

Managing Conflict in Higher Education

Respectful University Services

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University
of Regina

What is Conflict?

Conflict can be defined as friction between individuals due to a difference of opinions, ideas, beliefs, values, needs or objectives.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KY5TWWz5ZDU>

Types of Conflict

- Interpersonal
- Intergroup or inter-organizational



Effects of Conflict

- There are positive and negative effects of conflict.



Preventing Conflict

- Nurture healthy relationships
- Build community



De-escalating Conflict

- Seek to understand the need.
- Determine if the need can or cannot be met.



Seek to Understand the Need

Positions	Interests
What they say they want	Why they want it
Positions are surface statements of where a person or organization stands, and rarely provide insight into underlying motivations, values or incentives.	Interests are a party's underlying reasons, values or motivations. Interests explain why someone takes a certain position.
Position Example: Union demands a five-year contract.	Interest Example: Union wants time for workers to retool their skills before plant closings are implemented.

Seek to Understand the Need

Positions	Interests
Example: “Start a month early”	Example: Finish project on time
What people say they want	Why they want it; underlying motivations
Demands	Concerns
Things you/they say you will/won’t do	Fears and aspirations
Subjective wants	Objective needs

Part 2: When the need cannot be met

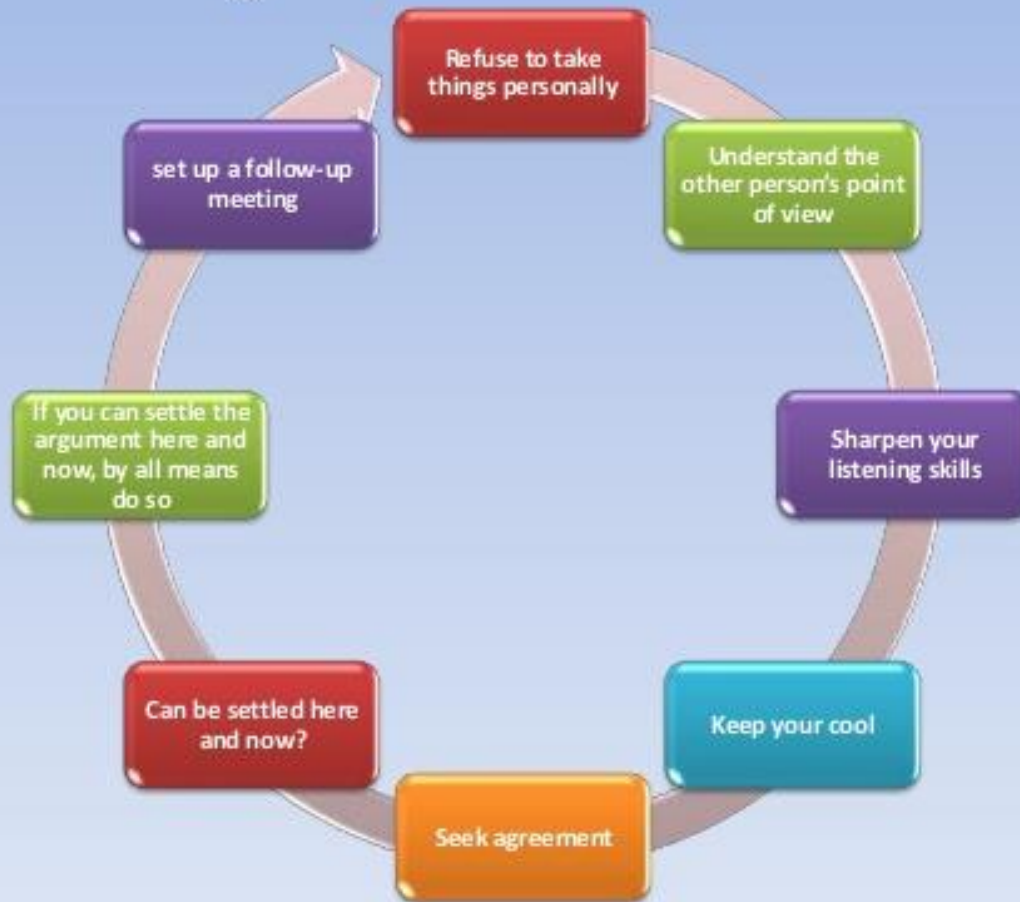


Managing Conflict

1. Acknowledge
2. Communicate
3. Create Solutions
4. Follow up



Strategies to dissolve Conflict



Acknowledge the Conflict

Pretending that nothing is wrong isn't the way to handle a conflict. Begin by admitting there's a problem that needs resolution. Acknowledge the conflict and the roles you and the other person have played in creating or sustaining the problem. Be honest with yourself about your own role in the situation.

- Think about what factors are influencing the problem, such as scheduling, personality conflicts, feeling overworked, or disrupting some kind of perceived pecking order.
- Look at not only your side, but the other side as well. Looking at both sides can help you understand the problem from both perspectives.

Acknowledge the Conflict

Focus on the problem, not the person.

If the conflict is not personal, don't make it personal. Put your focus on the problem and finding ways to solve that problem.

You can't change the person, and you will likely continue working with them. Even if you don't want to be friends with the person, keep your focus on the problem without making it a personal issue.

- It's easy to feel personally attacked for something, especially if it's regarding your work. Do your best to not take things personally and keep everything within the lens of your work.

Acknowledge the Conflict

Take the initiative.

It is important to address issues as soon as possible to prevent them from becoming larger issues in the future. If you notice a problem, then address it right away.

For example, you could hold a meeting to discuss the issue and work together to find a solution.

- Don't wait for the person to come to you. Be the first one to bring up the problem, no matter what your role is.

Communicate

Choose the right time and place to talk.

A hurried conversation at your desk between emails and phone calls won't solve anything. Put some thought into talking with the person. You need an undisturbed location and time to address the issue.

- Decide whether you want to send an email or have an in-person discussion. If you speak in-person, do so away from other employees and when both of you have time to talk.

Communicate

Ask.

If somebody has done something that made you angry or if you don't understand their actions, simply asking about it can make a world of difference. Don't assume that people do what they do to annoy or harm you. Sometimes, there's a good reason why that person does what he or she does. Other times, they may not even realize that they did something hurtful, and bringing it to their attention can clarify their intentions. Make an inquiry, not an accusation. Try to remain neutral and phrase your questions as matters of curiosity.

- Say, "I was wondering why you brushed off my question yesterday," or "I've noticed that you cut my work down, and I'm wondering why that is."



Communicate

Find things you agree upon.

Find some common ground with the person. This might mean that both of you acknowledge that a problem exists or that something needs to be solved. Perhaps you can agree that both you and they need to do something to create resolution. Whatever it is, find something each of you can get behind.

- For example, if you feel bullied, both of you might agree that you have problems getting along or splitting responsibilities.
- Say, “I want us to resolve this. Let’s find some things we can agree upon so that we can move forward.”

Communicate

Accept responsibility for your actions.

Accept responsibility for your part in the conflict. Usually everyone involved has done something to create and sustain the conflict. Own up to how you contributed to the dispute and express regret and responsibility. Remember: you're not accepting the entire blame, you're taking responsibility for your contribution to the situation.

- For example, say, "I'm sorry I said those hurtful things. I was upset, but it wasn't right of me to call you that."

Communicate

Resist acting on impulse.

If your coworker says something offensive or hurtful, resist the urge to fire something harsh back. You might say something you regret or blow the issue out of proportion. If a conflict arises, take some time to think it over before immediately responding. You may come to realize that you misheard them, misunderstood them, or need further clarification.

- Immediately responding will likely mean you respond in a negative way.

Communicate

Avoid accusations and blame.

Keep from becoming defensive or blaming the other person. Even if you feel victimized, don't pour your negativity onto them. It might be tempting to call them out and let others know how they've wronged you, but keep some decorum as this is your workplace.

- If you want to express how you feel wronged or hurt, use "I" statements. For example, say, "I felt really hurt when you took credit for the project during the meeting," instead of, "I can't believe you did that. You're a horrible person."

Creating Solutions

Develop a plan for resolution.

Once you feel like you've talked over the problem, propose possible solutions. Keep the focus on the future and how each of you can respond better. Find points where you can compromise or work on communicating more effectively. Create a different way of problem-solving or working together, such as taking turns or writing things out instead of saying them out loud.

- If you can't create a plan on your own, involve your manager in creating ways to approach conflicts.
- For example, if the person talks over you in meetings, say, "I want to be heard. Is it possible for you to wait until I finish speaking to chime in? If you start to talk over me, I will ask you to let me finish."



Creating Solutions

Involve your supervisor if needed.

Your supervisor can help you solve workplace conflicts. If the conflict is growing larger or you feel like you want to quit over it, now is the time to get your supervisor involved. You may also want to involve your supervisor if the conflict is personal or workplace morale is low for you and maybe even those around you.

- Your supervisor can find someone to mediate or get you and the other person talking more constructively. A good mediator will help the disputants find their own solution, not provide advice or push them toward any particular solution.

Creating Solutions

Follow through on your plan.

It's not enough to just create a resolution. Both you and the other person must follow through on any agreed-upon solutions. Discuss ways to stay accountable, whether that means that other co-workers will participate or your workplace will step in. Create a system to be accountable. You might want to include your manager in enforcing any changes.

- For example, if you struggle to have balance in projects, divvy up tasks before starting the project so that they feel fair and equal. Have someone neutral step in and get their opinion on the tasks.

Creating Solutions

Make necessary changes.

Depending on the dispute, you may need to make some changes, such as changing your role in the workplace. For example, if you can't find a resolution, then consider changing departments or taking a different role in your workplace. If you know talking to the person will upset you or cause problems, engage only in "water cooler" discussions. Do what you can to avoid creating or perpetuating further disputes.

Follow Up

Check back in.

Decide on a date to re-evaluate the situation. Hold yourself accountable for your part in the solution.

In the event that this dysfunctional conflict persists, supervisors may have to resort to alternative strategies (third party):

- Coordinator Respectful University Services
- Human Resources Business Partner
- Mediation
- Organizational development interventions
(education, training, coaching)

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