

**C**onflict happens! We see it between members of families, between friends and between nations. Conflict happens in groups, and as elsewhere, it isn't always bad. In many cases, conflict can lead to a better understanding of issues and other people, as well as creative ways to solve problems or take advantage of opportunities. Learning about conflict—common sources of conflict, common styles people use in conflict situations and how to channel conflict into creative solutions—are important group skills. Helping all group members understand basic conflict skills moves the group to a higher level of effectiveness, in which work gets done and relationships remain intact, even when there are disagreements and disputes.

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## Sources of conflict

Conflicts happen in groups for many reasons. Dee Kelsey and Pam Plumb identify these sources of conflict:<sup>1</sup>

- Miscommunication and misinformation
- Real or perceived differences in needs and priorities
- Real or perceived differences in values, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and culture
- Structural conditions

Each of these sources of conflict can be approached with specific strategies. In general, conflicts arising from miscommunication and misinformation are easier to resolve than those arising from differences in needs and priorities. Differences in values and beliefs and those arising from how things are structured are more difficult than conflicts over information and priorities. The first step in managing and resolving conflict

is to determine which of these four sources are the biggest contributors to your conflict.

<sup>1</sup> Dee Kelsey and Pam Plumb, *Great Meetings* (Portland, ME: Hanson Park Press, 2001), 120.

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## What you will learn:

- Common sources of conflict in groups
- Personal styles of dealing with conflict
- Communication skills that help resolve conflict
- A facilitated group process for working through conflict
- Role and skills for facilitators

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## Styles of dealing with conflict

Those who study people and conflict have developed theories about how we, as individuals and as members of groups, respond to conflict. In general, we tend to get comfortable with one set of responses, even though we can learn skills allowing us to respond to each situation differently. Five common responses are listed below. Do you recognize yourself in this list?

- I avoid conflict.
- I accommodate others to keep the peace.
- I compromise; find middle ground.
- I compete; try to win with my own solution.
- I collaborate; seek a better solution.

In truth, all of these conflict response styles work in some situations and not so well in others. The choice for the individual and for the group is what style best matches the situation and the desired outcome.

## Personal and group skills for dealing with conflict

The basic skills for dealing with conflict have to do with describing the conflict in such a way that people don't feel personally attacked. You can do this by asking questions to determine the sources of the conflict and offering a description, testing it to see if others also see things as you do. By continuing to question and test, the group will come to understand what the conflict is about.

In order to do this work, the

bedrock skill is listening—listening for facts as well as feelings. You convey that you are listening through the language of your body (by making eye contact, by smiling, by leaning forward, by nodding) and by restating and summarizing what someone has said. This kind of acknowledgment of another person is often a powerful way to defuse situations that have become tense or disruptive. You also convey that you are listening fully by asking questions that allow speakers to open up, allowing them to focus on what they are feeling, thinking and wanting to happen.

If you have listened well, and have found agreement with your framing of the conflict, you may be able to suggest a group process for finding a solution.

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## Process for finding solutions to conflict

**Time and ground rules:** Find a time when people can meet just to focus on the conflict and its solution. Suggest and get group "buy-in" around ground rules such as "no personal attacks," "ask questions to understand," "one person speaks at a time" and others.

**Venting:** Allow each party (or those with common views) to

describe the conflict in turn and discuss how they feel about it. Ask questions that elicit responses beyond yes or no: "What happened?" "How did you feel?" "What impact has the conflict had on you?" Ask clarifying questions: "Can you phrase that another way so I can understand?" "Say more about that." And open the way for others in the group to ask similar clarifying questions. Ask those not involved in the conflict to refrain from stating how they feel, but rather to ask open-ended, nonjudgmental questions so that each party feels fully heard.

**Summarizing:** Restate the key facts, feelings and impacts each party has shared about the conflict. Ask the parties and group members to add to your summary as needed. Then ask for any observations about the situation.

**Desired outcome:** Ask the parties and group members to describe what the group would be like if this conflict were resolved. What impacts would a resolution have on the group's ability to do its work and maintain relationships among members?

**Seek shared interests:** Ask the parties and the group if they see any shared interests among the conflicting positions.

**Range of solutions:** Restate the desired outcome and shared interests. Ask for all the possible solutions to this conflict.

**Test for support:** Try to narrow the range of solutions by asking which ones seem to best bring the desired outcomes and meet the most number of shared interests.

**Test for agreement:** See how

willing the parties are to adopt one or a combination of the solutions. If agreement doesn't come easily, ask what would have to change to make a particular solution acceptable.

**Record the agreement:** Write it down for the group records, so it can be reviewed when needed.

**Evaluate the agreement:** Decide on a time frame for looking at how well the solution is working; evaluate and modify it as needed.

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## Roles and skills for facilitators

A facilitator in group conflict situations creates safe space for all participants to feel fully heard, respected and supported. Safe space can become creative space for finding solutions. Facilitators can help the group establish ground rules and procedures that lead to conflict resolution. Facilitators do not have a vested interest in a particular solution; they do not take sides in a conflict. Facilitators act in service to the group, helping the group be more effective, accomplish its work and maintain relationships.

In addition to the skills of listening and questioning already noted, a facilitator needs to develop skills to call the group's attention to how it is doing its work or how individual members

are behaving, either to move the group forward or to hold it back. These skills are like holding up a mirror so that the group can observe itself and make changes.

Several experts have described the process of holding up the mirror to the group, or intervening:

- Notice what is going on, both behavior and its impact on the group.
- Decide whether what is going on needs to be mirrored to the group.
- If you decide it does, describe what you have noticed in a nonblaming way.
- Test the impact you sense the behavior is having on the group.
- Ask if the group wants to do anything differently, or suggest new behavior.

- Remind the group members that they can also hold the mirror.

This publication won't make you an expert at dealing with and resolving conflict in groups. However, it has provided some ideas about where conflict comes from, ways that we tend to deal with conflict, and a process for a group to use in conflict situations. If you are interested in learning more and improving your skills as a facilitator, check out the other publications in this series.

## References

Kelsey, Dee and Pam Plumb. *Great Meetings*. Portland, ME: Hanson Park Press, 2001.

*This fact sheet was developed by Ronald Beard, Extension educator.  
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