

BUILDING MEMBERSHIP - ONE MEMBER AT A TIME

CONFLICT

Conflict is a normal and necessary part of healthy relationships. After all, people can't be expected to agree on everything at all times. Therefore, learning how to deal with conflict—rather than avoiding it—is crucial.

When conflict is mismanaged, it harms the relationship. But when handled in a respectful and positive way, conflict provides an opportunity for growth that ultimately strengthens the bond between two people. By learning the skills necessary for successful conflict resolution, you can face disagreements with confidence and keep personal and professional relationships strong and growing.

Conflict arises from differences. It occurs whenever people disagree over values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires. Sometimes these differences seem trivial. But when a conflict triggers strong feelings, a deep personal need such as a need to feel safe and secure, a need to feel respected and valued, or a need for greater closeness and intimacy is usually at the core of the problem.

Everyone needs to feel understood, nurtured, and supported. However the ~~way in~~ way in which these needs are met varies widely. Differing needs for feeling comfortable and safe create some of the most severe challenges in our personal and professional relationships.

Misunderstanding and communication problems remain the most common sources of strife ~~and~~ and interpersonal difficulties. Generational differences, personal management styles, educational background, and cultural diversity are all potential sources of misunderstandings.

Prevention is the medicine

The following suggestions are ways to prevent or avoid major conflict before it begins.

Clarify Expectations

Clarifying expectations within your unit will provide your members with a common ground to begin discussions:

1. Review or develop a clear statement of your unit mission or purpose.
2. Review or establish ground rules governing participation ~~and~~ sharing of responsibilities.
3. Depersonalize conflicts. ~~It~~ It is not about the person.
4. Recognize and utilize group process, including discussion and brainstorming.
5. Use structured processes for problem solving and conflict resolution.
6. Clearly and appropriately define individual responsibilities for work expected; ~~C~~ Clearly delineate connections between an individual's responsibility and the unit/HSA goal, objective or mission.
7. Clearly define ~~project~~ standards and time lines.

Questions that can help teams work through conflict:

1. What are we supposed to accomplish as a unit?
2. What are each of our roles and responsibilities in accomplishing that goal?
3. Who and when do each of us need to get information from?
4. If we get into trouble, whom can we ask for help?
5. How will we arrive at decisions?
6. What are the strengths that each of us brings for accomplishing our goals?
7. How can we make ourselves more accessible to one another?
8. What are we doing that is blocking the resolution of this problem?
9. How can we express differences without blaming others?
10. Which behaviors are unproductive? How can we help individuals take ownership of their unproductive behavior?
11. Don't excuse a team member when he or she behaves badly.

Suggestions for use in managing conflict within and among groups:

1. Recognize and acknowledge that conflict exists.
2. Analyze the existing situation.
Know exactly what the conflict is about. Does it involve values, goals, means to goals, territory, or a combination of these?
3. Analyze behavior of involved parties: members of the group(s). ???
4. Find out how other similar conflicts have been resolved.
5. Problem solving (5, 6 & 7 may be worked through together)
 - a. Define the unit problem as a shared need.
 - b. Focus on issues not personalities. Use these guidelines to help depersonalize conflicts.
 - c. Encourage each side to objectively explain his or her bottom line requirements. When the team is determining a solution, each person's criteria should be evaluated.
 - d. Remind the unit of ground rules, while generating options such as "no criticizing statements by other people until all ideas are posted."
 - e. Encourage everyone to listen to other points of view.
 - f. During the process, keep encouraging points of agreement.
 - g. Determine the criteria for a solution.
 - h. Generate options.
6. Facilitate Communication
 - a. Enhance communication. Open the lines for free discussion and involve all members.
 - b. Encourage accurate communication and feedback because negotiation (discussed below) depends on good communication.
 - c. Listen and raise questions.
 - d. Allow free expression. Constructive disagreement should not be suppressed.
 - e. Supply information and facts.
 - f. Maintain an objective (not emotional) level.
 - g. Stay on issues, not people.

- h. Provide the tact needed to "save face" for all parties. Everyone's integrity should remain intact.

7. Negotiate

- a. "The satisfaction of needs is the goal common to all negotiations," and that "the satisfaction of needs is the goal common to all negotiations.... Negotiation is a cooperative enterprise; common interests must be sought; negotiation is a behavioral process, not a game; in a good negotiation, everybody wins something."
- b. Determine possible solutions.
- c. Develop implementation plans.
- d. Review results later on a regular basis.

8. Make necessary **A**adjustments, **r**Reinforce

Conflict 101

If efforts to avoid conflict fail, the suggestions below are a guide to conflict resolution.

- A conflict is more than just a disagreement. It is a situation in which one or more parties perceive a threat (whether or not the threat is real).
- Conflicts continue to fester when ignored. Because conflicts involve perceived threats to our well-being and survival, they stay with us until we face and resolve them.
- We respond to conflicts based on our perceptions of the situation, not necessarily to an objective review of the facts. Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs.
- Conflicts trigger strong emotions and can lead to hurt feelings, disappointment, and discomfort. When handled in an unhealthy manner, it can cause irreparable rifts, and resentments. But when conflict is resolved in a healthy way, it increases our understanding of one another, builds trust, and strengthens our relationship bonds.
- Conflicts are an opportunity for growth. When you're able to resolve conflict in a unit, it builds trust. You can feel secure, knowing your unit can survive challenges and disagreements.
- *Know when conflict isn't just conflict.* If conflict arises due to sexual, racial, or ethnic issues, or if someone behaves inappropriately, that's not conflict. It is harassment. Take action and discuss the problem with a board member or headquarters.

How to deal with conflict

- Remain calm, non-defensive, and respectful of others and their reactions. By staying calm you can accurately read and interpret verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Communicate your needs clearly.

- Be ready to forgive and forget in order to move past the conflict without holding resentments or anger
- Be able and ready to seek compromise
- Have a belief that facing conflict head on is the best thing for both sides
- Pay attention to the feelings being expressed, as well as the spoken words of others.
- Be aware of and respectful of differences. By avoiding disrespectful words and actions, you can resolve the problem faster.
- Be specific in formulating statements. "I'm never invited to meetings" is not as effective as "I believe I would have been able to contribute some ideas at last Thursday's meeting."
- Resist the temptation to involve yourself in conflicts that do not directly involve you or your responsibilities. Even if someone has clearly been wronged, allow him or her to resolve the situation as he/she chooses.
- Try to depersonalize conflicts. Instead of a "me versus you" mentality, visualize an "us versus the problem" scenario. This is not only a more professional attitude, but it will also improve member relations and is in the best interests of the unit.
- Be open and listen to another's point of view. Reflect back to the person as to what you think you heard. This important clarification skill leads to less misunderstanding, with the other person feeling heard and understood. Before explaining your own position, try to paraphrase and condense what the other is saying into one or two sentences. Start with, "So you're saying that..." and see how much you really understand about your rival's position. You may find that you're on the same wavelength, but having problems communicating your ideas.
- Character assassination is unwarranted. Remember that you need to preserve a working relationship rather than a personal one, and your opinion of a person's character is generally irrelevant.
- Consider a mediator if the problem gets out of control, or if the issue is too emotional to resolve in a mutual discussion. You can consider using a neutral third party mediator.

Nonverbal communication plays a big role in conflict resolution

- The most important information exchanged during conflicts and arguments is often communicated nonverbally. Nonverbal communication is conveyed by emotionally driven facial expressions, posture, gesture, pace, tone and intensity of voice.
- When people are upset, the words used rarely convey the issues and needs at the heart of the problem. When we listen for what is felt, as well as said, we connect more deeply to our own needs and

emotions and to those of others. Listening in this manner also strengthens us, informs us, and makes it easier for others to hear us.

- When you're in the middle of a conflict, pay close attention to the other person's nonverbal signals. This will help you figure out what the other person is really saying and will help you respond in a way that builds trust, and gets to the root of the problem. Simple nonverbal signals such as a calm tone of voice, a reassuring touch, or an interested or concerned facial expression can go a long way toward relaxing a tense exchange.
- Make conflict resolution the priority rather than winning or "being right." Maintaining and strengthening the relationship, rather than "winning" the argument, should always be your first priority. Be respectful of the other person and his or her viewpoint.
- Pick your battles. Conflicts can be draining, so it's important to consider whether the issue is really worthy of your time and energy. Maybe you don't want to surrender a parking space if you've been circling for 15 minutes. But if there are dozens of spots, arguing over a single space isn't worth it.
- Be willing to forgive. Resolving conflict is impossible if you're unwilling or unable to forgive. Resolution lies in releasing the urge to punish, which can never compensate for our losses and only adds to our injury by further depleting and draining our lives.
- Know when to let something go. If you can't come to an agreement, agree to disagree. It takes two people to keep an argument going. If a conflict resolution is going nowhere, you can choose to disengage and move on.

Dealing with Group Conflict

Groups tend to "protect" their territories and maintain their boundaries by excluding others, rewarding and/or pushing group members for the degree to which they adhere to group norms and defend the territory in question, and by holding ethnocentric beliefs.

Groups may also "tend to believe that their way of thinking and doing things is not only the best but the only right way.

Conflict may arise over goals. Most conflict is the result of incompatibility of goals. However, there are also conflicts that stem from differences about the means to attain goals.

Conflict can also involve threats to behavior: "When values, policies and goals are changed, when territories are redefined, one must develop new behavior skills" (Robinson 1972).

Defining and sharpening issues is one of the positive functions of conflict among community groups. As sides form on an issue, arguments and positions are clarified, and people can more easily distinguish between two different points of view.

However, conflict may increase bitterness, alienation, and divisiveness within or among groups and may have long-lasting effects upon future cooperation among individuals and groups holding opposite views.

Conflict within a group can allow dissatisfied members to voice their complaints. And, the group may restructure itself to deal with internal dissension and dissatisfaction. However, conflict within a group often leads to internal tension and disruption. Member's attention may be diverted from the goals of the group to focus on the conflict.

The structure of the group and its degree of tolerance of conflict will affect the results of intra-group dissatisfaction and dissension. Groups that have developed close bonds and whose members feel a great involvement and sense of belonging tend to "play down" or suppress conflict and hostile feelings which may be seen as a threat to the unity of the group. Because of this tendency, feelings of hostility within a group can accumulate and intensify over time. If conflict eventually erupts it may be quite intense.

Conflict also is potentially destructive in groups when it consumes individual members' energies. However, conflict can interfere with group process and create so much interpersonal hostility that group members may become unwilling or unable to work with one another.

"When conflict arises, we need to be able to manage it so that it becomes a positive force, rather than a negative force threatening to disrupt the group or community." Parker (1974)