



# Managing Conflict



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## Fact Sheet

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The potential for conflict exists whenever and wherever people have contact. It basically involves one or more of the following:

1) competing interests or goals; 2) different ideas about methods of reaching goals; or 3) incomplete understanding or hidden personal feelings. In creative management of conflict all parties need to:

- Recognize and acknowledge that it exists.
- Facilitate open, accurate communication and active listening.
- Maintain an objective, not emotional, stance; stay on the issues, not people.
- Find the common interests and goals so everybody wins something.
- Make the necessary adjustments, reinforce, confirm, make the agreement work.
- Remember that conflicting ideas lead to stronger, more effective groups.

Differences of opinion and conflict are common to any volunteer organization or community group, as well as to families and friends. Where people of different backgrounds and interests come together for group decision-making, differences of opinion are to be expected.

Too often, however, interpersonal conflict is suppressed in favor of group harmony. This is dangerous. Suppressing conflict only drives it underground to reappear later in some more destructive form. Also, to discourage strong feelings and convictions kills the very vitality that the group so badly needs. Conflict can stimulate new thought, lead to more creative solutions, and keep a group alert to the various interests of its members. Conflict gets internal dissension and dissatisfaction out in the open where it can be used in making the group more responsive to its members.

Conflict, then, is best dealt with openly. As long as conflict is focused on the job to be done — rather than on personalities — the gains usually outweigh the costs.

Conflict management is sometimes referred to as “agreeing to disagree.” Conflict resolution means that the differences are successfully combined or revised to create a new level of satisfaction.

### **Why does conflict occur?**

Human behavior studies indicate that some conflict is inevitable in human relationships. Clashes often occur more over perceived differences than real ones. People anticipate blocks to achieving their goals that may or may not be there. Conflict occurs when:

- **There is a lack of communication.** Failure to share ideas and feelings allows the other person to “fill in the gap.” We “read in” what we think the other person or persons will say or anticipate how they will respond. Then, we often suspect negative things which provoke anxiety, leading us to look for the worst. If this continues, trust becomes lower and we may become suspicious and defensive.
- **There is a value conflict in which two people have different attitudes, beliefs and expectations.** These differences may interfere in making decisions if we are inflexible and hold rigid beliefs about the “right way” to do things. Two people choose different goals or different methods to achieve the same goals because they have different values and beliefs. Since each goal requires an investment of time, effort and some sacrifice, we often cannot pursue one goal without sacrificing the others to some extent.
- **There is a lack of effective leadership or decision making.** Lack of agreement about “who’s in charge” or “how we are going to get things done” in any situation can be a source of conflict. For example, if one person in a group expects democratic decision-making (all members have input), and the other expects someone to be in charge and tell the members what to do, they may have difficulty resolving differences of opinion. Then, when differences exist, they become sidetracked into a hassle over who will decide, or whose opinion is going to be accepted as the “right” one, or what the decision-making processes should be. The resulting conflict becomes a “win-lose” struggle.
- **There are discrepancies in role expectations.** Difficulties can arise if people see their own and each others’ roles differently. For example, if the president sees her/his role as “running the organization,” and the members see themselves as not only contributing information and opinions, but also having a real voice in decisions, conflict may arise.
- **There is low productivity.** Being able to accomplish tasks and achieve goals is a necessary ingredient in the organizational environment. And, if the task is not done, we may get angry. If the other person responds to our anger by performing the task, a response pattern of anger is established to get results. Groups with low productivity may try nagging, making trade-offs (I’ll do this if you do that), and criticizing, but these tend to produce only short-term success.
- **Change causes a shift in equilibrium.** While change is considered to be a “given” for people working and living together, another “given” is that people tend to prefer secure, predictable patterned responses to the unknown. When changes occur abruptly and unpredictably, conflict may follow.
- **Forces may have been at work for a long time to cause such a change.** But, when an urgent need appears suddenly, it provokes anger, anxiety and confusion. Both a process and an actual decision or action plan have to be developed.
- **Unresolved prior conflict.** As the number of past unresolved conflicts increases between people, so does the possibility of future ones. Many people shy away from conflict management because memories of past conflicts still hurt. Probably the most lasting of those “scars” have been caused by conflicts with those we are closest to — family, close friends, trusted colleagues in volunteer or work groups.

## **Methods of managing conflict**

Before we try to work through a conflict with another person to achieve a more constructive outcome, there are some questions we must ask ourselves:

- Is the conflict issue really worth the effort to resolve it?
- Are the other persons in the conflict really important to me and/or to the group work?

## **Creative Conflict Resolution**

In any situation involving two or more individuals, there is occasionally a struggle over guidelines or rules — who sets them, the kinds of rules that exist and what happens when rules are broken.

## **Some guidelines for having a “creative” conflict**

Here are some suggested guidelines that all parties must agree to for the creative conflict resolution process to proceed. If they don't, the process will quickly deteriorate as people try to “win” as much as possible and “lose” as little as possible.

1. Agree that now is a good time to attempt to resolve the conflict. Allow “prime time” when energy is high and motivation is positive, not when you are angry or tired or trying to meet a deadline to adjourn.
2. The goal of creative conflict is deeper understanding, not “I win, you lose.” There must be an underlying attitude of respect, caring, forgiveness, and no harm. The people involved share a common goal.
3. Discuss the specific issue or specific behavior, not the person, personality or motivation.
4. Focus on the present. Avoid engaging in faultfinding from the past.
5. Provide “face-saving” mechanisms. Don't corner the other person. Allow a “time out” if emotion gets too heavy. Then set a time to resume again. Sometimes you have to agree to disagree. At other times, a trial period to see how something works out will be useful.
6. When you have come to terms, put the disagreement away until you agree that it needs more discussion.

After everyone has agreed on guidelines, the next step is a negotiating method that considers both the relationship and the issue at stake.

## **Resolving a disagreement**

The following method is designed to help two individuals resolve a particular disagreement or conflict. For this to work, both individuals must want to have some sort of resolution to the situation. The process goes as follows:

1. Person A completes the sequence of four statements (a, b, c, d) from his/her point of view. Person A should be very specific and focus on behaviors. Remember, the goal is mutual resolution, not winning.

- a) Description of the current situation (“The conflict I’m having with you is . . .” “The problem as I see it is . . .”).
- b) Description of the ideal situation (“What I’d like to see is . . . “What I’d like the outcome to be is . . .”).
- c) Description of current feelings or emotions (“The way I feel about this situation is . . .” “I feel . . . when we . . . because . . .”).
- d) Description of self-intention (“What I’m willing to do to create what I want is . . .” “I’m willing to reach a settlement by . . .”).

2. Person B then paraphrases what Person A has said. If the paraphrase is accepted as accurate by Person A, Person B goes through the same sequence of statements and Person A paraphrases them.

3. Person A then asks, “Can we reach an agreement?” If the answer is “no,” Person A begins the sequence again. If the answer is “yes,” both parties propose possible solutions.

4. Person A presents four possible solutions, considering what Person B has said, ranking them 1, 2, 3, 4. Person B does the same. Person A selects one of B’s solutions and Person B selects one of A’s solutions as being the most desirable.

The goal is negotiation over which solution will accomplish the greatest outcome for both. Agree to try it out on a temporary basis to assess its consequences. Then come back and make any small changes needed. Any resolution must be tried willingly by both parties. A lack of commitment to do so may shatter the outcome and lower the trust level.

For more serious conflicts, additional study or assistance may be needed.

### **Conclusion**

In creative management of conflict all parties need to find the common ground — that is, the goals and interests they share. This serves as a foundation for resolving differences.

### **Adapted from:**

Douglas Dunn, *Motivating People in Groups*. University of Arizona Extension Service.

Charlie Griffin, *Conflict Resolutions and Decision-Making*. FCL Presentation, McPherson, KS, 1991.

Herb Lindgren. *Managing Conflict Creatively*. University of Nebraska Extension Service.