

Eight Steps to Managing Conflict

No organization is free from it. The trick is to catch it early and manage it creatively.

BY MARION PETERS ANGELICA

STEP 1 Identify the Conflict.

There is a great benefit to finding trouble before it finds you. Conflicts identified early are easier to resolve because they haven't escalated to a high level of emotional intensity or complexity. If you, as the board chair or chief executive, note tension or misunderstandings between board or staff members, take the initiative to check it out.

Pay attention to subtle clues of possible conflicts brewing. Doing so is more a matter of focus than of performing a new activity. Because conflict is uncomfortable for most people, you will see them reacting to one another differently when they are in conflict. Here are some cues to look for:

Silence. A drop in the amount of communication can often be a signal that something is going on. Conflict is one possibility.

Body language. Watch how people position their bodies during interactions. Remember that some body language is culturally specific. However, the activity of mirroring positions and movements (matching another person's gestures) is a signal of harmony in almost all cultures.

Change in social patterns. For example, a change in who goes to lunch together or who is included in alliances can indicate conflict.

Style differences. Significant differences among individuals in their work and decision-making styles can be a common sign—of conflict.

Recurring problems. Recurring troubles between specific individuals or groups may indicate system-induced conflicts.

Cross-program tensions. Watch for recurring tensions between programs or administrative parts of the organization. Such tensions may be the result of an outmoded policy or procedure.

STEP 2 Decide Whether to Intervene.

By putting your attention and skills to work, you may have identified a conflict. Now you have to decide what to do about it. Consider the following questions:

What are the likely consequences of *not* resolving this issue now? What will be the best and worst possible outcomes if you don't intervene at this point?

Are you the most appropriate person to help resolve this conflict? The general rule is to handle conflicts as far down on the organizational ladder as possible. However, conflict between managers or between supervisors and their employees may need executive inter-

vention. Unique circumstances may require the board to handle conflicts throughout the organization.

Can you be objective about the people and issues?

Can you make the time to deal with the resolution process? Conflict resolution takes time because it is predominantly a communication process. The time investment for an average conflict is as follows:

Gather information from involved parties: 40-60 minutes for each person

Analyze the conflict and tailor the process: 30-60 minutes

Brief parties about the process: 30-45 minutes each

Conduct conflict resolution meeting(s): 60-120 minutes each

If you don't have the time, skills, or objectivity to manage the conflict, find someone who does. If no one with your organization can facilitate the conflict impartially, you may need to hire an outside mediator.

STEP 3 Identify Parties, Issues, and Emotions.

Once you've decided you will manage the conflict, you need to understand what you're facing. Answer the following questions:

Who has a stake in the conflict? These are the parties.

Do certain groups have the same interests and positions? Think of like-minded groups as one party.

Avoid phrases that sounds interrogating.

How does each person see the issues in the conflict?

What does each party seek as a solution to the conflict?

How emotional are people regarding the conflict?

Make appointments with known parties to collect information about who is involved, the issues, and their feelings about the situation. Help them uncover their own interests by learning *why* they seek a particular solution to the conflict.

The way you get to *why* is important. A direct *why* can make people feel you doubt their reasoning, which can make them defensive. Avoid phrases or tones of voice that sound interrogating. Rather, approach the question in a conversational manner. You can state, as a guess, what you think a party's interest might be and check it out with them. When people hear their interests articulated, they feel understood. It also becomes clear to them what elements a resolution must contain to satisfy them.

Many people have strong feelings when they are engaged in a conflict. Your recognition of their feelings will usually lower the intensity of the emotion, helping them to think more clearly.

STEP 4

Analyze the Conflict.

Your analytic abilities, managerial judgment, and creative thinking are your best tools for analyzing a conflict. Your analysis should answer the following questions:

Can this conflict be handled by this informal process? Some situations require special processes. Such situations include harassment, discrimination, the involvement of children or vulnerable adults, and evidence of illegal behavior.

Who are all the people with stakes in this conflict? Revisit the list you created in Step 3 to be sure

you know the name of every person who is affecting or being affected by the conflict. In addition to the people who are parties to the conflict, list others who may be affected by or concerned about the resolution. Though they probably won't be included in the conflict resolution meeting, you may need to ask for their advice or opinions as options are being devised.

Are these individuals capable of making rational, informed decisions? After you have named all the individuals, you need to decide whether they are competent to participate in a conflict resolution process. For example, a person who seems overwrought with emotion is still capable of participating; a person who seems overwrought and is acting out violently is not.

What are the power relationships among the individuals? Who has what sorts of power, and who accedes (or does not accede) to that power?

What gender or cultural differences must be considered? Might culture, gender, or other communication differences have created misunderstandings?

How does each person describe the conflict? Use this information to assess how the parties place blame or claim responsibility in the conflict.

What is each party's position? What solutions do they seek?

What does each party say—or what can be inferred—about their key needs and concerns? Understanding each party's interests gives you a picture of the conflict and may even show you possibilities for resolution.

What assumptions are people making about one another? Understanding these assumptions will give you important clues about issues that need to be discussed at the conflict resolution meeting. Dispelling inaccurate assumptions is a major contribution to mending relationships.

Is the conflict interpersonal or is it induced by the system—or both? Be alert to system-induced conflicts and open-minded about changing the systems that create them.

Are there known limitations to potential resolutions that you must impose on behalf of the organization? Some solutions may be limited by finances, policies, mission goals, ethical standards, or legal requirements. Be aware of such limitations before a conflict resolution meeting.

STEP 5

Design the Process.

Answering these questions will help you plan the best way to bring the parties together to address the conflict:

What are the goals of the process? If the people involved must work together, an important goal will be to reestablish trust and harmony. If the conflict is between management and employees or board members, the goals might include changing or clarifying processes in the organization. Here procedural interests are foremost, coupled with relationship interests when staff and board will continue to work together.

How much time will the process take? To develop a time estimate, consider the number of

Use deadlines like a spice—just a little, and at the right moment.

people involved, the complexity of issues, and how damaged relationships are. While people need time to air their side, often a deadline helps them stay focused. Use deadlines like a spice—just a little, and at the right moment. Sometimes having a time limit helps people feel good about resolving an issue sooner than anticipated—it sets everyone up as work-

ing together to beat the clock. Any time you can get people in conflict to work together or agree—even about the weather—you are reinforcing their ability to work through a conflict together.

How will power imbalances be handled? Fear of retribution by a more powerful individual may keep people from dealing with conflict.

You need to deal with this fear up front—*before* people agree to try to resolve the conflict.

How will you handle people's emotions regarding the conflict? Don't underestimate the importance of feelings, even if emotions don't seem strong. Many resolutions hinge on an apology or acknowledgment of someone's misjudgment of people or events.

In what setting will the meetings occur? The physical setting can influence the process more than you might expect. Be sure the setting is private, comfortable, and free from interruptions. Be sure it doesn't "belong" to either party. Seat people at angles to one another so that they can choose when and whether to make eye contact. Round and square tables work best.

How will you protect people's need for privacy and confidentiality? It is usually enough to have people agree orally and in each other's presence that what is said will remain confidential.

Figure 1: Process Steps Checklist

When you meet with each person involved in the conflict, you will need to describe how the conflict resolution process works. Also repeat this explanation at the beginning of the conflict resolution meeting between the parties.

1. The conflict resolution meeting will open with the conflict manager welcoming people.
2. The group will discuss comfort issues and logistics, including location of bathrooms, refreshments, seating, time limitations, and dates for future meetings.
3. The conflict manager will discuss the ground rules:
 - the goal and benefits of the conflict resolution process
 - the conflict manager's role as impartial facilitator and the organization's steward
 - expected decorum
 - confidentiality and concept of good faith
 - alternatives to this process
 - use of caucus
 - how the meeting will proceed
 - the role of outsiders, if any
 - questions about ground rules
 - any additions to ground rules as discussed and agreed to by all parties
4. The parties will make an oral or written agreement to participate in and follow ground rules.
5. The conflict manager will briefly describe the conflict.
6. The parties will voice their understanding of the conflict.
7. The parties and conflict manager will discuss and clarify their understandings of one another's perspectives on the conflict.
8. The parties and conflict manager will identify the key interests and establish an order in which to discuss them.
9. The parties will generate ideas for solutions to key concerns.
10. The parties will evaluate solutions in light of the interests they've identified.
11. The parties will select mutually agreeable solutions.
12. The parties will discuss implementation, monitoring, and follow-up to the solutions.
13. The parties and conflict manager will fine-tune and write up the agreed-upon resolution.
14. The conflict manager will initiate a way to celebrate the resolution.
15. The conflict manager will ensure follow-up.

STEP 6 Educate Parties, and Get Agreement to Participate.

Explain everything that will happen in the conflict resolution process, and ask each person to agree to participate. Figure 1 includes a checklist of steps you will want to cover with the parties. Use this checklist twice—first when you are educating the parties privately and again at the opening of the first conflict management meeting.

STEP 7 Conduct the Process.

Hold a meeting to help the parties find a creative solution to their differences. The basic steps are as follows:

Set up the meeting environment. Have pens, paper, a box of tissues, a flip chart or erasable board, and markers at the ready. Give the participants pens and paper so they can take notes to help them remember points they want to clarify or questions they want to ask. Remind them, though, that you will gather their notes at the end of the meeting to protect confidentiality.

Open the meeting. Welcome everyone, and explain the steps for the meeting, as outlined in Figure 1. Let everyone know the time the meeting will end. Explain that people may ask to take breaks or request caucuses with you at any time. Discuss the basic rules that all conflict resolution meetings follow:

- People must speak respectfully to one another. A common way to ensure respectful dialogue is to have people begin their thoughts with “I.” Using “I” instead of “you,” “he,” or “she” assures they are giving their own perspective rather than blaming or accusing others.

- People are expected to speak and act in good faith—to tell the truth as they know it and to agree only to actions they are willing to do.

- Everyone must keep all information confidential.

Have the parties describe their experiences without interruptions. Have them take turns stating their understanding of the issues and their feelings about the conflict.

Invite questions. After all parties have given their views, give people a chance to ask for clarification.

Discuss and sort issues. Help the parties untangle the web of misunderstanding and break it into distinct issues. Write the issues on the flip chart or erasable board.

Decide which issues to discuss first. It’s wise to start with an issue that’s easy to resolve. Getting even a simple issue tentatively settled creates a feeling of optimism.

Discuss issues, and generate ideas for solution. This is the cre-

ative part of the process. To help parties explore potential solutions, you can reframe issues, ask questions, and politely challenge assumptions. If people get stuck on an issue, put it on hold and move on to the next one. As momentum builds toward resolution, there is a better chance of resolving the sticky point later. There’s no need to finalize solutions in this step.

Review the issues and possible solutions. Have the group review the proposed solutions and how they fit together. Modify them as necessary. Sometimes at this juncture new issues arise. As the integration phase proceeds, people grow more optimistic, creative, and clear about what is important to them—and an undiscovered interest may suddenly surface. Be patient, and work on the newly surfaced interest as you did on earlier issues.

Agree to a resolution. When all the pieces have come together, the parties are ready to agree to a resolution. To be sure everyone has the same understanding of the agreement, you can draft the resolution and have the parties refine it. Reading an agreed-upon resolution can prevent future misunderstandings.

Formalize the agreement. You can get oral agreement, or the parties can finalize it with a handshake or sign a written letter of understanding. Even though the agreement is not a formal document, there are times when people feel more confident when they have an agreement in writing.

STEP 8 Celebrate and Check In.

When people work through a conflict, it’s important to celebrate. This is an easy step to forget. Don’t. View it as an investment in people’s willingness to resolve future conflicts, preferably on their own.

A celebration ends what was likely a difficult set of interactions on

a positive note. Base the celebration on the situation and people. It need be no more elaborate than starting a round of thank-yous or handshakes.

Finally, set a future time—a week, a month, or a few months away—when you will check in with the parties about how their agreement is holding up. This gives you and the parties an opportunity to fine-tune the agreement to stave off future problems and ensure that everyone remains satisfied. ■

Marion Peters Angelica is president and founder of Convergences, Inc., a provider of services in conflict resolution and creative problem solving. She is an assistant professor at the Hamline University Graduate School of Nonprofit Management, adjunct professor at St. Mary’s College Graduate School of Education, and author of Resolving Conflict in Nonprofit Organizations and Keeping the Peace: Resolving Conflict in the Boardroom, from which this article is adapted (published by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, www.wilder.org).

Lose the Fightin’ Words

Beware the following phrases—which can increase the possibility of conflict:

Ordering:	“You have to...” “You will...”
Threatening:	“If you don’t...” “You’d better or else...”
Preaching:	“You ought to...” “It’s only right that you should...”
Interfering:	“Here’s what you should do...” “It’d be best if you...”
Accusing:	“You started this mess...” “You won’t listen...”
Categorizing:	“You always...” “You never...”
Diagnosing:	“You’re just trying to get attention...” “What you need is...”

—adapted from *Resolving Conflicts at Work* (Jossey-Bass)