



# 5 Categories of Conflict

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The Johnmark Extension 2023  
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# Categories of Conflict

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These five categories (sometimes referred to as levels) describe the capacity of a church or an organisation to deal with conflict. It refers to the emotional maturity of the system, not necessarily the nature or importance of the issues at stake.

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These categories are numbered sequentially but they do not necessarily move through sequential levels. Conflicts can emerge or erupt at relatively high categories. Some significant issues can be dealt with in lower-level categories.

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These categories are not always discrete, some individuals may be operating in one and others in another. They are useful to describe the kind of attitudes and behaviour that are typical of the leaders and at times the majority of participants.

# Summary of the 5 categories

## Category 1

- The Robust Disagreement and Open Discussion

## Category 2

- The Emotional Discussion – Playing the Cards and Protecting Interests

## Category 3

- The Contest – Whatever Power It Takes to Prevail Will Be Used and We Need To Win

## Category 4

- Remove the Opposition – Someone Will Have to Go and It Probably Should Be You

## Category 5

- Search and Destroy – This Person Should Never Serve and Do This Again

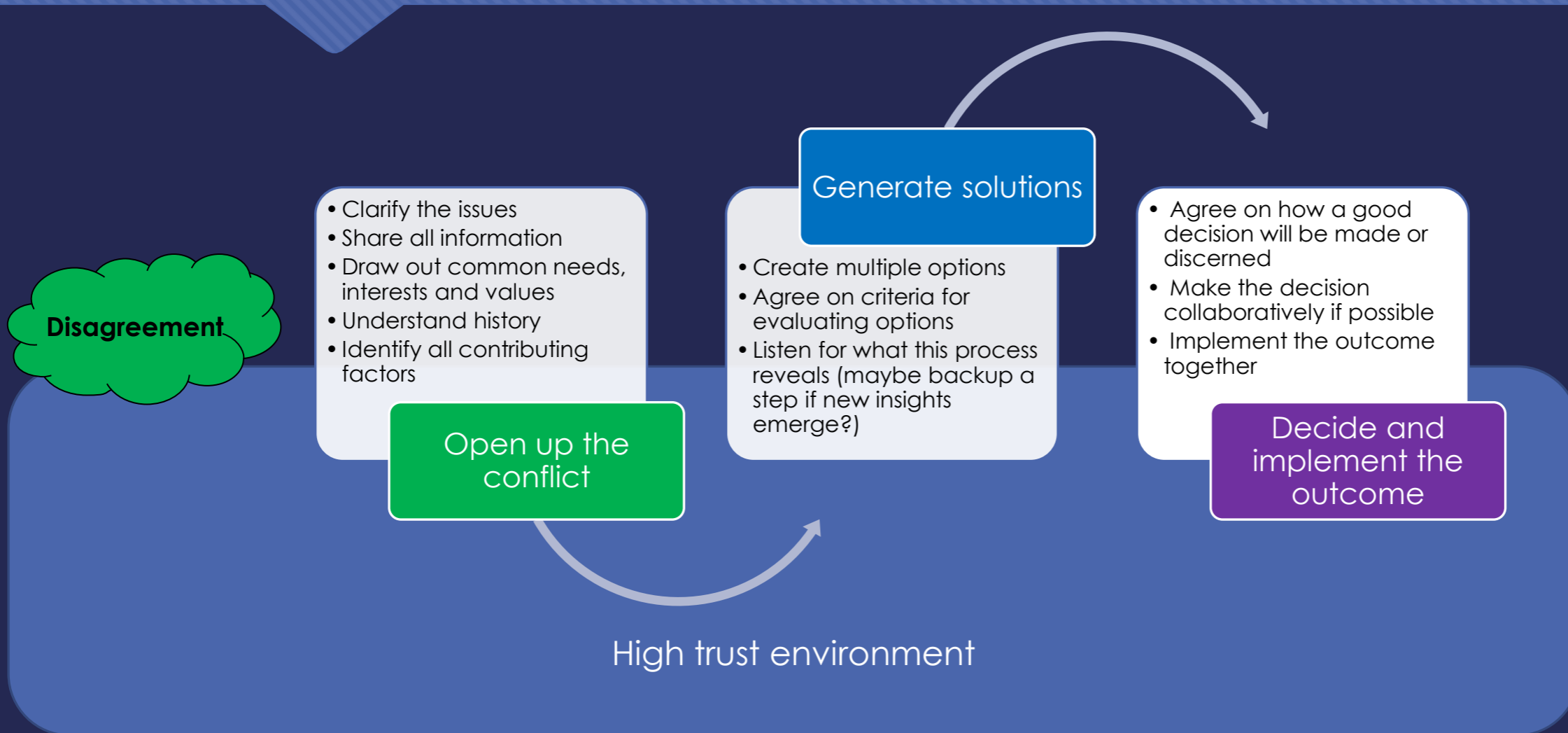
# Category 1: We've got a problem let's work it through

- **Objective:** *To solve a real disagreement with open methods of exploratory discussion based on trust.*
- Identifying Dynamics: **The Robust Open Discussion**
  - Participants use clear and specific language, and focus on the issues.
  - There is open disclosure of all information relating to the issues.
  - Any personal anxiety or anger is short-lived and quickly controlled (not usually expressed)
  - While there is real disagreement, significant trust exists. There is risk-taking in sharing honestly and often with some vulnerability.
  - Parties collectively believe that open discussion and healthy communication will enable a win – win solution and are willing to work toward it.
  - This allows for 'Owl' conflict style resolution

# Category 1: We've got a problem, let's talk it through

- **Strategies for use in healthy category 1 conflicts:**
- Use high trust collaborative problem solving strategies
  - Discuss and agree to a healthy process
  - Define and clarify the all issues and aspects of the problem.
  - Drill down, gather and openly share all the facts, history, and especially all possible contributing causes.
  - Identify the common needs, interests and values of all parties (NIV). "Tip the iceberg."
  - Reflect theologically and explore Biblical principles.
  - Explore potential options, provide opportunity for creative solutions.
  - Work at the grass-roots level and encourage wide participation. Increase the power and visibility of minority groups or voiceless individuals.
  - Encourage consensus decision making.

# Category 1 Conflict Processes





## Category 2: We would like to get this sorted but we do need to be cautious and careful

- **Complex objective:** *Solving the issue and protecting self emotionally*
- Identifying Dynamics: **Playing our cards carefully**
  - There is acknowledgement of an emotional connection to the issues
  - Issues may be harder to define and may become obscured by the way they are discussed or communicated. i.e. emotionally loaded language is used.
  - Participants will admit that trust is not total. There is some distancing and suspicion between parties.
  - Selective withholding of information relevant to the situation.
  - In discussion there is some sniping, jokes and throw away lines have a hostile edge. Tendency to simplify and personalise.
  - Inaccuracies in others' ideas are pointed out mainly to score points.
  - Participants start to look around for supporters.
  - Parties would genuinely like a win – win but are open to win some – lose some solution. This moves the conflict resolution style from Owl to Fox.

## Category 2: We would like to get this sorted but we do need to be cautious and careful

- **Strategies for use in a category 2 conflict:**
- Category 2 conflicts require the addition of trust building and self / other awareness strategies
  - Agree to a temporary halt to the conflict and discuss a healthy process that all can agree to. Agree to simple ground rules for discussion.
  - Negotiate space to focus on teamwork, conflict and communication skills - use training and resources to support this.
  - Build trust through personal storytelling / sharing (maybe not directly related to the issues at hand) – timelines, sharing values that are important, common goals and interests.
  - Self awareness of the impact of the conflict and also the contribution each makes to the conflict is important
  - Encourage the appropriate expression of emotion. “I am feeling.....”
- **Then use all Category 1 negotiation and collaboration strategies**



# Category 2 Conflict Processes

**Emotionally loaded Disagreement**

- Create a safe space and establish a healthy process
- Agree to basic ground rules
- Facilitate sharing and disclosure

**Build Trust**

- Open up the conflict**
- Map the conflict
- Clarify the real issues
- Draw out needs, interests and values (NIV)
- Understand history
- Explore all causes

- Create multiple options
- Agree on criteria for evaluating options
- Listen for what this process reveals (backup?)

**Generate Solutions**

- Decide the outcome**
- Agree on how the decision will be made or discerned
- Make the decision
- Care for all impacted by the decision and by the process

**Work at creating and tending a high trust environment**

# Category 3: We need our viewpoint to prevail and will do whatever it takes to win.

- *Objective: To ensure our position is maintained or our view prevails. To win.*
- **Identifying Dynamics: The 'Contest'**
  - Participants begin to use contest language (Our way – Not yours! This is oppositional rather than collaborative. Win – lose thinking appears. Shift from self-protection to winning.)
  - The assumption is that the 'Bull' approach is needed and the parties will search for sources of the power they need to prevail.
  - Language reflects perceptual distortion and generalised emotions. I.e. "Lots of staff or members are concerned or upset". There are "either/or", "always", "never", "nobody".. Statements. E.g. "This church has never cared for its older members, so we are going to ....."
  - Quite strong personal and emotional attacks are employed in order to discredit others and influence people's thinking. Simplification and personalisation become focused.

**Category 3: We need our viewpoint to prevail and will do whatever it takes to win.**

○ **Identifying Dynamics (Cont): The contest**

- Informal clumps or coalitions begin to emerge, with internal extensive internal sharing, but with difficulty talking informally other parties.
- “We are right, the others need to see it and come and make peace”. (The need for initiating peace is assumed to be the responsibility of others, who are assumed to be in the wrong).
- Threats of consequences (leaving, stopping giving) if the decision goes against the group.
- There is the beginning of resistance to offers of peace-making processes like mediation or facilitation as these may force a compromise of the party’s position.
- Strong negative assumptions about the others’ inappropriate motives and intentions (mind reading).

**Category 3: We need our viewpoint to prevail and will do whatever it takes to win.**

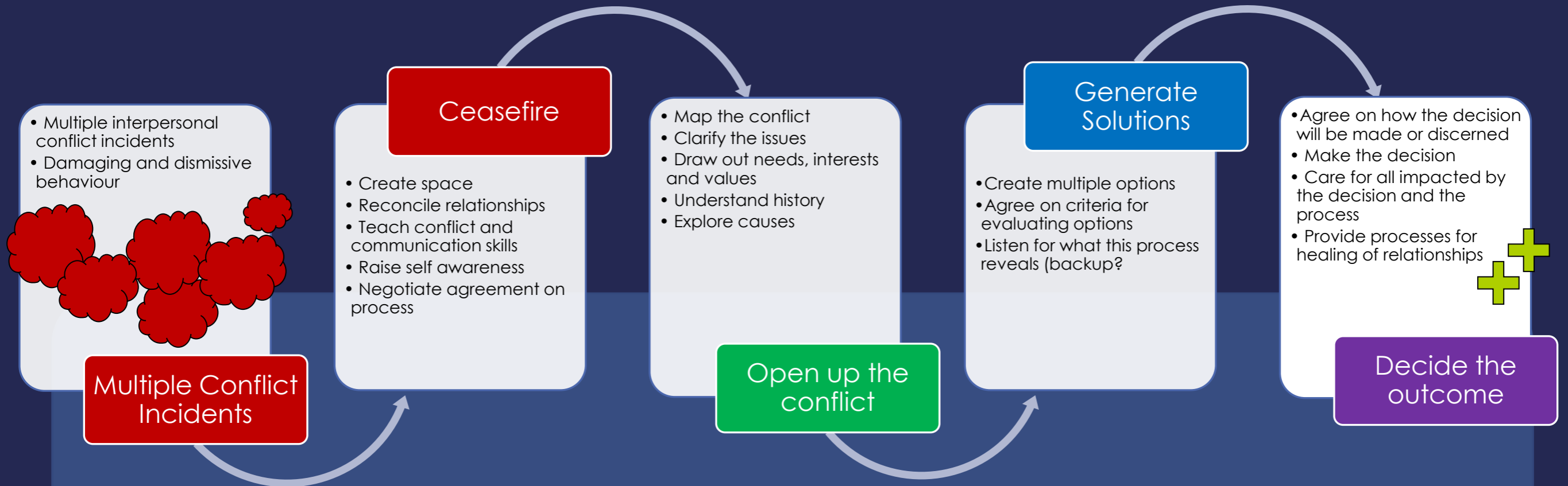
- **Strategies for use in a category 3 conflict:**
  - External process assistance from a facilitator, mediator, consultant is advised.
  - Negotiate an immediate ceasefire.
  - Develop and commit to firm and clear ground rules for the conflict and to covenant agreements of appropriate behaviour.
  - Structure the way the group will work through the conflict and seek agreement on process.
  - Work toward reconciling tense or broken relationships (apologies, forgiveness, interpersonal reconciliation).
  - Teach about conflict processes and dynamics and train all parties in positive conflict skills. Use an external source for this.
  - Use private sessions to enable insight, to coach and encourage. Assist each party gain insight into how they contribute to the problem.

**Category 3: We need our viewpoint to prevail and will do whatever it takes to win.**

- **Strategies for use in a category 3 conflict: (External process assistance advised)**
  - Search out super-ordinate goals, common needs, interests and values.
  - Understand the history and complex contributing factors to the conflict.
  - Clarify differences between assumptions and caricatures and reality.
  - Work to keep the focus on the issues and off individuals.
  - Work at increasing trust through sharing feelings and the personal impact of the conflict.
  - Use structured liturgical worship, intercession, prayer (Not spontaneous prayer or informal leading.)
  - Clarify the process of decision making
  - Negotiate and document agreements



# Category 3 Conflict Processes



Support the engagement of parties through careful process with clear agreed ground rules, accountability for behaviour and structured sessions.



**Category 4: The  
only way to resolve  
this is for one of us  
to leave and it  
should be you**

- *Objective: Solution through leaving or preferably getting the other to leave*
- **Identifying Dynamics: “Remove the opposition”**
  - Clear development of factions with leadership and tight internal factional boundaries around the position taken.
  - The unity of the factional group becomes more important than the unity of the whole - conflict in the faction is suppressed to give outward solidarity.
  - Language moves away from real issues and needs to ideological principles which are assumed to have been violated by the opposition.
  - No real interest in new contrary information, clarifying issues, understanding values or needs. Focus is invested in forcing a move.

**Category 4: The  
only way to resolve  
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should be you**

- *Objective: Solution through getting the other to leave*
- **Identifying dynamics**
  - Little interest in or commitment to process or to mediation, facilitation or consultation.
  - Parties attempt to recruit outsiders for validity and seek out anything which builds their case for removal.
  - The other party is marginalised, assumed to be hypocritical.
  - Quite vicious personal attacks and attempts at expulsion appear to the parties as justified.
  - Rejection rituals are common, 'Dancing the fight'. I.e. Walking past others, not acknowledging their presence or place.

**Category 4: The only way to resolve this is for one of us to leave and it should be you**

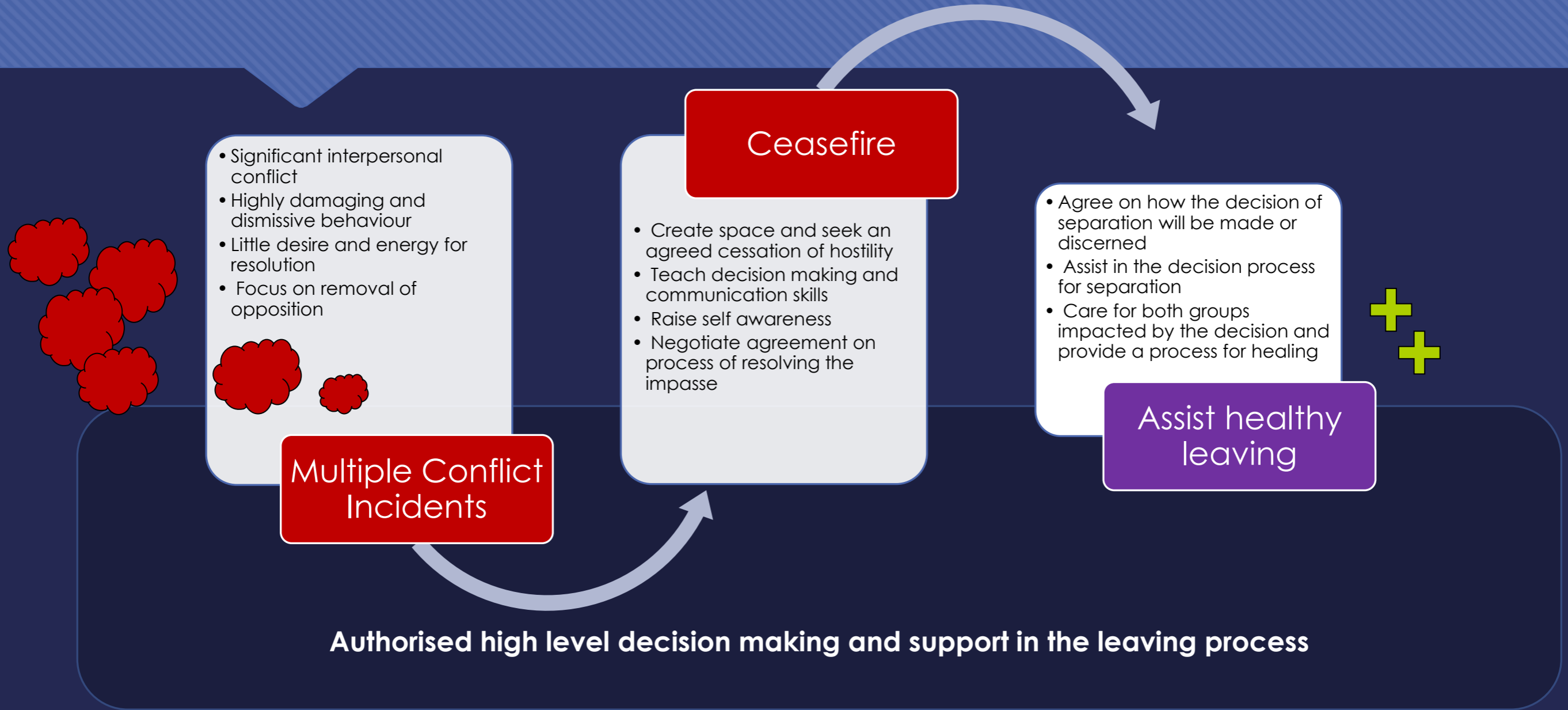
- **Strategies for use in a category 4 conflict:**
  - Once system behaviour reaches this level, 80% of category 4 conflicts resolve through a party actually leaving. This is likely to be a 'pick up the pieces' process rather than a 'resolution'.
  - Identify the risks and potential costs of conflict. A clear and realistic analysis of the costs of a conflict are one of the means of moving the conflict back to Category 3.
  - Work at the higher levels of organisation not the grass-roots.
  - Use only organisationally authorised processes: consultation, mediation, negotiation, arbitration, voting (accepted denominational processes). Follow these with care. Keep the authority of the leadership / majority clearly in focus.
  - Negotiate a settlement, the issues themselves may not be able to be resolved at this point.
  - After a win/lose decision acknowledge the pain and allow people to leave well with dignity and good closure.

**Category 4: The only way to resolve this is for one of us to leave and it should be you**

○ **Strategies:**

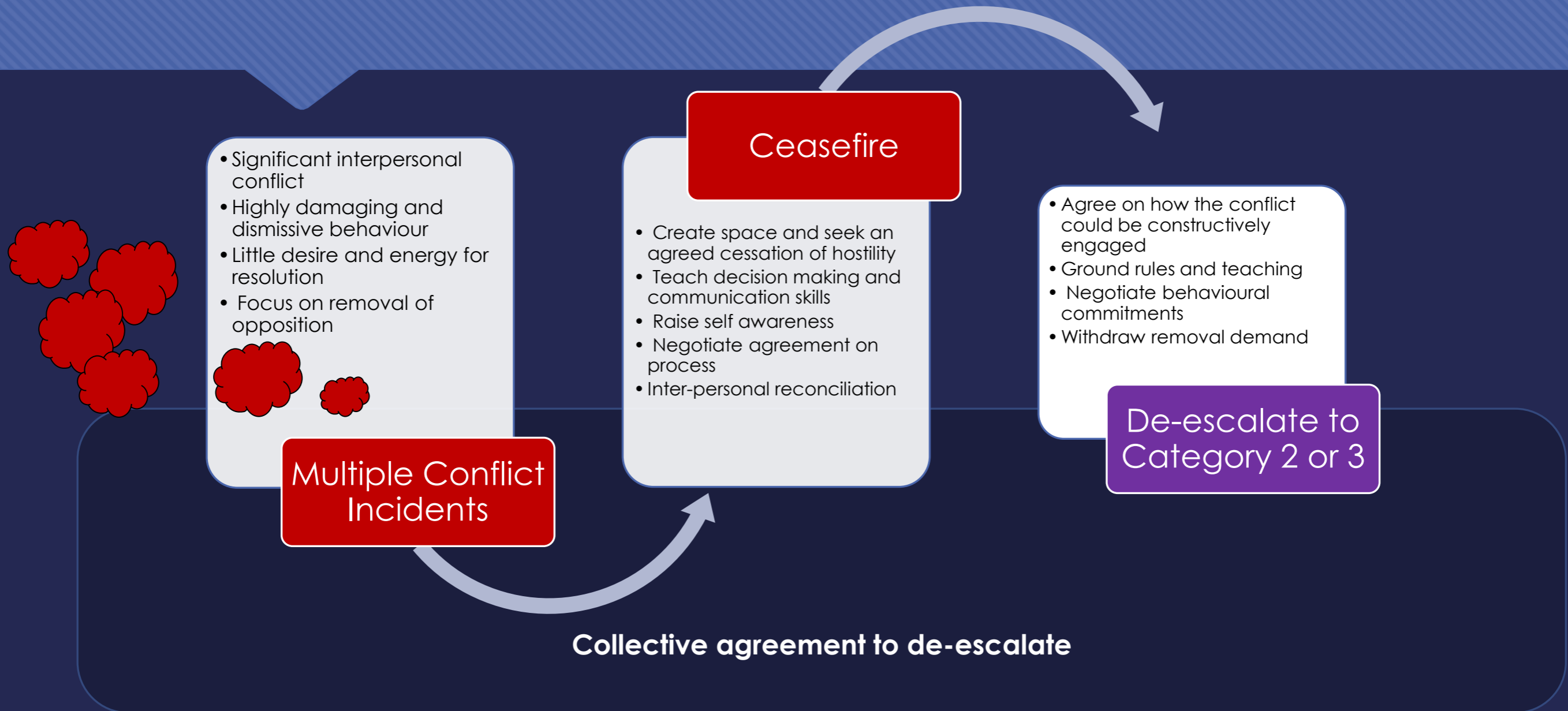
- In occasional circumstances (<20%), an independent third party can work with each conflicted group individually, coaching, searching for common ground, areas of interdependence, super-ordinate goals – and give them private feedback.
- If the third party can work with groups to help them recover the actual issues, and they are willing to agree to a process of exploring these toward resolution this is one circumstance where moving down a level to Category 3 may be possible. This requires very strong ground rules and a commitment to accountability for behaviour.

# Typical Category 4 Conflict Process





# Potential Category 4 De-escalation





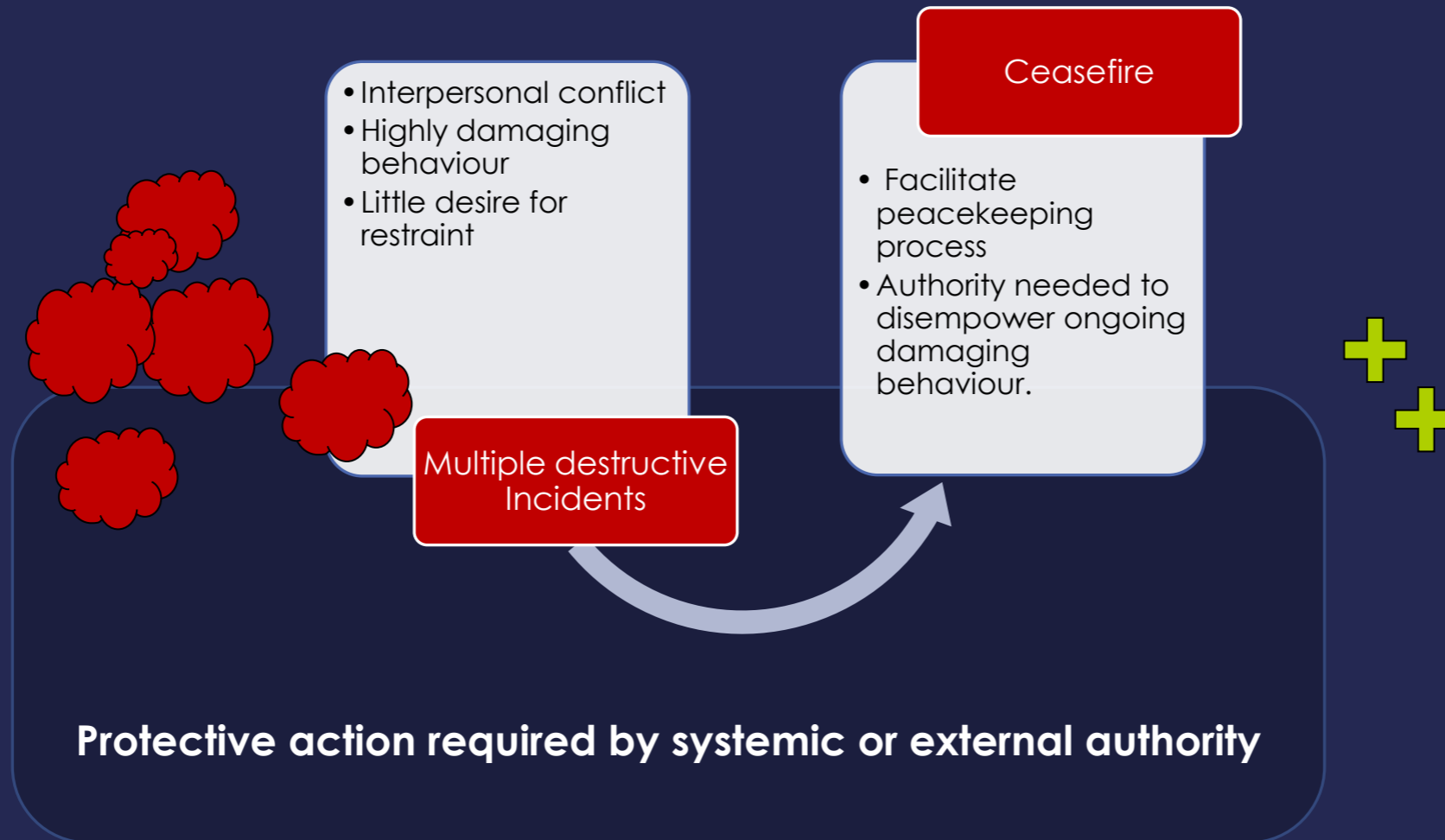
## Category 5: This person needs to be punished and destroyed

- *Objective: Damage or destroy the person*
- *Identifying Dynamics: Search and Destroy*
  - Intentionally damaging action is taken against another person.
  - Parties perceive themselves on the side of some righteous cause to rid the church or organisation (not just themselves) of this person / group.
  - Means are justified by 'righteous' end – there is no attempt to withdraw, be reasonable or to control emotion.
  - This is seen as the only option and parties present themselves as true heroes willing to do what has to be done to protect others.

# Category 5: This person needs to be punished and destroyed

- Strategies for use in category 5 situations:
  - The appropriate denominational or organisational authorities must act to keep parties from destructive behaviour.
  - There needs to be internal accountability or disciplinary processes for those who persist in this behaviour.
  - Separation can help but some form of peace-keeping force needs to be in place.
  - Removal of persistent offenders may finally be necessary.

# Category 5 Conflict Processes



# Category 0: Systemic Depression – Denial of the existence of conflict and hurt

- Category 0 is often a post traumatic reaction to a category 4 or 5 conflict. It can exist where there has been no capacity to process the conflict or to resolve any of the substantive issues.
- The actual systemic conflict is remains unresolved but is collectively kept suppressed. This leads to long term dysfunction.
- There can consequently be a 0 - 4 - 0 – 4 pattern over years unless the systemic issues are carefully resolved.

# Category R: Post Crisis Recovery

- Category R indicates a willingness on the part of a parish to engage in an intentional process of recovery following a high category three or category 4 conflict.
- Although the crisis is over, there will be elements of systemic conflict unresolved. In Category O these are suppressed in R there is a willingness to deal with them.

# Category R: Post Crisis Recovery

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Indicators:

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Recognition of the relational and systemic damage caused by the conflict and a willingness to accept some ownership of responsibility

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Acceptance for the need for pastoral care of those impacted and wounded

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Willingness to move toward reconciliation where possible and appropriate

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Willing to think through the learning that might come from the conflict

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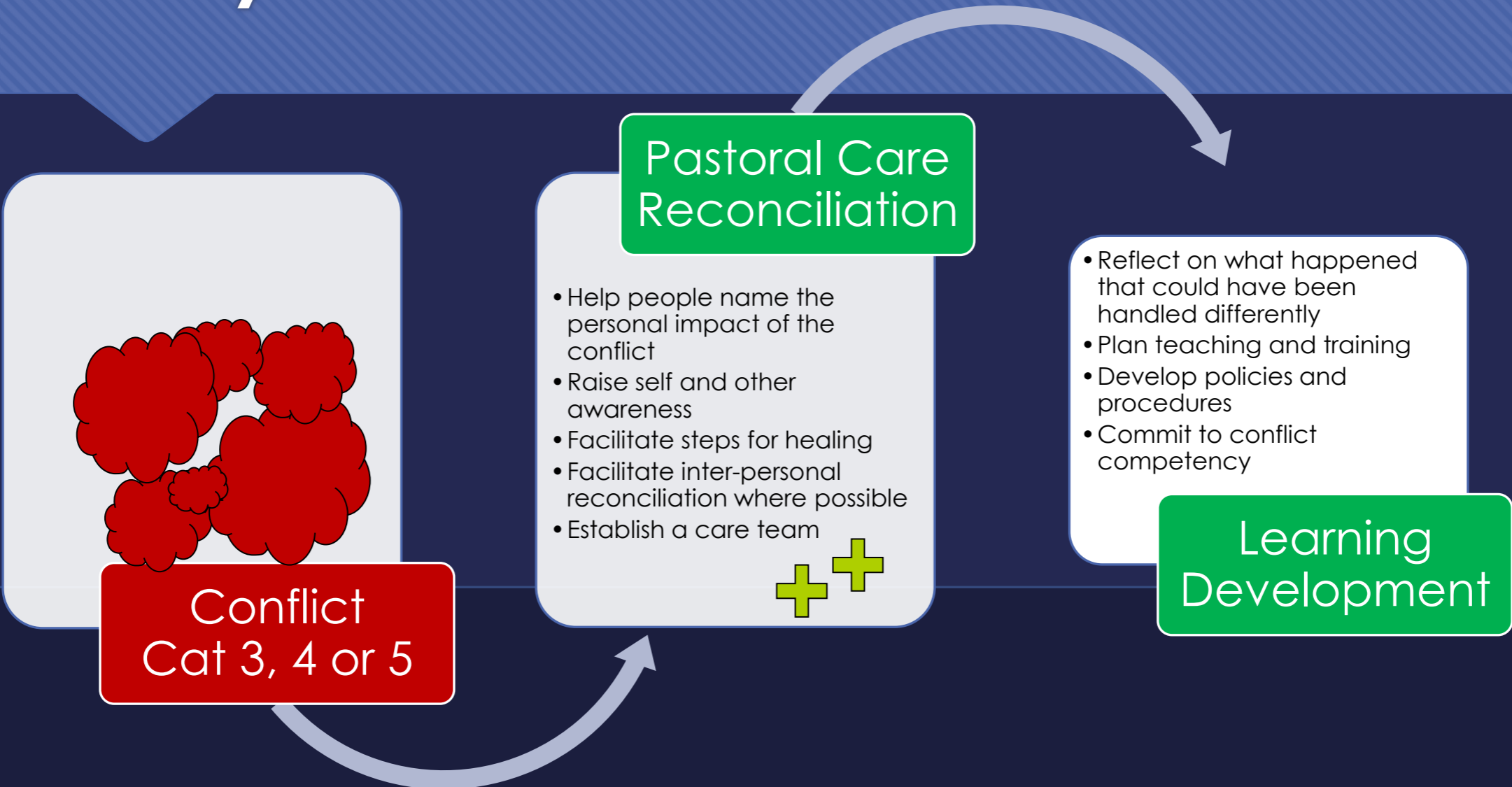
Ready to implement changes based on the experience of the past



# Category R: Recovery

- Strategies for use in Recovery situations:
  - The organisation or church requires an intentional conflict recovery process for a return to health
  - The organisation or church needs the opportunity to carefully and objectively re-examine the issues, attitudes and behaviours which characterised the conflict. An assessment process can assist in identifying the range of contributing issues and also the implications and impacts of the conflict.
  - Those wounded and damaged in the conflict need the opportunity for care and healing. Where possible there may need to be a final process of post-conflict reconciliation or healing.
  - Assistance may be required in facilitating a process of identifying the learnings out of the conflict and shaping a constructive plan for developing conflict skills and capacities.

# Recovery



Collective agreement to journey through recovery