

Bordering on Failure: A Tale of Discovering the Three Rules of Conflict

By Duncan Autrey, MA

ABSTRACT

This article tells the story of how I discovered the Three Rules for Transforming Conflict, while working on a series of border conflicts in Ecuador. This allegorical tale teaches poignant lessons about the essential nature of conflict and the existential value of improving our political, social, and environmental discourse. The three rules of conflict present a guide to improving collective decision making. The rules teach us to get clear on what the conflict is really about; to include everyone who is involved; and to ensure that the process of transformation is aligned with the desired outcome. Win-Lose processes are dividing us, impeding our healing and progress, and they are undermining our sense of shared humanity. In contrast, this story reminds us that being in any ongoing relationship means that we are interdependent, so our shared success depends on the quality of our processes. We all win, or we all lose.

Bordering on Failure: A Tale of Discovering the Three Rules of Conflict

This is the story of how I discovered the three rules for transforming conflict, while simultaneously failing to prevent it. As we face our current political, social, and existential challenges, this tale may serve as an allegory, offering insights into how we can change the way we change today.

In 2013, I had just graduated with a master's degree in International Security, Peace, and Conflict Studies from Universidad del Salvador in Buenos Aires, I launched my career as a Conflict Transformation Facilitator. Soon afterward, I joined a colleague in Ecuador to explore a possible project for Mediators Beyond Borders International. We spoke with politicians, organizers, lawyers, and heads of mediation organizations.

One recurring topic was the pending national deadline to resolve hundreds of border disputes throughout Ecuador. The country had over 700 undefined, under-defined, or disputed municipal, cantonal, and provincial borders. The President of Ecuador passed a law requiring every political leader to define their territory's borders by a certain date or risk their job.

As border conflicts go, these weren't very scary. People had lived happily with blurry borders for centuries, without many significant issues. They were primarily a source of confusion arising from historical accidents. Most borders were created long before technology, using descriptions based on long forgotten geographical features. In many regions, the descriptions written in the founding documents didn't correspond with their neighbors. Generally, the situation presented a logistical challenge, not an existential one.

That's until we arrived in the mountain city of Cuenca, to meet with Chechi, the Vice Governor of Azuay. Their province was responsible for 32 borders, and one of the border discrepancies was becoming very contentious. By historical accident, the border between mountainous Azuay and coastal Guayas, hadn't been clearly defined for over 400 years. The disputed area, of cloud-forested mountains and cacao fields, included an indigenous community and over a dozen towns. Over 60,000 people were in limbo.

Chechi explained that they wanted to peacefully define their borders, and that they needed immediate help. Recognizing that this conflict-opportunity, wasn't for MBBI, I eagerly offered my services as a newly minted conflict transformation professional, and they accepted.

Three weeks later, I moved to beautiful Cuenca from Buenos Aires, and I began my new job as the Community Communications Director at the Provincial Government of Azuay. I had my first real job transforming conflict.

It quickly became a professional nightmare. The newly assembled team was chaotic and under extreme time pressure. The leader of the team became angry and spiteful. The real challenge arose, because I was an unknown person from a different culture, who was proposing ideas that people weren't ready for.

But they wanted my new ideas. They asked me to flip the script ("*cambiar el chip*") on their conflict and show a new way of approaching it. I faced the challenge enthusiastically, but I couldn't pierce through the urgency.

When sides were taken, voices were excluded, and things spiraled into violence, I was an easy scapegoat.

Nonetheless, my efforts to create a poignant way to communicate about conflict led me to discover "*The Three Rules of Conflict Transformation*." They have been a guide and companion ever since.

Rule One

The conflict is not about what it's about.

If my mission was to introduce a new way of thinking about this border situation and to transform this confrontation into an opportunity for generative collaboration, rule one was the starting point.

I needed to demonstrate that it wasn't about the border, rather how it impacted people's lives. When people are in conflict, it's usually over strategies or things. When the situation creates an emotional charge, something personally important is happening. This is why conflict is an opportunity to truly get to know one another, and it's also why conflict is so intense and complex.

The wisdom that "*the conflict is not about what it's about*" arises directly from mediators' interest-based approach to resolving conflict. We know the way through conflict is to reveal and meet everyone's underlying needs and interests.

My first task was to figure out the underlying needs in the impacted communities. I used this first rule to explain why our first step was to travel along the border to interview community leaders. Our goal was to determine what was important to them so officials would consider it as they defined the border. I delved into these communities to ask questions about what mattered to them, their historical experiences, concerns, and who they thought officials should include in the conversation.

As expected, these interviews revealed that the conflict wasn't about what the governors thought it was about. People weren't concerned about the invisible borders or GPS coordinates. Instead, they asked, "Who's going to provide water, electricity, and education?"

People shared stories of identity: where their ancestors came from, marriages, and the food they enjoyed. Their cultural differences were important. Azuay's mountain culture and Guayas' coastal culture have very distinct histories and traditions.

I submitted reports to my boss to inform our overall strategy and show the conflict was not just about the border. The people cared about identity and public services, so those were the topics the political leaders and negotiators needed to address. Beyond maps, people needed to know their leaders would care for them.

Rule 2

Whoever is involved in the conflict needs to be involved in the solution, or it's not going to work.

The next step was to convene discussions between the community leaders and then have incrementally inclusive dialogues in and between the affected communities. These would inform the governors' decisions.

Sharing these reports and my overall strategy revealed that I was gathering a diverse set of perspectives, including from those with a relationship with the Guayas government.

My boss explained that there was no chance we could include, listen to, or create space for the 'enemies' who disagreed with the Azuayan government. He thought me ignorant to have thought that was a good idea.

Recognizing that excluding anyone would undermine our capacity to address this conflict, I uncovered the second rule of conflict. At the time, I emphasized it by adding: *whoever is excluded from the process will include themselves on their terms*. I was new to Ecuador, but I knew enough about conflict to understand that excluding people from the process would only anger them. Sure enough, the border dispute devolved into an "us versus them" situation.

Many were angry at their ostracization. Protests arose in the towns, with an angry mob smashing government vehicles. They took over the government building, ransacking it while we cowered in our offices. As I hid behind a locked door, I knew we had failed because we did not incorporate their voices into the conversation. They believed that forming a mob was the only way to be heard when we should have already been listening.

Rule Three

The process of transforming or resolving a conflict is the same as the outcome.

As complexity grew and deadline pressure rose, the governors' offices took over negotiations, excluding the communities. It became a secret process with lawyers and geographers making short-term choices with long-term implications. While trying to push back against their approach, I identified the third rule of conflict, which means two things.

Firstly, the qualities of the future that we're creating will reflect the qualities of the process. When resolving a dispute, we lay the foundations for the future we want. If the government wanted an outcome that honored the local citizens' needs, the process had to honor them. Clarity about education, water, electricity, and identity was vital, so they needed to talk about those topics throughout. Similarly, an adversarial process creates adversarial outcomes.

Secondly, the process and the outcome are the same because *the outcome is just a new process*. As ill-defined as the previous borders were, they had been there for over 400 years, and these new digitally coded borders will potentially be around for the rest of human history. People will have to live with them and the implications for their education, water, electricity, and identity. It's not merely a static choice.

It was important to recognize that designing the border was not the end of the process; it was the beginning of a new phase.

This point brings us to the **fourth of the three rules of conflict**: *There is no final outcome.*

If diverse people are going to be in ongoing relationship, they can expect to always be facing the tension between disagreement and collaboration. New issues and decisions will arise. Thus, one doesn't have to figure out **WHAT** the solution is, instead one must figure out **HOW** they want to find solutions now and in the future.

Epilogue

In the end, while my rules of conflict did not pierce through the urgency, we defined every border by the deadline. The governments celebrated; the people accepted the decision. There was very little bloodshed, and we all learned a lot. Although the three rules of conflict arose from Ecuador, they are applicable everywhere. These rules are useful in understanding the ongoing tension arising in our current political and social systems.

A Three-Fold Lesson

In case you haven't noticed, poorly managed conflict is eroding our democracy. We know the reality of angry mobs that feel excluded. Learning to transform our approaches to political, social, and environmental conflict is existentially important. For long term change we need an omni-win process and outcome. Here is a way to immediately apply the lessons of this story to the conflicts in your own life.

Effective decision-making hinges on the three elements: clarity of *content*, the quality of the *relationship*, and the collaborative nature of the *process*. If you're stuck in a conflict, at least one of these elements is missing.

Use the three rules to bring you back.

CONTENT

Talking in circles? Remember **rule one**: the conflict is (usually) not about what it's about.

- Confirm agreement on the goal: What is the conversation about? and what question are you trying to answer?
- Get on the same page: Define terms and share information sources.
- Find the heart of the matter: Try to understand why the issue is so important to you and to others.

RELATIONSHIP

Meeting resistance? Remember **rule two**: Whoever is involved in the conflict needs to be part of the resolution, or else...

- Be inclusive: Invite all relevant stakeholders and affected parties into the conversation.
- Don't exclude: If certain groups or perspectives are missing, consider why and what it would take to include them.
- Build trust: Actively improve the quality of the relationships.
- Keep it simple: Recognize and acknowledge your interdependence and human dignity.

PROCESS

Fighting with someone? Remember **rule three**: The process and the outcome are the same.

- Assess your process:
 - Is there a path to collaborative decision-making, or does it lead to a rivalrous cycle of winners and losers?
 - Are the participants empowered to make decisions about the topics they care about?
 - Is there deliberation and dialogue between different perspectives?
- Ask others if the process is working for them and propose new processes.
- Ask for help. There are many organizations and individuals out there who have these skills.
- REMEMBER: If you're in an ongoing relationship there will not be a final outcome.
 - Consider how you want the relationship to feel and function over the long run and move towards that.

We are diverse humans with feelings. We're in relationship, and disagreements will occur. We get to decide together how we engage with our differences. We can choose a way that brings us closer together, is generative and nuanced, or we can pick sides, try to defeat our rivals, and potentially never find a way to solve our shared problems.

We all win, or we all lose.

About the Author:

Duncan Autrey, MA is a conflict transformation facilitator and educator. As a Rotary World Peace Fellow he studied International Peace and Conflict in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Duncan's conflict management work spans from the local to the international. He's a central leader of the [Democracy, Politics and Conflict Engagement Initiative](#). His current project is a podcast that promotes creation of a win-win democracy and collaborative solutions to our shared human challenges. Learn more at omni-win.com.