

Managing Conflict

COMMUNITIES ARE GROUPS of people who may not know each other and have had different life experiences, but who live in proximity to each other or who have interests in common. Our vision of the world and how it operates is influenced by our culture, our parents, our age, our personality, and a range of other factors. Module Five addresses one inevitable fact of life: Individuals do not always agree. And when they don't agree, the result for group work can be either positive or negative, but it is rarely neutral. The challenge and opportunity for a community leader is to learn how to manage conflict and to channel its energy in a positive way.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

There are generally considered to be four types of conflict. These are:

- **Personal** conflict that is directed at and between individuals
- **Subject or issue** conflict that is related to the group's work and goals
- **Procedural** conflict that emerges from work methods and strategies
- **Competitive** conflict that occurs when individuals or groups must compete for the same financial or human resources.

There are different techniques or strategies for managing the individual role of conflict and the group role. For example, if two individuals are clearly in disagreement over the procedures of the group, one remedy is for the group to determine by what norms it will operate. Alternately, when there is conflict in a group for whatever reason, the group members must be clear on their roles. Will individuals take sides? Is the protocol to let the conflicting parties work it out alone or will certain group members help to mediate? Finally, the group must decide how it will react and act to prevent conflict from eroding meeting time and derailing the mission of the group.

ADDRESSING CONFLICT

Conflict often results in people giving up, disbanding the group, compromising, or having a winner-takes-all outcome. Obviously, on issues of great importance, the hope is that the conflict can be resolved in a beneficial manner. There are four ways that conflicts are resolved. Some create more positive outcomes than others, but all are part of the range of actions that can be taken.

- **Avoidance** is a typical response to conflict. “If we ignore it, it will go away.” People who endorse this view think that time will take care of the conflict. This sometimes happens in the short run, but rarely over the long run. Problems and disagreements that are intense enough to be called “conflict” have little chance of resolving themselves without positive effort. Conflicts don’t evaporate. Pushing conflicts below the surface and pretending that they don’t exist creates tension and holds groups and individuals back.
- **Surrendering** is another way groups attempt to resolve conflict. People who cannot tolerate dissension and conflict often just give up and let the dominant people or groups have their way. It eases the conflict for the moment but it may not be the best thing for the community or organization or for the individual. Maybe the person waving the white flag was actually right and the others were wrong. What damage could be done to an organization or to a cause as a result? Because conflicts rarely have an absolutely right or an absolutely wrong conclusion, the ability to hear people out and sort through the issues in an impersonal, nonthreatening way helps the understanding and eventual resolution of the issue and allows groups to move forward.
- **Verbal attacks** are another way groups grapple with conflict. Some people just want to fight it out verbally. They will use any tactic to coerce others into conforming to their views. The only way to prevent or stop this behavior is for group norms and procedures to refuse to accept that type of negative behavior. This is not to say that individuals should not have strong views and opinions, but to say that using insults or superior force to defeat opposition is not acceptable.
- Finally, **negotiation** is the process by which the different parties to the conflict offer their views of the dispute, describe their positions, and ultimately put their suggestions on the table for resolution. This process involves give-and-take for both parties and can result in a win-win outcome if there is compromise on both sides and a willingness to look for creative solutions. A well-known example is one where both parties want an orange. The only solution appears at first glance to be to half the orange. Only after both sides clarify their interests and needs does it become clear that one side wants the pulp and the other side wants the peel. Clarifying interests, not locking into a particular position, and listening to the needs of the other side help in this approach.

GROUP OPPORTUNITIES

How groups learn to handle conflict sets the stage for everything they try to do together. Research has shown that conflict resolution can spiral up or down. If there is a history of intimidation and argument, the level of trust within the community can be permanently

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damaged. If, on the other hand, conflicts are handled by cooperation, negotiation, and a win-win approach, it enhances the group's ability to work on issues despite their obvious disagreements.

Conflict is not easy to deal with at any level. As human beings we may wish that our relations with other people would always be smooth and cordial. But conflict, if it is handled well, can generate new alternatives, present different perspectives, and allow the group and its members to clarify their own thoughts and ideas.

