

Managing Conflicts Constructively

Of all the situations student activity advisers deal with, conflict between members of the organization is one of the toughest to handle. The conflict itself is not usually what causes problems; because most people have never learned to handle conflict in a positive way, problems arise from how people choose to handle conflict. When handled poorly, conflict results in frustration, anger, inefficiency, and unsatisfactory compromises. When properly resolved, conflict can be an opportunity for growth.

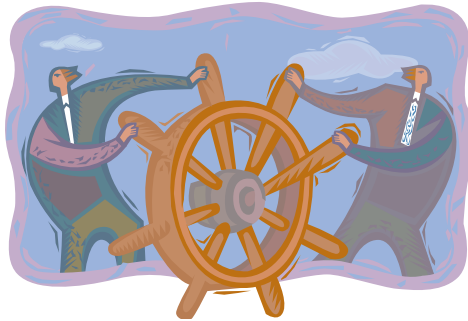
Conflict Is Inevitable

In any group, conflict is inevitable because different people have different viewpoints. A conflict can be defined as a problem situation where the concerns or interests of two or more parties appear incompatible. Group members see the needs of the organization differently because of their different values, goals, and prior experiences. In organizations, conflict usually arises over questions such as:

- What should we be doing?
- How should we be doing it?

- Who should do it?
- When should it be done?
- Should it be done at all?
- Why can't I do it my way?
- Who has the final word?

By resolving conflict, leaders earn respect and enhance their leadership status, but because



conflict with others can be uncomfortable, many leaders fail to address

conflict situations unless or until it becomes absolutely necessary. Instead of taking charge, they ignore, suppress, or avoid it. Conflicts treated in this way don't go away, they simply go underground, causing additional problems. When conflict is ignored, or approached on a win/lose basis, communications break down, animosities develop, and the ability of the organization to function is impaired.

People whose concerns and objections aren't dealt with properly can find subtle ways to block or foil the group's efforts. As an adviser, you can't afford to have your group members in combat with each other—you need them to use their energy for working toward the group's

goals, not against each other.

Conflict Is Healthy

Because conflict is natural and inevitable, the goal of the organization should be not to eliminate it, but to view it as essentially healthy. When people can disagree constructively, the organization is enhanced by exploring differences. Usually when conflict arises and is dealt with openly, people are stimulated to creativity, alternatives are considered, better ideas are generated, a better course of action results, and more positive relationships develop.

So how can your group handle conflicts more positively to strengthen your organization?

Accept the fact that conflict is going to happen. Decide to take steps to manage it in a constructive manner. When it occurs, discuss the conflict openly with the group.

Develop ground rules for dealing with conflict. Develop an agreement about how the group will resolve conflict if it does occur. Focusing on resolution behaviors prepares the organization to deal with conflict constructively.

Take care of the problem when it comes up. Even if the problem seems small, if you don't deal with it at the time it happens, the problem will only

get bigger, like a snowball rolling down a hill.

Encourage differences. Foster an organizational culture in which differences of opinion are encouraged. Make differences the expectation and healthy debate about issues and ideas the norm. Emphasize the common goals organization members have and respect that there can be different opinions about how to reach those goals.

Discuss differences in values openly. It's a lot easier to see the other person's side of a disagreement when you understand that their opinion is based on values they consider important. What are the underlying values that are in conflict? Is there a way to reconcile them?

Search for the causes of conflict. Help group members address the basic issues that underlie conflict:

- *Limited resources*, like time, money, and property
- *Unmet basic needs*, like belonging, power, freedom, and fun
- *Different values*, like beliefs, priorities, and principles
- *Misperceptions or assumptions*
- *Lack of knowledge.*

Determine the nature of the conflict. Is it a content issue or a relationship issue? How deeply held are the values or beliefs? Is this a core issue or a minor clash? How much of the conflict might be attributable to misunderstandings or disagreements about basic facts? Are cultural misunderstandings contributing to the conflict?

Deal with one issue at a time. If more than one issue is

involved, someone needs to identify the issues involved so they can be addressed one at a time. Don't bring up all the old problems that have happened in the past.

Encourage both sides to listen to what the others have to say. It's hard to judge a situation or make a decision about a problem if you haven't heard the other person's side of the story. Teach group members to say something like: "I see that we look at this issue from different perspectives. While I want to share my point of view with you later, I first want to understand where you are coming from. Help me understand what your concerns are regarding ..."

Members should then follow up by restating what the person has said to demonstrate that they really do understand.

Don't let it get personal.

Create the expectation that although conflict around ideas and healthy debate about options is expected, personal attacks, name calling, and other belittling behavior will not be tolerated. All members need to preserve their dignity and self-respect.

Use laughter to relieve tension. A well-timed joke can break the tension and get people to consider new perspectives. Be careful with humor though—make sure it's not being used at someone's expense. It's usually safe to use oneself as the target of the humor.

Agree to disagree. Honest differences of opinion are valid. Not everyone has to share the same opinion, but choose not to allow the disagreement to interfere with the organization.

Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict

Conflict is destructive when it:

- Takes attention away from other important activities
- Undermines the morale or self-concept of group members
- Polarizes people and groups, reducing cooperation
- Increases or sharpens difference
- Leads to irresponsible and harmful behavior, such as fighting, name-calling.

Conflict is constructive when it:

- Involves people in resolving issues important to them
- Results in clarification of important problems and issues
- Prompts authentic communication
- Helps release emotion, anxiety, and stress
- Builds cohesiveness among the members of the team
- Helps individuals develop understanding and skills
- Results in solutions to problems.