

Conflict . . . An Opportunity for Development

~ Agenda ~

Introductions and Workshop Objectives

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Key Elements of Conflict

The Conflict Cycle

A Video Demonstration

Part II: Resolving Conflict

Techniques for Problem-solving

Practicing Conflict Resolution Skills

Summary Discussion

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Understanding Conflict

Key elements of conflict:

- ✓ There must be at least two parties involved.
- ✓ There must be some kind of a struggle or threat, either real or suspected; or fear of loss.
- ✓ There must be some interaction or interference.
- ✓ The transaction may be emotional.

A positive perspective of conflict:

Conflict is an opportunity for creative change and development!

Common misconceptions about conflict . . .

- Ø Harmony is normal, and conflict is abnormal.
Some level of conflict is present (or could develop) in any number of situations. The key is to understand that conflict is normal and inevitable, and learn some techniques to manage it.
- Ø Conflict and disagreements are the same.
Often, disagreements are the result of miscommunication or misunderstanding, and can be resolved by clarifying information. Conflict is more serious than disagreement, and usually involves incompatible goals.
- Ø Conflict is the result of personality problems.
Personalities do not conflict . . . people's behaviors conflict.
- Ø Conflict and anger are closely merged.
Conflict involves issues as well as emotions, and the issue and the participants determine the emotions generated. Parties in conflict may feel fear, excitement, sadness, frustration and other emotions, as well as anger.
- Ø Confrontation in conflict is inherently destructive.
Though many conflict situations result in destructive behavior, opportunities for growth and positive development are present in each case.

The Conflict Cycle¹

Conflicts usually follow this cycle, beginning with tension development and ending with some adjustment. A conflict may progress through each stage, skip stages, get stuck in a stage, or move backward to a previous stage.

1. Tension Development

5. Adjustments

2. Role Dilemma

4. Confrontation

3. Injustice Collecting

Types of adjustments

- *Domination:* The strong party may “win” by forcing its preferred outcome. In time, however, the “losers” may regroup and gather strength to continue the fight directly or indirectly.
- *Cold war:* The opposing parties are of equal strength, which results in a stalemate. Each party tries to weaken the other by working behind the scenes.
- *Avoidance:* People repress their emotional reactions, look the other way, or leave the situation entirely. Participants in the conflict can’t always avoid the opposing party, but they try hard to avoid the situation or the issue. The weaker party may choose to avoid the conflict if the alternative is to be dominated by the opposition.
- *Compromise:* The parties may choose to compromise, each giving a little and losing a little.
- *Collaboration:* The parties look for a new solution, one that goes beyond compromise.

¹ Source: Robinson, Jerry R. and Louis S. DiFonzo. 1991. Conflict Management in Community Groups. University of Illinois Extension, Urbana, Illinois.

Some causes of conflict . . .

Conflict can result from a variety of causes, some of which are listed below. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but the list does include some of the most common causes of conflict.

- ❖ Faulty communication, including distortion, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding.
- ❖ Competition for limited resources.
- ❖ Clash of values.
- ❖ Poorly defined responsibilities.
- ❖ Change.
- ❖ Need for recognition.

Warning signs of conflict . . .

- ❖ Ambiguous jurisdictions: if boundaries of responsibility and authority are unclear, conflict is likely to occur as people struggle to define their roles.
- ❖ Competition for limited resources: competition for rewards or for scarce resources (real or perceived) escalates the likelihood of conflict.
- ❖ Communication barriers: lack of effective communication, such as misunderstandings in terminology and an unwillingness to listen to others, increases the likelihood of conflict.
- ❖ Overdependency: if one party depends too heavily on the other for resources or performance, conflict is more likely to occur.
- ❖ Differentiation in an organization: the greater the degree of differentiation in an organization (levels of authority, types, numbers of specific tasks, and so on), the greater the potential for conflict.
- ❖ Association of the parties: interaction creates opportunities for conflict. However, at some point, when the interaction serves to facilitate communication and foster shared goals, the likelihood of conflict decreases.
- ❖ Need for consensus: when all parties must agree on the outcome, disagreements tend to escalate.
- ❖ Behavior regulations: conflicts are likely to occur when controls (rules, regulations and formal policies) are imposed.
- ❖ Unresolved prior conflicts: unresolved conflicts foster continuing and new conflicts.

Resolving Conflict

Using "I" messages . . .

An "I" message allows the speaker to describe his or her feelings about another party's behavior. When the speaker focuses on his or her own feelings, the threat is taken out of the message. The speaker always starts out by saying "I feel . . ."

A "you" message can order, command, blame, label or ridicule. These messages are threatening and accusatory. The listener's feelings may be hurt and he or she could become defensive. Examples of "you" messages include:

You're driving me crazy!

You made me foul up this project.

Clean up your messy room! You are such a slob!

You don't seem to care about this job, since you arrive late every day.

You hurt my feelings. Why don't you care about how I feel?

Practicing "I" messages . . .

An "I" message consists of three parts: the speaker's feelings, a description of the other party's behavior, and the effect of that behavior on the speaker. For example, an "I" message might be:

"I start to feel nervous when you tap your pencil on the table during our meetings. I become frustrated and get distracted by the tapping." This is a non-threatening description of the situation as the speaker sees it. Note that the speaker doesn't try to identify the motivation for the tapping, or attribute any personality flaws to the tapper. The offending table-tapper can easily acknowledge this simple description of the events. A follow-up, which suggests a change in behavior, is reasonable after this exchange. "Would you please stop tapping your pencil during our meetings?"

Practice sending "I" messages using this framework . . .

I feel _____ (describe a feeling)

when you _____ (describe a behavior)

because _____ (describe the effect).

Sample situations (choose one to practice the "I" message framework) . . .

- ✓ Your teenager constantly leaves his room in a mess.
- ✓ Your co-worker fails to complete the assignments she has agreed to.
- ✓ A neighbor borrowed your lawnmower and hasn't returned it . . . now you need it!
- ✓ Your aunt tells you that you are spoiling your children.
- ✓ Your spouse doesn't seem interested in sharing responsibility for household chores.
- ✓ Your friend told someone else something that you told in confidence.

Techniques for problem-solving -- six steps to follow:

- Step 1. ***Eliminate false conflicts:*** Sometimes we find ourselves in conflict because our information is inaccurate. Check the facts and ensure that each party understands the situation completely and accurately. You may resolve the “conflict” by clearing up a misunderstanding!
- Step 2. ***Identify concerns and analyze interests:*** Each party or stakeholder should have a chance to articulate his or her concerns. Other parties must listen respectfully. It is often helpful to make notes during explanations. This is a time to discuss the problem, not the solution.
- Step 3. ***Arrange concerns in priority order:*** Parties arrange their concerns from highest importance to lowest importance.
- Step 4. ***Make concessions:*** Through discussion and brainstorming, solutions are suggested and concessions are negotiated. If the parties cannot come to a mutually acceptable agreement, go back to identifying concerns and arranging concerns in priority order until an agreement can be reached. In some cases, the only agreement is to meet again. Conflicts develop over time and are resolved over time.

Optional steps to use when appropriate:

- Step 5. ***Develop a written agreement:*** If the parties come to agreement, the agreement(s) is written and shared with each party.
- Step 6. ***Set a date for follow-up:*** Deadlines for action and for follow-up are part of the written agreement. Follow-up might be a meeting face-to-face, a telephone call or an event during which both parties can report about how the agreement is working.

Engage in “unconditionally constructive” Strategies:

In their book, Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate², Roger Fisher and Scott Brown suggest a strategy of being “unconditionally constructive.” Fisher and Brown suggest, “do only those things that are both good for the relationship and good for us; whether or not they reciprocate.” This strategy results in the most effective path toward mutually beneficial outcomes. It requires that we focus on important outcomes, including the preservation of the relationship, which is the basis for any work on resolving differences. It also suggests that regardless of how our adversaries behave, we continue to engage in activities which improve the relationship and further our objectives.

² Fisher, Roger and Scott Brown. 1988. Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate. Penguin Books, New York, NY.

Case Study: Big Deals, Big Decisions

- Step 1. Within your small group, assign each of the following roles to one person.
- Step 2. Study your role and think through your interests, the position you will advocate, and the outcome you hope for.
- Step 3. Review the techniques for problem-solving (page 5 of this handout).
- Step 4. Hold a meeting, as described on page 7.
- Step 5. During the meeting, the observer will note how each of the six steps in problem-solving was used.
- Step 6. Discuss how your group used the techniques for problem-solving to come to an adjustment. Did you follow the six steps? What is the outcome? Could it have been better? How?

Roles Roles Roles Roles Roles Roles Roles Roles

Terry a semi-retired farmer who owns about 60 acres currently zoned agricultural. Terry wants to sell this land for development. Terry has talked with Kelly about petitioning the county zoning board of appeals to change the zoning from agricultural to residential. For the past five years, Terry has rented out this land for pasture.

Chris a member of a local environmental group, which is working to limit development in lands zoned as agricultural, and would like to set up a preserve to begin to restore natural prairie in the county.

Sam Sam's home on five acres is three miles from Terry's tract of 60 acres. Sam moved to the country to be away from houses and development. The last thing Sam wants is more housing nearby.

Kelly a local contractor, is talking with Terry about buying the 60-acre tract for a housing development.

Pat serves on the township board, and is also a member of the county zoning board. Pat knows that the proposed change in zoning from agricultural to residential or commercial will cause quite a stir among county residents. There are heated debates about where residential development should occur in the county, and how the school system and municipal services will support the families in these houses.

Fran chairs the township board. Terry has approached Fran about supporting the change in zoning. "This is good development for the township," Terry said. "And we've been friends for 35 years. This is a big deal for all of us. You should support me on this, against big county government." Fran is torn between an obligation as township board chair and friend to Terry.

The observer watches the meeting and takes notes as the process develops. The observer will record how each actor used the techniques to manage conflict (these six steps are described on page 5 of this handout).

The meeting

Fran and Pat, who serve on the township board, have called an informal meeting to discuss the proposed development of Terry's 60 acres. They've invited Terry, Sam and Kelly to discuss the options and determine next steps. During the meeting, Chris walks in.

"This is an open meeting, right?" Chris asked. "What are you all doing here?"

"Well, Chris, we're trying to organize our thoughts about the idea of a housing development on Terry's 60-acre tract," said Fran. "When Pat goes to the county zoning board meeting, the board should know what we, as a township, think about this project. As you know, the board includes one person from each township in the county, plus the chair. They'll vote, but the vote will be influenced by what they perceive the township wants to do. Please, sit down and work with us."

The Observer's Notes . . .

During the meeting, the observer takes notes as the group uses the six steps of solving problems to manage the situation. After the group has ended the meeting, the observer reports on the following questions:

- How did the group use the six steps to manage the situation? (see page 5 of this handout)
- Did the group define the issue and agree upon an action?
- How would you characterize the adjustment? (domination, cold war, avoidance, compromise, or collaboration)

Questions to consider

*What **are** they all doing there?*

Will Chris be invited to join the meeting?

Who will manage the discussion?

Will this group be making any decisions? What decisions?

What are the outcomes from this meeting? How will these outcomes affect the township and the county?

How will these outcomes affect Terry and Fran's friendship?

Will Sam have new neighbors? Will those new neighbors be people or prairie dogs?

Evaluation -- Conflict . . . An Opportunity for Development

Were the topics presented relevant to your work or family life?
(5=right on target, 3=average, 1=missed the mark).

5 4 3 2 1

How successful was this workshop in giving you ideas and resources you can put into use?
(5=excellent, 3=average, 1=poor)

5 4 3 2 1

Rate the *content value* of the workshop (5=excellent, 3=average, 1=poor).

5 4 3 2 1

Rate the *presentation* of the workshop (5=excellent, 3=average, 1=poor).

5 4 3 2 1

Did you find this workshop thought provoking and helpful? (5=very, 3=somewhat, 1=not at all)

5 4 3 2 1

Overall rating of the workshop. (5=excellent, 3=average, 1=poor)

5 4 3 2 1

What did you like best about the workshop?

What did you like least?

What would you like to know more about?

THANK YOU!