

Relationship Building to Foster Productive Conflict: Insights from Collaborative Research to Spur Food Systems Transformation

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Community-academic research partnerships can benefit from diverse perspectives, but these may lead to conflicts that either unify or divide efforts.

Objective: We present lessons learned in developing a relationship building and conflict management approach for a food systems-change intervention implemented and evaluated using community action research. Our partnership included people from academia, community-based organizations, and grassroots initiatives within a historically redlined urban setting.

Methods: Our approach emerged from iterative and adaptive processes conducted over 18 months through ongoing feedback, application, and refinement with partners.

Lessons Learned: The prevention strategy emphasizes relationship building to enhance connections, accountability, and mutual benefit among members of the partnership to reduce destructive conflict. The management strategy is focused on fostering productive conflict management through mutual understanding, mediation, and forward paths post-conflict.

Conclusions: Findings offer practical guidance for leveraging productive conflict to innovate and ignite transformative change through community-academic research partnerships committed to community-driven leadership.

KEYWORDS: Community health partnerships, Community health research, Power sharing, Process issues, Health disparities

Community-academic research partnerships have a core value of inclusivity, acknowledging that people with diverse experiences bring unique vantage points to topics of study.^{1,2} Everyone in the partnership contributes complexity—individually and systemically.³ These entrenched complexities are shaped by different personal and professional experiences and privileges, which may generate conflict that has the potential to influence partnership effectiveness.^{4,5}

Conflict, if managed effectively, may be a driver of innovation among community-academic research partnerships because it results in collisions of different ways of knowing and being that can ignite new approaches for solving pressing issues.^{6,7} In contrast, destructive conflict occurs when tensions among partners result in divided working relationships, which limits creativity among the team.⁷ In short, conflict can yield either virtuous or vicious feedback; the outcomes of conflict are modulated by the strategies deployed to manage conflict.⁵ Conflict without an approach for management is likely to reduce partnership effectiveness and even cause harm.

Our research sought to address gaps in the literature about practical steps involved in building capacity to manage conflict positively within community-academic research partnerships.⁵ This type of practical guidance is needed because productive conflict creates opportunities to innovate and mobilize transformational change through community-academic research partnerships.^{6,7} This aligns with findings of a systematic review of research on community-academic partnerships affirming effective conflict resolution is a facilitating factor for partnership effectiveness yet few published studies described approaches used to support conflict resolution activities.⁸

In this paper, we present a case study describing how our partnership experienced conflict and used an adaptive approach to learn from these experiences. These lessons guided the development of a relationship building and conflict management approach within our community action research project focused on food systems change.

Methods

Research context. Our research is part of the Nourishing Power Network (NPN), a systems-change intervention implemented and evaluated through community action research in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. The study occurred in an urban context shaped by historical practices of race- and ethnicity-based exclusion that yielded a legacy of disinvestment in racialized areas resulting in contemporary health, economic, and social risks.^{9–11} This disinvestment was exacerbated by deindustrialization, which changed the economic landscape of Rust Belt cities, accelerating persistent poverty in the urban core.^{12,13} Similar to national trends,^{14,15} food system inequities were evident in the county at the start of this study.¹⁶ Rates of food insecurity and diet-related chronic diseases were higher and access to healthy foods and leadership within local food systems work were lower for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).¹⁶

Against this background, our study team wanted to drive food system transformation by combining community and organizational power to ignite and expand community-driven food justice initiatives led by BIPOC community leaders. Power in this research was understood as a multidimensional construct reflecting capabilities to exert influence on actions or decisions within the local food system.¹⁷ The intentional marrying of community and organizational power

generated conflict within the study due to the collision of different viewpoints, experiences, and histories at both personal and systemic levels.

The study is premised on prior evidence suggesting transformative change within urban food systems will be accelerated through strategies that foster community ownership of the local food system.¹⁸ The intervention included four components: (a) Advisory Council (AC) prioritizing community leadership in decision-making, (b) Fellowship offering training and mentorship for early-stage food justice initiatives, (c) Networking to build connections among partners, and (d) the Nutrition Equity Fund for community leaders to invest \$240K (USD) in transformative food justice work locally. Ethical approval for the study was granted by Name of University (STUDY20220691).

Community-academic partnership. Our case study is rooted in the NPN research partnership that launched in July 2022 bringing together institutions, non-profit organizations, grassroots groups, and community leaders. The partnership was formalized after funding was jointly awarded to an academic institution and two local nonprofits. While there were many partners involved in NPN, leadership of the partnership was centralized in the study's AC and Leadership Team whose composition is summarized in Table 1. The partners were majority Black females from the non-profit sector (mostly grassroots organizations) with experience in community organizing, community development, and food policy and advocacy. The composition of the partnership evolved during two implementation phases. In both phases, the AC was recruited via an open application process. Applicant interviews were conducted by the study's Leadership Team and research staff in Phase 1 and by the first AC in Phase 2.

Table 1. Characteristics of Advisory Council and Leadership Team for two phases of the Nourishing Power Network (NPN).

	NPN Phase 1		NPN Phase 2	
	Advisory Council	Leadership Team	Advisory Council	Leadership Team
	N=10	N=3	N=7 ^a	N=6 ^b
Racial Composition				
Black or African American	7 (70%)	-	5 (71%)	3 (50%)
White	1 (10%)	3 (100%)	1 (14%)	3 (50%)
Choose not to respond	2 (20%)	-	1 (14%)	-
Gender				
Male	4 (40%)	1 (33%)	1 (14%)	2 (33%)
Female	6 (60%)	2 (67%)	6 (86%)	4 (67%)
Sector Affiliation^c				
Community advocate	3 (30%)	-	3 (43%)	1 (17%)
Non-profit	8 (80%)	2 (67%)	6 (86%)	5 (83%)
Business	1 (10%)	-	-	-
Education	2 (20%)	1 (33%)	4 (57%)	3 (50%)
Coalition	2 (20%)	-	1 (14%)	-
Neighborhood group or block club	2 (20%)	-	-	-
Faith-based	1 (10%)	-	2 (29%)	1 (17%)
Healthcare	1 (10%)	-	2 (29%)	1 (17%)
Current Work or Interests in Local Food System^c				
Emergency food assistance	1 (10%)	-	4 (57%)	1 (17%)
Government food benefits (i.e., SNAP, WIC)	1 (10%)	2 (67%)	1 (14%)	2 (33%)
Support non-food needs (i.e., housing, health)	2 (20%)	-	1 (14%)	-
Food retail	2 (20%)	1 (33%)	1 (14%)	1 (17%)
Restaurant & culinary arts	1 (10%)	-	1 (14%)	-
Food distribution	2 (20%)	-	2 (29%)	-
Food waste reduction	3 (30%)	1 (33%)	1 (14%)	1 (17%)
Nutrition education & skill building	5 (50%)	2 (67%)	4 (57%)	2 (33%)
Farmers market or food hub	5 (50%)	2 (67%)	2 (29%)	2 (33%)
Food service (i.e., schools, hospitals)	1 (10%)	-	-	-
Workforce development in food sector	2 (20%)	1 (33%)	1 (14%)	1 (17%)
Nutrition incentives or produce prescriptions	1 (10%)	2 (67%)	1 (14%)	2 (33%)
Urban agriculture (i.e., farming or gardening)	5 (50%)	1 (33%)	3 (43%)	2 (33%)
Food policy or advocacy	5 (50%)	2 (67%)	4 (57%)	3 (50%)
Community organizing	5 (50%)	2 (67%)	5 (71%)	4 (67%)
Community development	5 (50%)	2 (67%)	4 (57%)	3 (50%)

^aPhase 2 Advisory Council included four new members and three members returning from the first phase of the Advisory Council.

^bPhase 2 Leadership Team included three new community co-investigators who served on the first phase of the Advisory Council.

^cParticipants could select multiple options.

The AC, which met bi-monthly, managed key decisions, including fellowship participant selection, mentoring, the Nutrition Equity Fund's structure and awards, NPN priorities, new AC recruitment, and sustainability. In Phase 1, the Leadership Team—academic and nonprofit co-leads—set study guidelines. In Phase 2, three AC members became community co-investigators, joining leadership. Throughout both phases, the Leadership Team met twice monthly to oversee NPN's activities, resolve challenges, liaise with funders, review finances, and coordinate dissemination efforts.

Members of the community-academic research partnership conducted extensive work in the local food system prior to the start of NPN. This work, however, was often conducted discretely or with a small number of partners. While partners joined the NPN with shared dedication to achieving nutrition equity through food systems transformation, they imagined transformation somewhat differently. To begin the research partnership, processes were implemented to support relationship building and conflict management (e.g., establishing values, team agreements, intentional team building) among the different partners. However, these proved insufficient for navigating emergent conflict within our research.

Precipitating events. Several events help contextualize development of our approach within an intervention that sought to share power for transformational impact, an ideal for community-engaged research with few models to guide application.¹⁹ Our research began as COVID-19 social distancing practices were easing, heightening the need for human connection. This led to a "honeymoon" phase where relationships quickly deepened despite skepticism among some

community partners that academics could “nourish power” through research. In this early phase (about 12 months), conflict was hidden due to shared commitments to NPN’s transformative mission. Partners inaccurately assumed this common ground would minimize future conflicts.

To promote efficiency, NPN’s work became siloed within smaller AC groups. This reduced transparency in decision making. New members (i.e., staff, community partners) joined without the deeper relationship-building efforts of the initial phase. Conflict also emerged because partners valued differently various actions, such as building network infrastructure (e.g., creating norms, strategic plans) versus engaging in direct action to address immediate needs in the local food system. At the conceptual level, partners recognized food system problems were rooted in oppressive structures, such as racism, sexism, classism, and their intersections. Yet, partners lacked practical tools to navigate and mitigate these systemic complexities, including contemporary manifestations of historical traumas that underpinned conflicts within the partnership.

As an example, conflict arose during networking event planning, with tensions over decision-making, site selection, and leadership. Initially, the Leadership Team managed events, with the AC offering support and academic research staff managing logistics. It became evident through these conflicts that choosing event locations in a segregated city impacted by decades of structural racism were underpinned by complex power dynamics beyond what event norms, such as guidelines about event locations, could address.

Through these experiences, we realized that neither the university nor the nonprofit leads of the project had broader infrastructure to manage unique conflicts within community-academic research partnerships. This led to mismanagement of conflicts, which increased tension, eroded trust, and weakened our collective unity. To address gaps in our capacity, we invested resources to develop an approach for navigating and managing conflict. This process was led by an AC member (first author of this paper).

Development of the approach. Our approach builds on strategies for community engagement that prioritize community-driven change wherein community leadership has a “strong role in identifying the policies and programs to be addressed, designing solutions, and evaluating implementation.”^{19(p2)} Meaningful community engagement for community-driven change requires safe and robust infrastructure that fosters trust, transparency, and mutual accountability.¹⁹ In addition, our approach intentionally integrates lessons from conflict management and conflict transformation,²⁰ which are often missing in the practice of community-academic research partnerships.⁸ These lessons “situate conflict as normative rather than abnormal” and emphasize the need for infrastructure to engage with conflict productively (e.g., perspective taking, expressing emotions, reflection) rather than destructively (e.g., winning, retaliating, avoiding).^{20(p38)} Further, they emphasize opportunities to promote productive conflict through mutual learning that values transparency, curiosity, informed choice, accountability, and compassion.²¹

Our approach was also guided by real-world application. All parts of the approach were trialed and refined within NPN over an 18-month process, including three team retreats with the study’s

Leadership Team and/or AC, applications in approximately 80 team meetings, and one third-party mediation process. Here, we present NPN's approach as a progress update based on learnings so far.

Results

NPN's relationship building and conflict management approach included strategies focused on reducing destructive conflict through prevention and fostering productive conflict management (see Fig. 1).

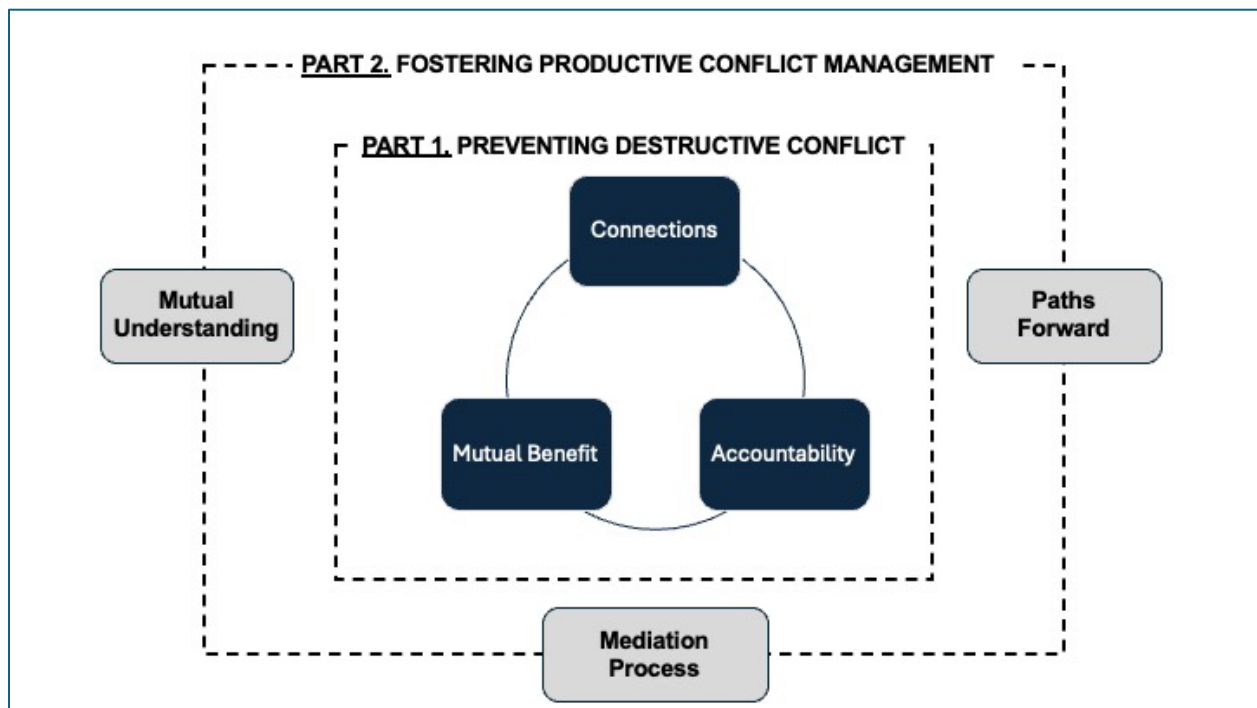


Figure 1. Conflict management approach.

Part 1. Preventing Destructive Conflict

Our partnership sought to minimize destructive conflict through relationship building strategies. These were designed to foster connections, accountability, and mutual benefit with the end goal of promoting trust, compassion, transparency, and power sharing—core ingredients of transformative community-academic research partnerships committed to mutual learning. Below we summarize strategies implemented within NPN related to these domains (see Fig. 1).

Connections. To promote trust and compassion, our efforts focused on connecting a diverse base of leaders bringing deep yet distinct expertise in local food systems. This base varied in proximity to food system injustices, intersectional identities, and community action research experience. Integrating relationship building into all aspects of our work was crucial to create safe spaces for perspective taking (e.g., acknowledging others' views as their truth) and vulnerability (e.g., engaging with emotions). We used strategies that emphasized connecting through our common humanity via shared meals, social-emotional check-ins, and one-on-one connections. We encouraged members to assist each other and supported partners' unique needs (e.g., providing meeting materials in advance). To encourage community connectivity, we sponsored public networking events, integrated community-building activities into meetings, promoted member-led events, attended external events together, and scheduled activities at convenient times encouraging children to attend.

Accountability. To foster transparent and mutual accountability for one's engagement in NPN, we established team agreements and engagement norms, rooted in NPN values, which were read aloud at meetings. At each meeting, a designated reflector was assigned to ensure adherence and initiate real-time mediation, as needed. We acknowledged local food system injustices as

systemic issues, conducted orientation sessions with NPN partners to foster a systemic perspective, and encouraged transparency about additional “baggage” partners carried because of systems of privilege. Accountability was prioritized through dialogue about research ethics and transparency about past harms. We openly discussed roles and responsibilities, developed detailed scopes of work, and regularly shared study findings with NPN members through presentations and feedback sessions. Financial accountability was advanced by partnering with a community organization experienced in grant-making to manage remuneration for NPN participants. This approach supported fair payments, quick turnaround, and accessible invoicing through interactions with community-friendly staff. We distributed grant funding benefits through stipends or honoraria and prioritized BIPOC vendors for NPN services, like catering or consultants. The partnership was accountable to adapt when processes were not working, which aligned with the study’s goals to be a responsive intervention with intentional adaptation.

Mutual benefit. To promote power sharing, NPN focused on mutual benefits for all members by offering knowledge sharing, leadership and capacity building, and community networking opportunities. Knowledge sharing included exchanging insights and simplifying complex information through technical assistance sessions, information sessions led by AC members, mentoring, developing data use agreements, engaging a marketing specialist, hosting monthly research meetings, and disseminating bi-monthly newsletters. The partnership hosted seminars with NPN members as expert panelists. To ensure data from the study offered mutual benefit to individuals and the community, preliminary findings were presented at monthly community research meetings where base members could elect to serve as co-authors.

Leadership and capacity building were enhanced through formal strategies of power sharing with the goal of mutual benefit, like creating co-investigator roles to engage community members in the study's leadership team and hiring consultants from the NPN base. The AC had decision-making authority in selecting Fellowship participants and making grant award decisions.

Everyone involved in NPN's work was compensated, whether through long-term roles or short-term engagements. AC members were prioritized for consultant roles, and materials were co-branded with participating academic and community organizations. Informal efforts included sponsoring attendance at food justice meetings, promoting achievements via social media and newsletters, and sharing resources. We honored Fellowship graduates with ceremonies, where they pitched ideas, received certificates, and were recognized with Nutrition Equity Innovation prizes awarded by the AC.

Part 2. Fostering Productive Conflict Management

Our prevention strategy sought to minimize destructive conflict. However, some conflicts required conflict management designed to promote mutual understanding, establish mediation processes, and create paths forward. Together, these efforts encouraged curiosity among partners to better understand intentions and motivations, accountability for responding to conflict that could not be resolved through prevention, informed choice about the complexities embedded in conflicts, and compassion to provide a path forward for healing.

Mutual understanding. Curiosity was needed to achieve mutual understanding of complexities influencing problems within the local food system (e.g., food insecurity, food apartheid). Given

the diversity of backgrounds and experiences of the partners (Table 1), it was important to have processes to encourage each partner to offer expertise about different pieces of the local food system puzzle. To facilitate this, retreats occurred at the start of AC and Leadership Team service terms focused on activities from our prevention strategy designed to foster connection, accountability, and mutual benefit. We took assessments that allowed partners to become curious about personal working and conflict styles. Efforts were made to be transparent about how these styles may be harmful if not fully understood yet had the power to support transformative goals because the partnership brought together many different perspectives.

Establishing mediation process. To be accountable for addressing conflicts unresolved through prevention strategies, the partnership reallocated resources to hire a third-party mediator with expertise in conflict management, local food systems, and team building. The mediator was a member of the study's initial AC endorsed by AC members for this role. The mediation process was implemented first among those directly involved in a conflict to promote informed choice to ensure shared understanding of the situation, with the mediator stepping in if these parties could not reach resolution. The process began by fostering compassionate curiosity about all perspectives related to the issue encouraging judgement to be suspended briefly to better understand and appreciate another's situation and concerns. We sought to highlight how systemic forces create feedback loops reinforcing a sense of disconnection among people with diverse perspectives. After sharing perspectives, parties collaboratively brainstormed solutions, considering everyone's needs and priorities, including those of NPN. Engaged parties agreed on a resolution, documented, and outlined an action plan with responsibilities and timelines. To

promote accountability, the Leadership Team monitored implementation and held follow-up meetings, if needed, to assess the resolution's effectiveness.

Creating paths forward. While formal mediation attempted to support conflict resolution among affected parties, our approach recognized the potential ripple effects of conflicts in a systems-change initiative. Steps were taken to be transparent with the base about conflicts within NPN to reduce misinformation, highlight strategies for moving into a space of productive conflict, and acknowledge limitations to managing conflict within broader systems of oppression. Healing processes were implemented to support next steps. Sometimes, this involved collective healing activities, such as shared meals or extended check-ins. Other times, it involved reduced engagement with NPN to provide distance for healing. This separation included open invitations to reengage, when feasible, and sometimes involved transitioning from one role to another within NPN. A lack of mutual benefit, a key factor in our prevention strategy, often drove separation, as time spent on NPN work could detract from other priorities.

Discussion

Lessons learned from our community action research partnership highlight the importance of having processes that normalize conflict as a productive and inevitable dimension of community-academic research partnerships.⁵ Our findings highlight six core components for conflict management infrastructure and reinforce the need for such infrastructure among community-academic research partnerships committed to systems transformation. Additionally, findings support institutionalization of conflict management infrastructure within these partnerships.

Our findings align with understandings of conflict transformation as a multi-dimensional and dynamic process that includes strategies for preventing destructive conflict and promoting constructive conflict management.^{20,21} Safe and robust infrastructure is needed to realize the benefits of conflict (e.g., innovation, holistic understanding, collective power) within community-academic research partnerships.²⁰ Our findings suggest conflict management infrastructure ought to promote connections among diverse groups, enforce accountability, and support mutual benefit among partners while maintaining mitigation strategies to foster mutual understanding, implement mediation when needed, and foster paths forward for healing. Our approach fills a gap in research on community-academic partnerships by providing practical guidance for maximizing the benefits of engaging diverse partners in research.⁸

Findings may serve as a resource for engaging diverse partners within a system, such as the food system. Community-academic research partnerships focused on transforming systems may share common values and hopes. However, they may also share common challenges related to unifying efforts among groups with different histories and privileges and limited experience effectively sharing power. Partnerships focused on transformative change are often charting new paths with few playbooks to foster the benefits and manage the risks of conflict. They may benefit by investing in responsive infrastructure to prevent and manage conflict.

Our findings highlight the need for institutionalizing practices that normalize conflict within community-academic research partnerships. The inevitability of conflict among project leaders is normalized in procedures, such as Multiple Principal Investigator plans. Our findings highlight

the value of having corollary plans for community-academic research partnerships. Based on our lessons learned, these plans ought to include multiple ways to both prevent destructive conflict and foster productive conflict management, reinforcing prior work highlighting challenges to negotiating fair and effective community-academic research partnerships.²²

Our approach is a work-in-progress. Our study design prioritized adaptive implementation, intentional engagement of many partners, and flexibility to reallocate resources for emergent needs. These design features supported our ability to reorganize because of insufficiencies in existing conflict management capacities. Nevertheless, formation of our approach was emotionally challenging, especially for those at the center of precipitating events. Not having an effective approach for managing destructive conflict resulted in additional time invested to react to emergent issues and reduced time available for actions related to address needs in the local food system. Establishing our approach improved workings of the partnership and reduced the need for conflict mediation.

Limitations.

Our lessons may be more applicable to partnerships focused on transformative rather than transactional community engagement.¹⁹ A limitation is that we cannot isolate the effects of each component of our approach or explore interdependencies. Thus, lessons offer a multipronged framework to guide planning among community-academic research teams. Future research is warranted to evaluate the effectiveness of different conflict management strategies among research partnerships committed to power sharing.

Conclusion

‘Change happens at the speed to trust’ is a core belief in community-engaged research.^{1,2} While trust is fundamental, conflict is often an accelerator of transformative change.²³ Our findings provide practical guidance for embracing the power of productive conflict within community-academic research partnerships by enhancing trust through relationship building and creating safety through efforts that proactively manage conflict.

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