader of PlayBook Consulting Group, specializes in helping companies improve bottom line performance through organizational transformation. She has developed and facilitated hundreds of engagements for pioneering corporate, small business, nonprofit, and government communities. An expert in change management, cultural transformation, and cross-sector collaborative problem solving, her approach builds team capacity and confidence to get the job done. Partnering with highly motivated and engaged leaders, she focuses on building winning game plans for clients by, facilitating effective organizational transformation, developing and implementing strategic plans that accelerate growth, and enhancing leadership effectiveness. [Read More](#)