

COPING WITH CONFLICT

Conflict is virtually inevitable in a collaborative endeavor. Disagreements are bound to happen when a diverse collection of voices and perspectives gathers. While we may all agree on an overall vision or goal, we may strongly disagree about the best way to achieve it. However, conflict does not always have to be negative. When handled appropriately, conflict can provide an opportunity for constructive change.

Always assume there is a legitimate reason for the group conflict. Do not seek out a “trouble-maker” or lay blame. If serious conflict occurs, take the time to resolve it. If conflicts are ignored or buried by the group, they are bound to grow larger and resurface again. If you are unsure about the cause of group conflict, ask other thoughtful group members outside of the group setting.

Conflict evokes emotion. When the group members are hurt by conflict, it must be addressed or they will not feel safe. This could stop the group from making any further significant decisions. Open, clear communication is the best prevention to avoiding unnecessary conflicts and can help resolve misunderstandings before they become full-blown arguments.

Steps for Resolving Conflict

1. Understand diversity of styles, background, perspective, assumptions, race, ethnicity, culture, language, training, and point of view. Be aware that cultural differences can affect our approach to communicating, disclosing, making decisions, and resolving conflict.
2. Surface differences early.
3. Assume equal rights – that is, everyone has the same right to satisfaction.
4. Identify the probable cause of the conflict:
 - ✓ Are differences of opinion thriving on lack of information?
 - ✓ Is there a power struggle or competition? Are two individuals trying for leadership or control?
 - ✓ Are institutional interests at stake?

- ✓ Is there a “personality conflict?” That is, are individuals personalizing differences of style, communication, or approach?
 - ✓ Is the group tired? Feeling hopeless or discouraged or unsuccessful?
 - ✓ Is the group confused about its task?
 - ✓ Are differences of power related to race or culture causing conflict?
5. Negotiate solutions using a problem-solving approach (see guidelines for consensus). You may consider asking a mediator or other neutral third party to facilitate. Hear both sides and focus on shared interests. What does each party want? Where is the common ground? What solution(s) would be most fair?
 6. Develop a written or verbal agreement and a process for checking progress.

Negotiation Skills

Listening is the ability to hear the other’s point of view. Be prepared to listen with your ears, eyes, heart and mind. “Active Listening” is responding back to the speaker by paraphrasing or clarifying the person’s position, feelings and content. Give your full attention without thinking of what you will say next while the other person is speaking.

Empathize. Try to step into the other person’s shoes so you can better understand their experience.

Discuss differences openly and respectfully. Take turns speaking and listening. Coercion, demands or threats are non productive.

Distinguish between fact, perceptions, feelings, values and assumptions.

Use “I” statements to describe the situation and how you are affected. Avoid blame, judgment and personal attacks.

Assume good intentions.

Focus on validating truths rather than defending – what is true about the other person’s point?

Concentrate on tangible outcomes.