
Using Group Conflict to Improve Your Project

Group conflict is essential to a group's cohesion. It helps groups identify areas of common values; provides greater group stability through shared beliefs; helps to balance the differences between extreme positions; and helps to clarify roles and structures. Frequently, if managed constructively, conflict can be a strong indicator of a group's effectiveness. To have effective conflict, it is necessary to create a safe environment.

A problem solving method usually is the first thing people employ in a conflict situation. If the group gets off track or tries to deflect the conversation, it is important to bring participants back to problem-solving.

The following are key steps in problem solving to move the conflict toward a win-win for all parties.

1. Separate the people from the problem. Put yourself in their shoes. Don't deduce their intentions from yours. Don't blame them for your problem. Discuss each other's perceptions. Look for opportunities to act consistently with perceptions to demonstrate your good faith in a negotiation. Give people a stake in the outcome by involving them in the process. Allow windows for face saving, making your proposal consistent with their values. Recognize and understand emotions of all parties. Listen actively. Speak about yourself rather than them. Speak for a purpose. Build a working relationship. Be hard on the problem, soft on the people.

2. Focus on underlying interests and not on stated positions. Ask "why" and "why not" for each position. Reconcile interests (not positions), since interests define the problem. (Behind opposing positions lie shared and conflicting interests.) Acknowledge others' interests as part of the problem. Acknowledge their interests before you state what you want. Look forward rather than arguing the past. Always be firm on interests and flexible on solutions.

3. Generate a variety of options before deciding

what to do. Be creative in how you can maintain or enhance the relationship with others in the conflict. Judgment hinders imagination. Brainstorm ideas by separating invention from imagination. Look through the eyes of different experts. Change the scope of the agreement to make it easier. Start with easier issues and work out resolutions that build momentum for the more difficult issues. Dovetail differing interests. Make their decision easy.

4. Base agreement on objective criteria and fair

procedures. Frame each issue as a joint search for an objective standard. Be open to reason to the type and application of standards. Yield only to principle, never to pressure.

5. Prepare in advance what you'll do if negotiation

fails (i.e. your walk-away alternative). Know your best alternative plan if you leave an interest-based negotiation. Know their best alternative plan. Be patient and persistent in negotiations until your walk-away alternative becomes the better choice. Never be a victim. If you have to, leave them knowing you worked hard on the problem. Stay true to your interests, and treat others as you would want to be treated.

These are strategies to guide your actions during a period of conflict:

- Start cooperatively with positive attitudes about the other person or team.
- Set boundaries for negative behavior.
- Be forgiving.
- Keep your strategy simple.
- Continue to put forth conciliatory gestures even when locked in a negative pattern.
- Eliminate hard feelings by attempting to do no better in any transaction than the other party.

When addressing a problem or conflict, ask problem-solving questions. Let the problem be the teacher.**These strategies can help:**

- Ask “*why?*” questions. “*Why is it that you want that?*” or “*Why is that a problem?*”
- Ask “*why not?*” Through their criticism seek to understand their interests.
- Ask “*what if?*” Use this to explore options without holding anyone to a position. Remember to invent first and evaluate later.
- Ask for the other party’s advice. “*What would you suggest that I do?*” “*What would you do if you were in my shoes?*” “*What would you say to my clients?*”
- Ask “*What makes that fair? You must have good reasons for thinking that is a fair solution. I’d like to hear them.*”
- Ask open-ended questions. Preface questions with “*how, why, why not, what or who.*”
- Tap into the power of silence. Let silence occur. Silence is the gestation period that can bring forth creativity and understanding.
- The turning point is when you change the game from positional bargaining to problem-solving negotiation.

Resources

Fisher, Roger, and Ury, William; *Getting to Yes*; SARE Conference, Lincoln, NE; Nov. 20, 1999.

Sternweis, Laura, and Wells, Betty; *The Ins and Outs and Ups and Downs of Groups*; ISU Extension; PM 147; Iowa State University, Ames, IA.

Ury, William; *Getting Past No*; SARE Conference, Lincoln, NE; Nov. 20, 1999.

Wheelan, Susan A.; *Group Processes: A Developmental Perspective*; SARE Conference, Lincoln, NE; Nov. 20, 1999.

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