

SKIDMORE

C O L L E G E

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Skill Building – Managing Conflict

Introduction

Conflict is inevitable in any interpersonal relationship or among members of any group and can be a very positive experience, if managed properly. Why do we shy away from dealing with conflict? Many of us were raised to believe that conflict is something to be avoided, an experience of failure. However, conflict doesn't have to lead to failure, defeat, separation or termination of individual relationships. We all come to see the world in different ways, and we have different ideas about what's best for us and what's best for our group. It is actually a signal that change is needed and possible.

The ability to manage conflict is probably one of the most important social skills an individual can possess. This handout is designed to help you acquire this skill. Specifically, it will offer information about:

- The different ways in which people deal with conflict
- Increasing awareness of your own style of conflict management
- A constructive method of conflict management which will not only lead to greater satisfaction of both parties involved, but also promote growth and development of your group

Competing

An individual pursues his/her own concerns at the other person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode, in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one's own position. Competing might mean "standing up for your rights," defending a position which you believe correct, or simply trying to influence others.

Accommodating

Accommodating is the opposite of competing. When accommodating, an individual neglects his/her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode. Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view.

Avoiding

The individual does not immediately pursue his/her own concerns or those of the other person if he/she does not address the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Compromising

The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. It falls on a middle ground between competing and accommodating. Compromising gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but doesn't explore it in as much depth as collaborating. Compromising might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

Collaborating

Collaborating is the opposite of avoiding. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with the other person to find some solution that fully satisfies the concerns of both. It means digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find a solution that meets both sets of concerns.

This is clearly the most effective approach of conflict management. Specifically it will produce the following results:

1. Both sides' needs are met
2. Satisfaction
3. Mutual respect
4. Both parties feel enriched rather than belittled
5. Continuing effort of both parties to work together

How To Use The Collaborating Approach (Win-Win Negotiation) To Deal With Conflicts In Student Organizations

1. Diagnosis—determining the nature of the conflict

- Is the issue a value conflict?

It is extremely difficult to negotiate when the conflict is regarding a personal value. An example: a dispute over whether alcohol should be prohibited at a fundraising dance.

- Is the issue a difference of expectations of each other?

Understanding this type of conflict lies in the fact that each of us has different expectations that grow out of our experiences with the organization. When we interact with others whose expectations have grown out of their own unique experiences with the organization, conflict arises.

2. Initiation

The most effective way to confront another in a conflict situation is to state the tangible effect the conflict has on you.

Example: "We have a concern in our committee. Although your position on keeping a low budget for the officer training retreat is understandable it

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restricts us from having the retreat off campus, which is the desire of most members."

3. Active Listening—negotiators must be capable of hearing the other's point of view.

- While listening, do not think about what to reply in order to persuade.
- Argument–provoking replies should be avoided.
- Active listening involves paraphrasing or restating what the other says. Idea or content should be considered as well as feeling.

4. Problem Solving

- a. Clarify the problem. After the above steps, each party should have a clear idea about what is the tangible issue.
- b. Talk about what's needed/wanted (be clear on facts and information).
- c. Generate a list of possible solutions. While doing this, let go of the solutions that you thought you had. Be creative! The best negotiator makes the other side feel good. Start by thinking "how can I make the other side happy?"
- d. Decide together on the best solution acceptable to all parties, use consensus decision making skills. Don't try to persuade or coerce.
- e. Plan the implementation of the solution. Make assignments of who, what, where, when and how.
- f. Plan an evaluation or review of the solution after a specified period of time.

Overview of Styles

All five styles of conflict management obviously have advantages and disadvantages. When dealing with conflict in personal relationships, any of these types may be useful in certain situations. The last style, collaboration, however, is highly recommended for dealing with conflict in student organizations. It results in something satisfactory to both parties. People often feel proud of themselves and feel a sense of personal power when they use this method. It's a sign of integrity and self–confidence when one is able to use this method with patience regardless of how difficult the situation may be.

Solutions to Two Main Issues

People Who Won't Negotiate

Some people refuse to negotiate because they want to protect their special interests or privileges. Here are a few steps to take in dealing with such people.

1. Start to negotiate anyway.
2. Explain why it is in their interest to negotiate, why it is worthwhile to deal with the problems existing between you.
3. Talk about problems how the collaboration will help them solve their problems or others' problems.
4. Share the problem. For example, bring to their attention the joint image that you're two sub-groups for the organization.

When Trust is an Issue

Here are a few suggestions for this problem.

- Be trustworthy. Do what you said you would do.
- Find a higher value that you both agree on. For example, you both want to project a positive image.
- Listen.
- Make an agreement in such a way that you know when it is carried out.
- Start small.
- There are people who simply can't/won't trust you, but do your best anyway.