

Resolving Conflict in Your Organization

Regional Economic Development Branch

Factsheet

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a normal and healthy part of our lives, when properly managed. But when differences of opinion are not constructively handled, they can escalate into huge problems and heated arguments around boardroom tables.

Conflict is an active disagreement or friction between people with opposing opinions or principles. It results from actual or perceived differences.

Disagreements often happen within organizations and boards. In fact, you probably have all kinds of examples from your own experience. What typically happens is that a minor disagreement or opposing opinion is left unchecked and allowed to fester into a major conflict. Emotions heighten, stress levels rise, board members take sides, and the disagreement grows into something much more difficult to resolve.

“Although there may be no immediate financial risk, the drain on support and on people’s time may be expensive and the public image of the [volunteer] organization may be damaged. This can adversely affect fund-raising potential... Disputes can prove costly in terms of: time delays, member and staff time, damaging publicity, charges of breach of trust, relationships and morale, stress, and hampering the work of an organization, among others.”

—Volunteer Now

This factsheet identifies how conflict happens, provides strategies for dealing with disagreements and suggests ways of avoiding conflict all together.

Reflect: Think of a disagreement or conflict that you experienced on your board or committee. What was it about? How was it handled? Was it resolved? What would you do differently next time?

CONFLICT! WHO NEEDS IT?

Turns out, we all need conflict in our lives. It is an opportunity for us to test limits and set new boundaries. Controversial topics and issues should inspire constructive dialogue, enabling working groups to grow and evolve to higher levels of understanding and commitment. At some time, your organization will probably have to address a fiery topic with people polarized on both sides of the debate. But where would your group be if you avoided talking about it? Disagreements and opposing viewpoints bring forward new ideas and options for conducting business.

Successful conflict resolution builds trust and strengthens the board’s interpersonal relationships. “If we can get through this, we can survive anything!”

IT TAKES TWO

There is bound to be lively debate, and even disagreement at times, when a group of people with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, values and education are brought together around a common interest. Volunteers tend to be passionate about their work and struggle at times to balance their personal values with the actions required to fulfill the organization’s mission.

Disagreement, dispute or conflict occurs between two opposing parties, such as:

- Two board members
- A board member(s) and the Director or Chair
- A board member(s) and a staff person(s)
- A board member and Executive Director of the organization
- A board member and a stakeholder, client or member of the public

Most disagreements stem from three major sources:

| Person | Organization | Resources |
|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal Style • Perceptions • Values and Beliefs • Culture • Life Experience • Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goals • Mission • Vision • Roles and Responsibilities • Procedures and Processes • Governance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time • Money • Equipment • Space • Staff |

Scenario 1

Peter is passionate about implementing a new community garden program and feels the board should implement his idea. Khursheed refuses to support it because she thinks the board’s time would be better spent on supporting the Buy Local Food Campaign. Neither are budging on their position and other board members are starting to feel uncomfortable about the mounting tension.

In Scenario 1 above, two board members (Peter and Khursheed) are in opposition, based on their personal perceptions, values and beliefs about the best way to spend the Board’s resources.

Scenario 2

Sammi, the Executive Director, spoke to the media about the unsuccessful fundraising initiative which might mean financial ruin for the organization. His actions confused board members who didn’t know he was doing this. Now everyone is scrambling to undo the damage created by this unflattering news story and they are not speaking to Sammi! Sammi thought he was doing the board a favour by bringing public attention to the problem and didn’t think he needed their permission to speak to the newspaper.

In Scenario 2, board members are in opposition with the Executive Director. This conflict stems from confusion over organizational roles and responsibilities.

Scenario 3

“Let’s spend some of the grant money on recognition of our volunteers. They are an essential part of running the healthy living fair,” said Elaine. “No way!” said Asad. “That money is supposed to go right back into the fair exhibits.”

“I don’t see why we couldn’t do both,” suggested Elaine.

“I won’t stand for it!” said Asad. “Who could go along with that?”

The other board members were squirming in their seats because it was evident that Asad was looking to see who sided with him.

Reflect: Look at Scenario 3. Who is in conflict? What are the sources of the conflict?

HAZARDOUS HALF MINUTE

VitalSmarts Research found that “most people do everything wrong in the first hazardous half-minute” of a disagreement, such as becoming combative or lashing out, oversimplifying the problem, being disrespectful, shutting down, accusing or taking offense, losing sight of the goal, or making assumptions about another person’s intentions.

Generally, people in conflict will choose one of five typical responses and start down that path in the first 30 seconds. While all are valid choices, appropriate use depends on choosing the right response for the situation at hand. For example, it is not constructive to use “Avoid” or “Compete” in every situation.

FIVE PERSONAL RESPONSES TO CONFLICT

| Response to Conflict | Behaviour | Best to Use When |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Compete | I choose to defend my ideas and do what it takes to win. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an emergency • Unpopular things have to be done • Rules have to be enforced |
| Collaborate | I choose to work with the other person to find a mutually agreeable solution. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both sides are important • Buy in from others is critical • Dealing with hard feelings • Learning is important |
| Compromise | I choose to find the middle ground for both of us, so we each achieve at least part of what we want. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neither side is important • Power on both sides is equal • No other strategies work • You are pressed for time |
| Avoid | I choose to withdraw from the conflict. This might mean victimizing myself and suppressing my own feelings about it. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An issue is trivial • There is no chance of getting your way • Potential harm outweighs the benefit • People need time to cool down |
| Accommodate | I choose to put myself in the other person's place and satisfy their concerns at the expense of mine. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You know you are wrong or are clearly losing • Harmony is important • A good will gesture is necessary |

Based on the work of Thomas/Kilmann

Reflect: Looking at these five responses, which ones do you tend to rely on? Have they served you well or have you encountered problems using them? Is there a response that you wish you were more skilled at using?

Best Use of the Hazardous Half Minute

“Don’t open your mouth until you’ve opened your mind.” —David Maxfield

Step back and get perspective. Plan your approach, rather than reacting to instincts. Try these three steps:

1. Stay calm and control your emotions. Don’t react.
2. Stop and think before you speak. What do you really want? What is the problem you want resolved? What are your real needs, not your position? Set out the observable facts first.
3. Disarm your defenses and open up dialogue. Be respectful and pay attention the other person’s feelings. Listen first, speak second. Welcome fresh perspectives.

“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”
—Stephen Covey

There’s an Elephant in the Boardroom

“Mokita, is a Papua New Guinea expression which means ‘that which everyone knows and no one speaks of.’” —Dana Wilke

There is a movement toward candid conversation or the Mokita Approach. It is a direct and honest approach for dealing head on with issues before they become serious conflicts. Instead of attacking each other, board members look for ways to attack the problem together by joint problem solving.

The first part of this is separating the problem, from the person. It means switching your focus from taking a stand or position (like I’m right and you’re wrong), to identifying each other’s interests. Once you do this, together you can invent options for mutual gain.

The second part is understanding your emotions as well as those of the other person. Emotional awareness is central to resolving conflict. It means taking a genuine interest in the other person and their concerns.

Reflect: So how do you handle the elephant in the boardroom? You...

1. Separate the problem from the person
2. Understand your emotions and take a genuine interest in the other person.

JOINT PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS

Once you have your emotions in check, and you've opened up dialogue with the other person, you are ready to move into a joint problem solving process to resolve the conflict. This involves five key steps.

1. **Identify the problem.** Involve all conflicting parties and collect as much information as you can to get a clear picture of the current situation. Make sure you get all sides of the story and do not evaluate or judge. If the issue is resolved, will this problem persist?

2. **Look for different ways to resolve the issue.** Ask "what if?" and "how many ideas can we come up with?" Focus on generating lots of options without judging any of them. Find common ground and share points of interest. Both parties should feel safe and respected in generating alternatives.

3. **Assess the alternatives to decide on the best solution.** Evaluate the ideas by asking: What are the advantages and disadvantages of each one? What are the pros and cons? Which is most favourable? Least favourable? Think about the resources needed for each idea, the willingness of the board, other priorities, the long-term implications, and so on. It is best to develop a standard set of criteria that you can measure each option against.

4. **Develop and implement an action plan.** Select the best option and write a step-by-step plan to achieve it. Who will do it? How will it be implemented? When will it start and finish? Where will it be? What resources are needed?

5. **Follow up to evaluate the solution.** Compare the outcome with the goal you set. Did it solve the problem? What could you do differently next time? Are there modifications that will improve the outcome?



SOME TIPS FOR OPEN DIALOGUE

Resolving conflicts through joint problem solving involves a lot of talking! Here are some tips so you can make the most of your dialogue.

Always begin with phrases that start with “I,” not “You.” Create a respectful, open environment so the other person feels safe and comfortable speaking about their issue.

- I want to understand what has upset you.
- I want to know more about your idea and why it is important to you.

Ask questions of clarification. Don't make assumptions. Get as much information as you can about the current situation.

- Can you elaborate on it?
- Could you explain that to me?

Paraphrase and restate what you have heard. Make sure you both understand what each other has said, before moving on. Correct misinformation.

- I think I hear you saying that...
- Is that what you said, or do you mean...?

Validate the concerns and feelings of the other person. Make sure you are sincere and respectful. Do not trivialize their concerns.

- I see how much that means to you.
- I'm glad we're talking about this issue and trying to figure it out.

Reflect: Think of a time when you had an interpersonal conflict with another board member. What did you say or do? Did your approach work? If you could rewind time, what would you do or say differently for a better outcome?

Be Proactive and Manage Conflict

Many committees and boards, especially those that have been established for some time, are prepared for conflict and have organizational structures in place. Such things as:

- conflict of interest policy
- code of conduct
- performance and termination procedures
- board director training in recognizing and skillfully handling potential conflict
- regular board evaluation are all opportunities for your board to plan how to avoid or handle conflict in a consistent and fair way

Be prepared for interpersonal conflict. Use the tips and techniques in this factsheet to plan an approach that you would like to try the next time a disagreement arises. For example, the next time I experience interpersonal conflict, I will do more of this: _____, and less of this: _____. Like any skill, your ability to resolve conflict will improve with practice!

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