

North Dakota State University
NDSU Extension Service

Leadership Development Within Groups

Managing Conflict

HE-500, September 1992

Disagreements happen every day. We feel the effects of conflict often. Whether at home or at work, an individual's needs, values and opinions are different from those of other people. Some conflicts are minor and easy to handle. Usually a disagreement is not resolved until we take charge and deal with it.

A leader is often needed to overcome the emotions involved in a conflict. Any individual in the group can provide that leadership, so it's helpful for all members to learn how to cope with conflict to be healthier, happier and more effective in groups.

We disagree with others regularly. When disagreements build, conflict occurs. Techniques for managing conflict are also helpful when dealing with disagreements.

Conflict is part of every group. Group leaders understand that issues affecting one member usually have an impact on other members as well. Learning to manage conflict will lead to a more productive team and more satisfied group members who feel welcome to communicate openly, take risks and exchange ideas.

It often happens that I wake up at night and begin to think about a serious problem and decide I must tell the Pope about it. Then I wake up completely and remember that I am the Pope.

Pope John XXIII

Unspoken -- But Still There

Avoiding a disagreement doesn't make it go away. We need to be aware of conflict and make decisions about what we are going to do about it. Conflict becomes negative only when it is not approached and resolved.

It's all right to tell someone we disagree with them. Lack of communication among group members can lead to avoidance of conflict. When that happens, the group can lose its effectiveness.

Group members and leaders need to be able to resolve conflict successfully. Like any other leadership skill, conflict management can be learned.

And I asked (my five-year-old niece), "What is a bridge?" She thought for a long time, and then she said this: "A bridge is when the ground falls out under you, and you build something to connect the cracks."

Leo F. Buscaglia

Children develop their own strategies for dealing with conflict as they grow. Even if their strategy doesn't work, they continue to use it because they don't know the alternatives.

Billy bites when he is angry or frustrated. He bites someone when he has to eat peas and when he has to take a bath.

We can become more effective in conflict situations if we consciously select appropriate behavior instead of reacting according to habit. To manage conflict, we need to understand the way we currently act and then learn alternative ways to cope.

So...

If you recognize the way you react in a conflict situation, ask yourself, "Is that the way I *want* to respond? Knowing other ways that might better solve conflict, you may be motivated to change. Only you can change your behavior. Changing the *way you act* often affects the *way others react* to you.

In working with people, disagreements can be costly, and it doesn't matter too much whether you are in the right or the wrong. If you handle a situation tactlessly, without regard for other people's feelings, even minor disagreements can leave a needless residue of ill will.

Bits & Pieces, May 1991

Tact is changing the subject without changing your mind.

Bits & Pieces, May 1990

Coping With Conflict

There are a variety of strategies available for dealing with conflict. We can develop skills to help implement these strategies.

Conflict can be dealt with in several basic ways. They are:

- Avoidance
- Accommodation
- Compromise
- Competition
- Collaboration

Avoidance

Some people attempt to avoid conflict by postponing it, hiding their feelings, changing the subject, leaving the room or quitting the project.

Avoidance may be appropriate when:

- the conflict is small and not worth our time to respond
- we need time to calm down because relationships are at stake
- time is needed to gather more information.

The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.
William James

Avoidance may NOT be appropriate when:

- the issue is very important
- a decision is needed quickly
- no decision has a major impact on the situation
- postponing the issue will only make matters worse.

Avoiding the conflict is usually not satisfying to the individual nor does it help the group resolve a problem.

Accommodation

Accommodation is a convenient strategy to satisfy an immediate need for individuals or the group. It emphasizes the things conflicting parties have in common and de-emphasizes the differences.

"Even though we don't agree on the details, we do agree that we want to make a contribution to the hospital. Let's move on for now."

Accommodation is helpful for a group to review their common purpose in the midst of conflict. Accommodation should NOT be used if a important issue is at stake which needs to be addressed immediately.

Compromise

Compromise is appropriate when all parties are satisfied with a part of their requests and willing to be flexible. Compromise is mutual for all parties. All parties should receive something, and all parties will

need to give up something.

"It sounds like the budget is your main concern. I'll give up my request for new equipment if you agree to remodel the storage room to use for work space."

Compromise works when:

- both parties are willing to reduce some demands
- an intermediate solution saves time and effort for both sides.

Compromise doesn't work when:

- initial demands are too great from the beginning
- there is no commitment to honor the compromise.

Competition

During a conflict, competition is a strategy used to exercise power. It is a way to approach conflict knowing that eventually someone wins and someone loses.

Competition will enable one party to win. Before using competition as a conflict resolution strategy, we must decide whether or not winning this conflict is beneficial to individuals or the group.

Competition will not enhance a group's ability to work together. It reduces cooperation.

Collaboration

This strategy encourages teamwork and cooperation within a group. Collaboration does not establish winners and losers. It does not gain power over others.

Collaboration is best when:

- individuals trust and respect one another
- there is time for all parties to share their views and feelings
- members want the best solution for the larger group
- individuals are willing to change their thinking when more information is found and new options are suggested.

Collaboration may NOT be best when:

- time is limited and people must act before they can work through their conflict
- there is not enough trust, respect or communication among the group for collaboration to occur.

Creative Ways to Manage Conflict

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

"There seems to be more than one way to view this situation. Let's talk about it more"

Deal with one issue at a time. There may be more than one issue involved in the conflict at one time. Someone in the group needs to provide leadership to identify the issues involved. Then only one issue at a time can be addressed so the problem is manageable.

If there is another problem from the past blocking current communication, list it as one of the issues in this conflict. It may have to be dealt with before the current conflict can be resolved.

"Tony, we've had our disagreements. I'd like us to put those aside today and work together on this community project."

Choose the right time for the conflict. Individuals have to be willing to address the conflict. We are likely to resist if we feel we are being forced into negotiations.

"I think we should talk about what happened this morning. Let's schedule a time when we could visit."

Avoid reacting to unintentional remarks. Words like "always" and "never" may be said in the heat of battle and do not necessarily convey what the speaker means. Anger will increase the conflict rather than bring it closer to resolution.

Avoid resolutions that come too soon or too easily. People need time to think about all possible solutions and the impact of each. Quick answers may disguise the real problem. All parties need to feel some satisfaction with the resolution if they are to accept it. Conflict resolutions should not be rushed.

"That's a possible solution. Let's think about it and talk on Monday morning to see if we still feel that way."

Avoid name calling and threatening behavior. Don't corner the opponent. All parties need to preserve their dignity and self-respect. Threats usually increase the conflict and payback can occur some time in the future when we least expect it.

Agree to disagree. Respect for one another and the value of relationships are two good reasons to disagree, but to choose not to allow the disagreement to interfere with the group.

Don't insist on being right. There are usually several right solutions to every problem.

A leader's best tool at a time like this is a willingness to laugh at him/herself.
Anonymous

Humor and Conflict

Laughter can effectively relieve tension in conflict situations. A well-timed joke can refocus conflict negotiations in a positive direction. Laughter gives people time to rethink their positions and see

alternatives that may not have been obvious before.

There is an interesting and useful relationship between laughter and anger. It is impossible to laugh heartily and to be angry at the same time.
J. Stepis

A leader can read a humorous story at the beginning of a meeting to set the tone or be prepared with a humorous example to use in case conflict occurs. Laughing together helps individuals accept differences and still enjoy one another as group members.

Humor is most effective when it relates to the situation at hand. The best source of humor is personal experience and it's usually safe to use oneself as target of the humor.

"You won't believe what happened to me last week..."

Humor should never belittle or insult anyone. Use humor to support talent within the group rather than a way to cover lack of skill.

"Jack, it sounds like you know everyone in town! Could you contact the people on this list?"

A sense of humor enables us not so much to laugh at the people who provoke us as to laugh at ourselves for being so easily provoked.
Robert Power

There are two categories of humor: public and private. Public humor is shared the moment it happens. Private humor is experienced when something funny occurs but it is inappropriate to laugh at that moment. It may be appropriate to laugh about it later. Both kinds of humor are useful.

Leaders for the 1990s should learn how to manage and use conflict creatively for the betterment of communities, organizations and personal relationships. We don't need to be devastated by conflict when we can learn to manage it and use the energy it produces.

Only in winter can you tell which trees are truly green. Only when the winds of adversity blow can you tell whether an individual or a country has courage and steadfastness.
John F. Kennedy

Hints for Organizations

Elected leaders of an organization have a strong influence on relationships within the group. That influence may have a positive or negative effect on how the group functions. The group should hold election of officers regularly to share the leadership and reduce the possibility of any single member creating a negative environment for a long term.

I can...

Learning is more complete when you begin to apply and experience what you have just learned. Here are activities to do on your own or with a friend to learn more about coping with conflict.

- Identify someone with whom you have had a conflict recently. List the reason(s) that conflict occurred.
 - Was the conflict resolved the same day? Why or why not?
 - If the same situation (above) happened again, what would you do differently?
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Images

We do not remember days, we remember moments.
Anonymous

If one cannot direct the wind, she/he must adjust the sails.
Anonymous

Bad habits are like a comfortable bed -- easy to get into but hard to get out of.
Bits & Pieces, July 1990

People who are only good with hammers see every problem as a nail.
Roger von Oech

You can't expect a man to see eye to eye with you when you're looking down on him.
Bits & Pieces, Feb. 1992

You will never be the person you can be if pressure, tension and discipline are taken out of your life.
James G. Bilkey

Keep both feet on the ground and you'll be less likely to jump to a conclusion.
Bits & Pieces, May, 1991

Use soft words and hard arguments.
Bits & Pieces, August 1990

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