Guide to Conflict Resolution

In this document you’ll find: (press ctrl + click to jump to title)
Nature of Conflict
Facilitating a Convergence of Means
Types of Conflict
Ways of Dealing with Conflict
Hints for De-Escalation
Specific Techniques for De-Escalation
10 Step Communication Breakthrough
Voicing & Hearing Complaints

Nature of Conflict

Conflict: Varied Perspectives; Belief Systems and Values; Interests

There is, perhaps, nothing more common than conflict. As a mediator, conflict may
constructively be viewed as resulting from:

· varied perspectives on the situation;
· differing belief systems and values resulting from
· participant's accumulated life experience and
· conditioning; and
· differing objectives and interests.

Effectively dealing with conflict requires the expression and management of participants'
varying perspectives, interests, belief systems and values. It is important to meet the
participants exactly where they are. Hear from them fully before tying to lead them
anywhere.

You can not effectively move toward resolution until each participant experiences
themselves to be heard on "their perspective," "what they want," and "why."

Common Ground - Overlapping Interests and Interdependence

overlapping interests -- participants share in their own relationship, typically have
common friends and colleagues, and also have interest in resolving the conflict in an
expeditious and economic way;

interdependence -- no single participant has the ability to unilaterally impose a
resolution on another without paying a very substantial price for doing so; and points of
agreement -- even when there are many disputed issues, there may still be a number of
points of agreement or possible agreement. The wise mediator assists the parties to
identify what they may be easily able to agree on as a foundation for additional discussions.

Conflict arises when one or more participants view the current system as not working. At least one party is sufficiently dissatisfied with the status quo that they are willing to own the conflict and speak up with the hope of being able to influence the situation to arrive at an improved condition. Conflict may be viewed as a process we put ourselves through to achieve a new condition and self definition.

Through conflict we have opportunities to be creatively self-defining. If nothing else, conflict allows us to do things differently in the future. Through the resolution of conflict, we can, if we choose, evolve and redefine ourselves, our relationships, our community, our society and our world.

It is no accident that we most often find ourselves in conflict with those with whom we spend the most time - family, friends, business associates, and fellow organizational members. There is a great benefit, in terms of the quality of our lives, in being able to constructively resolve conflict with those around us.

**Facilitating a Convergence of Means**

Conflict Resolution represents a convergence of means (or arrangements for the future), not necessarily participants' interests or perspectives. Participants will commonly come to support the same arrangement or agreement for very different reasons. Conflict resolution does not necessarily resolve tensions between parties. Conflict resolution may simply sufficiently align matters to allow each participant to make enough progress toward his or her desired ends to prefer declaring there to be a "a state of agreement" rather than the uncertain and stressful "state of disagreement."

**Types of Conflict**

**Relationship Conflicts**

- Relationship conflicts occur because of the presence of strong negative emotions, misperceptions or stereotypes, poor communication or miscommunication, or repetitive negative behaviors.
- Relationship problems often fuel disputes and lead to an unnecessary escalating spiral of destructive conflict.
- Supporting the safe and balanced expression of perspectives and emotions for acknowledgment (not agreement) is one effective approach to managing relational conflict.

**Data Conflicts**
Data conflicts occur when people lack information necessary to make wise decisions, are misinformed, disagree on which data is relevant, interpret information differently, or have competing assessment procedures. Some data conflicts may be unnecessary since they are caused by poor communication between the people in conflict. Other data conflicts may be genuine incompatibilities associated with data collection, interpretation or communication. Most data conflicts will have "data solutions."

**Interest Conflicts**

Interest conflicts are caused by competition over perceived incompatible needs. Conflicts of interest result when one or more of the parties believe that in order to satisfy his or her needs, the needs and interests of an opponent must be sacrificed. Interest-based conflict will commonly be expressed in positional terms. A variety of interests and intentions underlie and motivate positions in negotiation and must be addressed for maximized resolution. Interest-based conflicts may occur over substantive issues (such as money, physical resources, time, etc.); procedural issues (the way the dispute is to be resolved); and psychological issues (perceptions of trust, fairness, desire for participation, respect, etc.). For an interest-based dispute to be resolved, parties must be assisted to define and express their individual interests so that all of these interests may be jointly addressed. Interest-based conflict is best resolved through the maximizing integration of the parties' respective interests, positive intentions and desired experiential outcomes.

**Structural Conflicts**

Structural conflicts are caused by forces external to the people in dispute. Limited physical resources or authority, geographic constraints (distance or proximity), time (too little or too much), organizational changes, and so forth can make structural conflict seem like a crisis. It can be helpful to assist parties in conflict to appreciate the external forces and constraints bearing upon them. Structural conflicts will often have structural solutions. Parties' appreciation that a conflict has an external source can have the effect of them coming to jointly address the imposed difficulties.

**Value Conflicts**

Value conflicts are caused by perceived or actual incompatible belief systems. Values are beliefs that people use to give meaning to their lives. Values explain what is "good" or "bad," "right" or "wrong," "just" or "unjust." Differing values need not cause conflict. People can live together in harmony with different value systems. Value disputes arise only when people attempt to force one set of values on others or lay claim to exclusive value systems that do not allow for divergent beliefs. It is of no use to try to change value and belief systems during relatively short and strategic mediation interventions. It can, however, be helpful to support each participant's expression of their values and beliefs for acknowledgment by the other party.
Ways of Dealing with Conflict

There are five common ways of dealing with conflict. Learning about the alternative means of handling conflict gives us a wider choice of actions to employ in any given situation and makes us better able to tailor our responses to the situation. Although listed below in an order of increase in elegance, the reality is that each of us utilizes each of these ways of dealing with conflict at least some of the time. We approach conflict in the way that we believe will be most helpful to us in our life. Our style for dealing with conflict will change with the circumstances.

Denial or Withdrawal

With this approach, a person attempts to get rid of conflict by denying that it exists. He or she simply refuses to acknowledge it. Usually, however, the conflict does not go away. It grows to the point that it becomes unmanageable. When the issue and the timing are not critical, denial may be a productive way to deal with conflict.

Suppression or Smoothing Over

"We run a happy ship here." "Nice people don't fight." A person using suppression plays down differences and does not recognize the positive aspects of handling the conflict openly. The source of the conflict rarely goes away. Suppression may, however, be employed when it is more important to preserve a relationship than to deal with a relatively insignificant issue.

Power or Dominance

Power is often used to settle differences. Power may be vested in one's authority or position. Power may take the form of a majority (as in voting) or a persuasive minority. Power strategies result in winners and losers. The losers do not support a final decision in the same way the winners do. Future meetings of a group may be marred by the conscious or unconscious renewal of the struggle previously "settled" by the use of power. In some instances, especially where other forms of handling conflict are not effective, power strategies may be necessary.

Compromise or Negotiation

Although regarded as a virtue, compromise ("you give a little, I'll give a little, and we'll meet each other half-way") has some serious drawbacks. Such bargaining often causes both sides to assume initial inflated positions, since they are aware that they are going to have to "give a little" and want to buffer the loss. The compromise solution may be watered down or weakened to the point where it will not be effective. There may be little real commitment by any of the parties. Still, there are times when compromise makes sense, such as when resources are limited or a speedy decision needs to be made.

Integration or Collaboration

This approach suggests that all parties to the conflict recognize the interests and
abilities of the others. Each individual's interests, positive intentions and desired outcomes are thoroughly explored in an effort to solve the problems in a maximizing way. Participants are expected to modify and develop their original views as work progresses.

Participants come to appreciate that the apparent presenting problem does not need to limit their discussions. Participants are encouraged to express the full breadth and depth of their interests, with each participant seeking to identify "value" that they can bring to the discussion and the maximized satisfaction of underlying interests and intentions.

Hints for De-Escalating a Conflict:

· Take a deep breath to stay relaxed.
· Look the other person in the eye, with both of you sitting or standing.
· Speak softly and slowly.
· Keep your legs and arms uncrossed. Do not clench your fists or purse your lips.
· Keep reminding yourself: "We can find a win-win resolution to this," and remind the other person of this too.
· If necessary, ask for a break to collect your thoughts or release pent-up tension.
· Give "I messages."
· Paraphrase what the other person has said, asking for clarification as necessary.
· Watch your language. Words that escalate a conflict are: never, always, unless, can't, won't, don't, should, and shouldn't. Words that de-escalate a conflict are: maybe perhaps, sometimes, what if, it seems like, I feel, I think, and I wonder.
· Really listen to what the other person is saying, with the goal of truly understanding that person's point of view.
· Affirm and acknowledge the other person's position.
· Ask questions that encourage the other person to look for a solution. Ask open-ended questions rather than ones that evoke a yes or no response.
· Keep looking for alternative ideas to resolve your dispute so that both of you have your needs met.

Specific Techniques
10- Step Communication Breakthrough

Try these suggestions to get your message across:

1. TALK DIRECTLY: If there is no threat of physical violence, talk directly to the person with whom you have the problem.

2. CHOOSE A GOOD TIME AND PLACE: Discuss the conflict in a quiet place, when you and the other person are not busy or rushed.

3. PLAN AHEAD: Think about what you want to say ahead of time. Be able to state clearly what the problem is and how it affects you.
4. GIVE INFORMATION: For example, say something like: "When your car blocks my driveway, I get angry because I can't get to work on time." Try not to say things like: "You are blocking my driveway o purpose just to make me mad!"

5. DON'T BLAME OR NAMECALL: Blaming and namecalling will only antagonize the other person, and make it harder for him or her to understand your concerns.

6. LISTEN: During the discussion, relax. Give the other person a chance to tell his or her side of the story completely, and try to learn how he or she feels about the situation.

7. SHOW YOU ARE LISTENING: Although you may not agree with what is being said, tell the other person you hear what he or she is saying, and are glad you are discussing the problem together.

8. TALK IT ALL THROUGH: Once you start, get all of the issues and feelings out into the open. Don't leave out the part that seems too "difficult" to discuss or too "insignificant" to be important. Your solution will work best if all the issues are discussed thoroughly.

9. WORK ON A SOLUTION: When you have reached this point in the discussion, be as specific as possible: "I will turn my music off at midnight." Not: "I won't play loud music anymore."

10. FOLLOW THROUGH: Agree to check with each other at specific times to make sure the agreement is still working. Then really do it.

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Voicing and Hearing Complaints

What works in voicing and hearing complaints:

Key principles:

- People who complain are great. They just have something that doesn't work for them and they are willing to talk about it.

- Behind every complaint, is some request, which if made and fulfilled would resolve the complaint.
While you may not be able to satisfy their requests, it will mean a lot to them that you took the time to listen and explain why you could not do what they asked.

If you have a complaint:

1. Find someone who can do something about your complaint or who can at least listen to you and help you determine what might resolve it for you.
2. State your complaint in very specific terms.
3. Identify what would resolve your complaint and who could resolve it?
4. Ask that person to take the action that would address your issue.
5. If you are unwilling to ask, stop voicing the complaint to others.

If you are hearing a complaint:

1. Listen to the entire complaint. Ask them, "Is there anything else?"
2. If you are not clear about any part of the complaint, ask for clarification.
3. If the complaint is in general terms, ask them to be specific.
4. Once the complaint has been clearly expressed, ask them, "Do you have a request?" or "What would resolve this for you?"
5. Then respond to their requests by either accepting, making a counter-offer or conditional response, or declining or promising to let them know on a specific date.
6. If you decline, explain your reasons and check for understanding.
7. Then ask them if the complaint has been addressed or if they need something else.
8. Thank them for voicing their complaint.