

Reasons for Conflict

LIMITED RESOURCES

Conflict often results when a number of groups are competing for limited resources.

COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

As groups evolve, they tend to become concerned only with their own issues and also to develop their own vocabulary around those issues. Communication problems may develop when the receiver of information does not understand the particular vocabulary or communication style of a group.

DIFFERENT INTERESTS AND GOALS

One individual or group feels its issues are ignored or are more important than another individual or group's issues, and there is a lack of agreement concerning the direction of group activity.

DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

Just as individuals perceive things differently, the groups to which they belong also have different perceptions. Groups, as well as individuals, tend to evaluate issues according to their backgrounds, norms, and experiences. This may be a problem, for instance, when there is a difference in performance expectations of members of the group or between groups.

LACK OF CLARITY

Lack of clarity about the task to be accomplished and who is responsible for specific tasks is a frequent cause of conflict.

Making Group Decisions

AUTOCRATIC

One person decides for the whole group.

THE FEW

The few decide for the whole group. Usually it is assumed that the few are experts and can make the decision for the group.

MAJORITY RULE

The group votes and the proposal or decision with the most votes wins.

CONSENSUS BUILDING

Conflicting individuals or groups work together to identify common concerns and develop solutions that will be mutually beneficial. Based on communication and compromise.

Conflict Resolution Strategies

THE BOMB

How do groups go about resolving their conflicts after an area of disagreement has been uncovered? There are four basic strategies for conflict resolution.

- Avoidance
- Defusion
- Power intervention
- Negotiation

Activity: Think of a specific situation in your own community where you've become aware of conflict. Now visualize this disagreement as a bomb, ticking away in the middle of the meeting room. What strategy will you use to resolve this situation?

1. You could *avoid* the bomb altogether.
2. You could *remove the fuse* from the bomb, addressing the symptoms of the problem but leaving the bomb intact.
3. Someone in a *powerful position* could step in, declare the bomb out of order, and carry it out of the building.
4. You could *negotiate*.

DISCUSSION

Apply each of the strategies described above to your community situation and answer the following questions:

1. What are the advantages of this strategy?
2. What are the disadvantages?
3. What will be the impact on the community if this strategy is used?

List your decisions on the flip chart paper.

Six Steps to Reaching Consensus

1

DEVELOP A COMMON STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

No matter how the discussions begin, it is a good idea to develop some statement of what the end product should look like to be acceptable to everyone. This can be a common statement of goals and objectives or a general description of outcomes the group hopes to achieve. This gives the group something by which to measure the end product. (See Module Seven)

2

EXCHANGE VIEWS AND INFORMATION

When parties in a collaborative problem-solving process have diverse points of view about difficult issues, they need to develop a shared framework of understanding. That doesn't mean they must agree with one another's perspectives, but rather that they should be able to acknowledge that others hold different views and values that are valid. This kind of understanding emerges from carefully listening to each other's perspectives and feelings and from a willingness to be tolerant and respectful of differences. The facilitator plays a key role by urging people to ask questions about each other's views and by clarifying issues and feelings in ways that help people overcome misunderstandings. (See Module Three)

Participants also educate one another. They learn about each stakeholder's perception of the issues and the specific interests that will need to be satisfied. After they have done this, they will need to jointly define the issues to be resolved. This involves reframing the issues in ways that meet all interests. (See Module Six)

3

GENERATE OPTIONS THAT ACCOMMODATE THE INTERESTS

Once the major issues are identified, participants begin developing options for addressing them. It may be useful to encourage participants to generate multiple options so they can begin to see beyond their favorite solutions. Or they may generate comprehensive proposals that attempt to address all the key issues.

The group can create these options in a number of ways. They may work on some issues through task or work groups drawn from their diverse interests. Or they may ask technical experts to help them come up with options. Or each party may develop proposals to bring to the whole group for consideration. (See Module Four)

Six Steps to Reaching Consensus (continued)

4

IDENTIFY CRITERIA BY WHICH TO JUDGE THE OPTIONS

To evaluate the various options and proposals that may be on the table, participants need to establish guidelines or criteria for determining the appropriateness and acceptability of each option. The criteria should arise from the interests that have been identified and are applied to the options to determine which are acceptable, which are unacceptable, and which need further work or discussion.

5

ASSEMBLE THE AGREED-UPON OPTIONS INTO A PACKAGE THAT ADDRESSES ALL ISSUES AND ACCOMMODATES ALL INTERESTS

The key to getting agreement is often packaging options in ways that can satisfy different interests. A variety of methods can be used to develop such packages as the basis for discussion and modification. Experienced facilitators are familiar with such methods.

Since the group will make decisions by consensus, it may be useful to test whether they are getting close. Participants can use a voting scale that ranks people's options:

- ❶ Wholeheartedly agree
- ❷ Supportive
- ❸ Can live with it
- ❹ Reservations about it—let's talk more
- ❺ Serious concerns exist—must talk
- ❻ Reject it—will block it

This method can help sort out where there is already a measure of consensus and where more time needs to be spent discussing or reformulating the options.

6

DEVELOP THE FINAL AGREEMENT

Once the group has developed consensus on a package of options, members of the group or a subgroup (or the facilitator) can begin drafting the language of the final agreement, including provisions for implementation. Parties will then review the draft and negotiate until they have a version that satisfies them.