

# Unit II: Interpersonal Leadership Skills

## 3. Managing Conflict

Differences of opinion and the resulting conflict are common to any volunteer organization or community group. When people of different backgrounds and interests come together to share decision making, some disagreements are to be expected. Finding common ground and resolving differences will result in a stronger organization with more effective action.

The potential for conflict exists whenever and wherever people have contact. It typically involves one or more of the following:

1. Competing interests or goals
2. Different ideas about methods of reaching goals
3. Incomplete understanding of or hidden personal values and feelings

In public decision making, even when a goal is agreed upon, ways to implement and finance the goal may also be a source of disagreement.

## Finding Common Ground

In creative management of conflict, all parties need to find the common ground—that is, the goals and interests they share. This serves as a foundation for resolving differences. Rephrasing the issue as a question often makes it easier to look for solutions that are satisfactory to all parties. It is helpful for people to:

- Recognize and acknowledge that differences (conflict) exist.
- Facilitate open, accurate communication and active listening.
- Maintain an objective perspective—stay on the issues, not the personalities; however, values and emotions must be acknowledged.
- Find the common interests and goals so everybody agrees on something.
- Make the necessary adjustments and reinforce, confirm, and make the agreement work.
- Remember that conflicting ideas lead to stronger, more effective groups.

## Conflict as a Difference of Opinion

Conflict can be defined as a “difference of opinion.” With that definition, seeing conflict as something that is natural to community groups and relationships is easier (Dunn 1986).

Conflict is often suppressed in favor of group harmony; however, suppressing conflict only drives it underground to reappear later in some more destructive form. Also, discouraging strong feelings and convictions reduces the very vitality that groups need. Conflict can stimulate new thought, lead to more creative

solutions, and keep a group alert to the various interests of its members. Conflict gets internal dissension and dissatisfaction out in the open, where it can be used in making the group more responsive to its members.

As long as conflict is focused on the job to be done rather than on personalities, the gains usually outweigh the costs.

## Why Does Conflict Occur?

Some conflict is inevitable in human relationships. Clashes occur more often over perceived differences than real ones. People anticipate blocks to achieving their goals that may or may not exist (Dunn 1986; Robinson, Clifford, and Moorhead 1974).

Conflict often results from:

- A lack of communication: Failure to share ideas and feelings allows the other person to “fill in the gap.” We “read into” what we think the other person or persons will say or anticipate how they will respond. Then, we often suspect negative things that provoke anxiety, leading us to look for the worst. If this continues, trust becomes lower and we may become suspicious and defensive.
- A value conflict in which two people have different attitudes, beliefs, and expectations: These differences may interfere in making decisions if we are inflexible and hold rigid beliefs about the “right” way to do things. Two people choose different goals or different methods to achieve the same goals because they have different values and beliefs. Since each goal requires an investment of time, effort, and some sacrifice, we often cannot pursue one goal without sacrificing the others to some extent.
- A lack of effective leadership or decision making: Disagreement

over “who’s in charge” or “how we are going to get things done” in any situation can be a source of conflict. For example, if one person in a group expects democratic decision making (all members have input) and another expects someone to be in charge and tell the members what to do, they may have difficulty resolving differences of opinion. So, when differences exist, members become sidetracked over who will decide what the decision-making process should be. The resulting conflict becomes a “win-lose” struggle.

- Discrepancies in role expectations: Difficulties can arise if people see their own and each others’ roles differently. For example, if the officers see their role as “running the organization” and the members see themselves as not only contributing information and opinions, but also having a real voice in decisions, conflict may arise.
- Low productivity: Being able to accomplish tasks and achieve goals is a necessary ingredient in the organizational environment. If the task is not done, the chairperson may get angry. If the other person responds to this anger by performing the task, a response pattern of anger is established to get results. Groups with low productivity may use nagging, making trade-offs (“I’ll do this if you do that”), and criticizing, but these tend to produce only short-term success.
- Change that causes imbalance: While change is considered to be a “given” for people working and living together, another “given” is that people tend to prefer secure, predictable, patterned responses to the unknown. When changes occur abruptly and unpredictably, conflict may follow.

- **Unresolved prior conflict:** As the number of past unresolved conflicts increases between people, so does the possibility of future ones. Many people shy away from conflict management because memories of past conflicts still hurt. Probably the most lasting of those “scars” have been caused by conflicts with those we are closest to—family, close friends, and trusted colleagues in volunteer or work groups.

## The Conflict Cycle

Conflict tends to follow a cycle, as represented in the diagram below (Robinson, Clifford, and Moorhead 1974).

- **Tension Development:** As the disagreement or threat begins to develop, the various parties start taking sides. The conflict can appear immediately or over time.
- **Role Dilemma:** People or groups who are involved raise questions about what is happening, who is right, and what should be done. They try to decide whether they should take sides and, if so, which one. (Tension development and role dilemma often happen at the same time.)
- **Injustice Collecting:** Each party begins to gather support. Each

itemizes the problems, justifies their position, and thinks of ways to win.

- **Confrontation:** The parties meet and clash. If both parties hold fast to their opinions, barriers may develop. Confrontation may be lessened or avoided by one or both parties making adjustments.
- **Adjustments:** If one party is weak and the other strong, the strong party can win by “domination,” but the conflict may reappear. If parties have equal power and neither party decides to change, they can wage a “cold war,” with each party trying to weaken the other. One party may choose to “avoid” the other. The two parties may choose to “compromise,” each gaining a little and losing a little. The two parties can work together in active participation to look for a solution to take care of both parties’ needs.

In most organizations and communities, only compromise resolves the conflict over time. Compromise in this context means giving up some of the less important factors—not giving up one’s principles. Other adjustments are, at best, short-term solutions, and the conflict will reappear.

## Methods of Dealing with Conflict

People and groups may use several different methods of dealing with disagreement. Some methods focus on preserving the relationship and resolving the issue, while others tend to have negative results (Griffin 1989; Lindgren 1990; Fisher and Ury 1991).

### Avoidance

Some people attempt to avoid certain types of conflict or conflict situations altogether. These people tend to repress emotional reactions, look the other way, or leave the situation entirely (for example, quit a job, leave school, get divorced). Either they cannot face up to such situations effectively or they do not have the skills to negotiate them effectively.

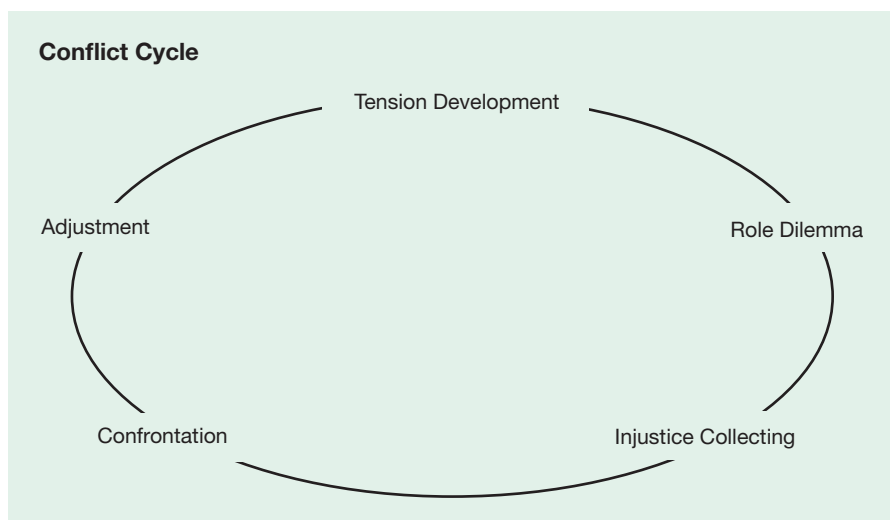
Avoidance strategies usually do not provide persons with a high level of satisfaction. They tend to leave doubts and fears about meeting the same type of situation in the future.

### Diffusion

Diffusion strategies are delaying actions that try to cool off the situation, at least temporarily. Examples include resolving minor points while delaying discussion of the major problem, postponing a confrontation until a more appropriate time, and avoiding clarification of the issues underlying the conflict. Similar to avoidance strategies, these tactics typically result in dissatisfaction, anxiety about the future, and concerns about oneself.

### Confrontation

The third major strategy involves an actual confrontation of conflicting issues or persons. Confrontation can be divided into win-lose (power) strategies and win-win strategies. Power strategies include the use of physical force (a punch in the nose, war), bribery (money, favors), and



punishment (withholding love, money). Such tactics are often very successful from the winners' point of view: they win, the others lose. A closer look at the power struggle suggests that it is probably not this simple. All win-lose strategies suffer from the "conflict trap." The loser has been given justification in her or his own mind for reversing the situation "next time." As a result, win-lose strategies, particularly the power strategy, are as much conflict generators as conflict solutions. The feeling of the loser is the seed from which the next round of conflict will likely grow.

### Arbitration

Arbitration is often the result of a fight strategy. When both sides in the fight are equally powerful and have equal rights, a stalemate begins, and a third party may be asked to decide the issue.

The problem with this strategy is that when the third party or judge decides between the conflicting parties, the loser seldom feels that justice has been done. The issue has been decided, but the hostility carries over and becomes a cause for renewed conflict.

### Voting

Voting is a civilized form of fighting. A vote, rather than an open fight, is possible when the following conditions are present:

1. Participants may change their positions on the issue in a conflict if they are convinced (election campaign).
2. Beliefs and commitments to principles or to an organization are present that hold the parties together in a continuing relationship (democracy).
3. The participants will generally abide by the preference of the majority.

### Compromise

Compromise strategies use negotiation and bargaining in order to "split the difference." The premise behind compromise is that partial victory is better than winning nothing at all. Ideally, in a compromise each side gives up something of lesser value in order to achieve or retain a greater goal. Compromise in this context is a form of negotiation. It does not involve giving up one's principles or values. Compromise, at its best, turns into consensus—a win-win result.

### Consensus

Consensus seeks to bring all parties in the conflict to a mutually satisfying resolution of the issue. Consensus is possible in an atmosphere where better answers and solutions are likely to emerge from differences. This is often called problem solving based on common interests (Fisher and Ury 1991).

### Synergy

Synergy is the highest form of conflict resolution. Imagine a ping-pong game in which your objective is, as a player, to return the ball in a way to maximize the probability that your opponent will hit the increasingly difficult shots successfully. This reverses the win-lose strategy.

Competition is invigorating and is used to increase mutual winning. The better each play, the more both win—and the more both enjoy it.

Synergistic thinking encourages us to use the minds, resources, and values of others to enlarge the amount of winnings.

In a win-win strategy, unlike power confrontations, both sides can win. The aim of these strategies is to resolve the conflict with a solution that is mutually satisfying to all parties involved in the conflict.

## Conflict Management Process

In any group situation, there is occasionally a struggle over guidelines or rules—who sets them, the kinds of rules that exist, and what happens when rules are broken.

### Guidelines and Procedures

Here are some suggested guidelines to which all parties must agree for the creative conflict management process to proceed. If they do not, the process will quickly deteriorate as people try to "win" as much as possible and "lose" as little as possible.

- Agree on a good time to attempt to resolve the conflict. Do this during "primetime" when energy is high and motivation is positive, not when you are angry, tired, or trying to meet a deadline to adjourn.
- The goal of creative conflict is deeper understanding, not "I win, you lose." Review the ground rules for maintaining trust and respect for others. See if the group wishes to add any other people. The group, as well as the facilitator, has a responsibility to see that discussion focuses on the issue and that people listen to one another. Discuss the specific issue or specific behavior, not the person, personality, or motivation. However, emotions should be discussed.
- Focus on the present. Avoid engaging in fault-finding from the past.
- Agree on which sources of information will be used.
- Provide "face-saving" mechanisms. Don't badger the other person. Allow a "time out" if emotions get too heavy, and then set a time to resume again. Sometimes you have to agree to disagree. At other times,

a trial period to see how something works out will be useful.

After everyone has agreed on guidelines about how to resolve a conflict, some suggestions for negotiating that consider both the relationship and the issue at stake are needed.

Recognize that personal emotional issues may be involved. The facilitator's job is to keep both the conflict itself and the processes of conflict resolution from including personal blame and the use of offensive language. Breaking down a big issue into smaller parts helps. Increasing the number of points that can be discussed separately offers more opportunity for negotiation and trade-offs. Bring in factual evidence wherever possible. Skilled negotiators try to reframe issues and provide different ways to look at the conflicting positions. They focus on interests, rather than on single proposed solutions (Fisher and Ury 1991; Pfeiffer and Goodstein 1982; Walker and Walker 1987).

### Third-Party Mediation

Conflict resolution can often be assisted by a third-party mediator. From time to time, each of us will have the opportunity to serve as a mediator to help others work out differences (Fisher and Ury 1991).

The mediator must remain neutral to be helpful. The role of mediator is similar to that of a traffic cop with the main responsibility of directing traffic—not promoting a given solution or solving the problem for the other parties. The mediator suggests different approaches to resolving conflict, ensures an open and balanced conversation flow, enforces ground rules, and protects the involved individuals from personal attack.

## Conflict Resolution

The distinction between conflict management and conflict resolution is important. We can manage conflict by withdrawing, by attacking or overpowering the other person, or by working out a compromise, but these strategies will not resolve the conflict. Each of these strategies carries a certain cost to the relationship. Also, since the conflict is only managed, not resolved, the conflict is likely to resurface. For a conflict to be resolved, two conditions must be met:

1. A cooperative rapport must be established between the conflicting parties, with a genuine concern for each other's needs.
2. A solution must be found that is acceptable to both sides.

Not all conflicts can be successfully resolved at a particular time. A willingness to develop a cooperative spirit and to engage in joint problem solving along with some specific strategies are often successful. This is often called interest-based negotiation.

## Improving Conflict Management Skills

Much conflict in groups stems from "communication gaps." For the effective management and perhaps ultimate resolution of conflict, there are two skills that are absolutely necessary—active listening and the clear sharing of concerns through "I-messages."

Listen. The area in which we most often fall short in our efforts to manage conflict is in listening. We usually fail to listen to other people—their needs, wants, concerns, fears, and feelings behind them. Rather than listen, we come on strong. We question, confront, defend, and use power and influence to overwhelm the other person. We wrongly feel we have heard and understood the other person's view and focus instead of getting our point across. We try to convince the other person of how right we are. We bring rational, logical ideas to bear, but with limited results.

### Results of Conflict Resolution

#### Successful

Better ideas are produced.

People are forced to search for new approaches.

Long-standing problems surface and are addressed.

People are forced to clarify their views.

Tension stimulates interest and creativity.

People have a chance to test their capabilities.

#### Unsuccessful

People feel defeated and humiliated.

The distance between the parties increases.

A climate of distrust develops.

Cooperation may decrease.

Resistance develops when teamwork is needed.

Some people leave because of the turmoil.

In order to manage conflict effectively, we first have to listen (Lindgren 1990; Pfeiffer and Goodstein 1982). We must:

- Stop talking.
- Give the person our total attention. You are not listening if you are thinking about what you are going to say next.
- Be attentive. Get in a straight line with the person. Assume an open posture and make regular eye contact. Physically react—nod, smile, shake your head in agreement, take notes. Clearly show through your actions that you are listening.
- Open the door. Invite the person to share his or her thoughts, feelings, or frustrations about the issue at hand. Use phrases such as “Tell me about it,” “Go on,” and “Good point.”
- Reflect. Summarize back to the person what has been said. “You feel. . .,” “You are concerned with. . .”
- Reflect the feelings as well as the words spoken. “You were quite annoyed over. . .” Reflective listening clearly shows that you are listening, develops rapport, and ends miscommunication.
- Probe. Ask for more information, “Please explain what you mean by. . .” Don’t interrogate—seek to clarify the person’s needs, interests, and concerns.
- Show genuine interest. Not until people feel listened to, understood, and respected in their views will they be open to your views.
- Use “I-messages.” Active listening is key to your effectiveness in conflict management. Conflict is not, however, resolved through listening alone. You must also clearly convey your opinion, needs,

concerns, and feelings—hopefully, to the other person’s understanding and respect. Only then can collaborative problem solving begin.

The “I-message” provides an effective means for expressing your thoughts in an assertive but nonthreatening manner. It simply involves expressing your concern, needs, opinion, or feelings through an honest, straightforward statement that begins with the word “I.” “I’m concerned about...” “I would prefer if we. . .” “I was embarrassed by. . .” “I suggest...” Care should be taken to express yourself in a direct but non-threatening, nonjudgmental manner.

Much conflict is resolved through a simple process of shifting back and forth between active listening and “I-messages.” This allows us to clarify and understand each other’s needs and concerns and the feelings behind them. As you begin to better understand each other’s points of view, you move on to collaborative problem solving—to the resolution of the conflict. The key is willingness to be involved in the process of listening and sharing clear “I-messages” (Lindgren 1990; Walker and Walker 1987).

## Techniques to Remember

1. Initiate an open and honest discussion about the conflict.
2. Be assertive, but not aggressive. Do not be afraid to state your own position, but do it in a nonthreatening way without attacking the other person.
3. Communicate the idea that even though you disagree with their views, you still respect them as a person. (This is similar to the idea of telling a child that even though you may not like some bad behavior, you still love the child.)
4. Again, affirm your positive feelings for the other person. This will often open the door to more acceptance on their part. Your positive affirmation of them removes some of the threat from the disagreement and makes them more open to change.
5. Don’t be reluctant to consider compromise. Meet them halfway.
6. Suggest that the other person consider a compromise. Find a common ground of agreement. Use it to help resolve the conflict.
7. Consider the use of humor to help diffuse the tension in arguments.
8. Every argument seems to have at least two “innocent victims” who are each suffering a “wrong” from the other. Examine your own behavior. Are you being unreasonable or inflexible?
9. Remember, constructive conflict resolution begins with your actions, feelings, skills, and willingness to change.
10. Outline a plan of action to resolve a particular conflict. What are you going to do to try and resolve the conflict? How do you expect the other person to respond? What will you do if they don’t behave in the expected way?

11. Keep conflict resolution efforts constructive. Gently challenge their views, but never threaten their person.
12. Initially, you can begin your conflict resolution efforts by building a mutual climate of trust. Work together with the other person on a joint cooperative effort. Cooperative interaction builds trust and has a powerful positive effect on the relationship between two people.
13. Refrain from “labeling” the other person’s position. If you label their ideas as “wrong,” “simplistic,” or “ridiculous,” it will elicit an equally negative reaction from the other person and may cause them to get defensive.
14. Avoid “no-win” situations where, even if you win, the relationship costs are too high of a price to pay. Is the issue of the conflict really worth the grief it may be causing?
15. Define the conflict. Actually write out the issues on a piece of paper. Think small. The more limited the definition of the conflict, the easier it will be to resolve.

## Summary

Conflict can be managed by withdrawing, attacking, or overpowering the others involved or by reaching a compromise. However, these methods do not resolve the conflict, which is likely to resurface. To truly resolve the conflict, a cooperative rapport must be established between the conflicting groups with a concern for each other, and a solution must be found that is acceptable to both sides.

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