

## **CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

**Conflict Management** is the ability to develop working relationships that facilitate the prevention and/or resolution of conflicts within the organization.

<i>This Means...</i>	<i>This Doesn't Mean...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensuring that both sides to an agreement have an opportunity to present their needs and reasons for action</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• only listening to the parties with whom you are in agreement, or have previous relationships</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presenting your needs as a point from which to start conflict resolution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• presenting your needs as a fixed and inflexible set of demands which must be met by the other party</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• helping parties in conflict to find common ground on which they can build an agreement and a relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focusing on the differences between the parties, encouraging an "us versus them" attitude</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• setting, and clearly explaining, the ground rules of the discussion or negotiation prior to its beginning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• changing the rules halfway through the negotiation, or penalizing individuals for inappropriate behaviour when the code of conduct was not explained to them</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• taking steps to calm someone (e.g., a coworker or customer/client) who is upset</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• refusing to get involved in emotionally charged situations or saying or doing things that make the situation worse</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• bringing group issues into the open which may be personally threatening to you or difficult for you to deal with</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• only offering opinions on group issues without being willing to put effort into addressing the issues</li> </ul>

**Developmental  
Activities**

**Level 1-2 Activities**

**Try to see the other person's point of view.**

- Listen. Don't answer your own questions, practice remaining silent for at least 10 seconds after you ask a question.
- If you disagree with someone in a team meeting, first acknowledge that person's point of view before offering your opinion.
- Objectively summarize differing points of view on issues and explicitly acknowledge that there is a difference of opinion.
- Ask for the group's help when there appears to be conflict in the group. As a team member, you should be willing to act in consensus with the group opinion, even if it differs from your own.

**Use a set of techniques for coping effectively when facing conflict.**

- Next time you find yourself in a stressful situation involving interpersonal conflict, try practicing one or two of the suggestions below:
  - ⇒ Recognize that others will not always be willing or capable of understanding or accepting your point of view.
  - ⇒ Present your point of view clearly but diplomatically.
  - ⇒ Remove yourself from the situation. For example, if it's a phone call, put the person on hold temporarily. Allow your emotions to subside before you act.
- Refer to the "Books and Videos" section of this guide. The references in this section contain many helpful techniques for dealing with conflict situations.

**Reflection Tip:**

- \* Evaluate the outcomes of interpersonal conflict situations once you have applied some of these suggestions. Do you feel differently? How are others affected by your new behaviour?

**Demonstrate active listening to reduce conflict and stress.**

- Summarize the main points being expressed by others.
- Be sure to communicate the content of what was said as well as the feeling behind the content. This demonstrates to others that you are actively listening.

**Reflection Tip:**

- \* To effectively listen actively you must feel as though you are putting yourself in the other individual's shoes. How does this perspective differ from your own?

### **Observe a colleague dealing with a difficult or conflict situation.**

- Note the effective techniques he or she uses to reduce tension and gain agreement.
- Debrief the interaction afterward. Describe what you observed and ask your colleague to explain what he or she was thinking and feeling at the time.

### **Ask a colleague to give you feedback on how to handle stressful or difficult situations.**

- Identify the different types of situations in which you have had difficulty resolving conflict (e.g., interacting with a difficult or demanding constituent).
- Ask a colleague to describe what he or she has observed you doing or saying (probe your colleague for specific examples).
- Ask your colleague for suggestions on how you might handle these situations more effectively in the future. Note your colleague's suggestions and apply them the next time you face a conflict situation with a constituent or co-worker.
- Meet with your colleague periodically to discuss your progress.

### **Level 3-4 Activities**

#### **Practice the following skills and behaviours when you are in situations of potential conflict in your team.**

- Emphasize people's common interests, concerns, goals, and the interdependence of involved parties.
- Emphasize the importance and equality of each member regarding their contributions and responsibilities.
- Have the group develop its own set of procedural rules or conduct code. For example, "Voice facts not emotions" or "Let people finish speaking before you speak."
- Help to define the problem by coaching others to offer succinct and factual information, to avoid verbally recycling the problem and to avoid excessive "testimonials" which merely repeat the same information.
- Insist on true consensus by alerting members to the pitfalls of forced consensus (consensus achieved through domination of the discussion by influential members) or false consensus (consensus achieved when people 'give in' often out of sheer exhaustion).
- Use group pronouns (we, us, ours).
- Thank and recognize members for their participation.

**Before entering a situation that you know will have conflict, practice with someone whose skills you respect.**

- Review the current situation with this person and your typical approach to resolving conflict.
- Ask this person how you and the other party can move closer to identifying the critical issues.
- Practice the discussion you might have.
- Enter the conflict situation, and use the feedback you received during your practice session.
- Find common ground on which both you and the other person can agree and focus.
- Maintain a focus on your common objectives.
- Monitor your own thoughts and feelings throughout the discussion. Note the reactions you are having to what the other person says. How does the other party respond to your actions?

**Ask your Manager to involve you in resolving difficult or stressful situations.**

- Use these situations as opportunities to practice Conflict Management.
- Ask your Manager to give you feedback on how you managed the situation.
- Take notes on how you thought you did and discuss your performance with your Manager.

**Ask a peer to role play a potentially tough and demanding customer/client.**

- Brainstorm all potential issues you may face in this customer/client situation and identify solutions ahead-of-time.
- Walk through the entire interaction in a realistic way. Ask for feedback on how well you managed conflict.
- Discuss the situation with your peer afterwards.
  - ⇒ Review the initial starting positions of each individual. How much closer were both of you at the end of the discussion?

**Reflection Tip:**

- \* Plan a strategy for incorporating what you have learned to successfully manage conflict.

**Practice helping others deal with conflict.**

- Be on the lookout for situations where you can help others deal with conflict. When there is an opportunity, seize the chance to practice calming others.
- Try a variety of techniques such as:

- ⇒ Calmly listening to the person who is upset.
- ⇒ Speaking in a calming tone of voice.
- ⇒ Holding yourself in a relaxed, non-threatening way (body language).
- After each incident reflect on what worked and what didn't.
- You can be confident that with practice you will become increasingly skillful at helping others deal with conflict.

**Identify one or two situations in the recent past (home or work) where you demonstrated effective Conflict Management and one or two situations where you had difficulty managing conflict.**

- Make notes about the techniques you used in the situations where you demonstrated effective Conflict Management.
- Think about whether your previously successful techniques would have helped in the situations where you had difficulty. Plan to use them the next time a similar situation arises.
- If you feel that the techniques would not have helped, or you tried them and were not successful, identify what it was about the situation that made it different and jot down some ideas or techniques that you might try next time. Keep a record of what happens to further evaluate.

**Investigate the barriers that prevent agreement in conflict situations.**

- In an area where you feel there might be conflict, determine the root cause for disagreement. Consider the following categories:
  - ⇒ Facts -- What are the issues? What actually happened? What is the data or information?
  - ⇒ Methods -- How should the situation be resolved? What are the steps?
  - ⇒ Goals -- What needs to be accomplished? What outcome would best satisfy everyone involved?
  - ⇒ Values -- What is important to each individual or group involved in the situation?
- Use the above categories to help establish the source of the disagreement or conflict. Discuss these sources with those involved to help clarify assumptions and, in doing so, reduce tension and clear the way for removing barriers to resolution.
- Listen to the viewpoints of others as if you are hearing them for the first time. Be open to new ideas and perspectives.
- Consider how the other person views the situation. Seeing the situation from the other person's perspective may provide new insights to resolving the conflict.

**When faced with a conflict, identify those people required to handle the problem. Have them meet and explain the problem.**

- Assign responsibilities and set up procedures for keeping you informed, as appropriate.
- Work with the group/individual to ensure that a resolution is delivered that meets the needs of the department or individuals involved.
- At the conclusion of the crisis, ask the group/individual what was learned? How can this type of situation be avoided in the future? Who will take responsibility to ensure that this does not happen again?
- Plan a strategy for incorporating what you have learned to successfully resolve your next difficult conflict situation.

### **Level 5 Activities**

**Offer to help two parties who are having trouble reaching agreement. Work on achieving true consensus by focusing on alternative plans of action which address both party's issues. (You could also do this as one of the parties.)**

- Begin by considering whether each side understands the position of the other? Are they using commonly understood terms and phrases? Do they appear to be deadlocked on certain fundamental issues?
- Have each side define their terms as precisely as possible, so that definitional misunderstandings can be eliminated early.
- When logical links (if a then b) are being made, question the speaker to help surface any causal assumptions which may be helping to drive the current line of debate.
- Help the opposing parties to define the nature and scope of the key differences in their perspectives. Work to define terms and be explicit about the practical, theoretical and philosophical implications of the differences in perspective.
- Approach the situation with a commitment to obtaining a win - win result. Aid the opposing parties in their understanding of the other's position and interests. Work with both groups to come up with potential solutions which meet the minimum criteria for acceptance determined by each of them.
- Review each solution with the groups to determine which would be the favoured approach for each, and how these can be combined or modified to satisfy both groups' requirements.

**Identify members of your team who need to cooperate with each other to achieve team objectives, but have trouble with their relationship to the extent that it impedes their joint progress.**

- Meet individually with those involved and have them clearly state their understanding of the situation.
  - ⇒ Enforce the group code of conduct which encourages colleagues to focus on the specific behaviours which interfere with progress, rather than directing personal criticism at the other party.
  - ⇒ Help each person define his or her biggest challenge in being successful as a team member.
- Facilitate a joint discussion with all the involved parties, restating and enforcing the code of conduct, as required.
  - ⇒ Present the similarities in perspective or desired outcomes you observed through your discussions with the individuals.
- Ask each individual to present the greatest challenge to his or her success and the 2 or 3 behaviours which he or she thought might improve the outcome.
  - ⇒ Illustrate the similarities in proposed solutions (e.g., cut down on unnecessary bureaucracy by eliminating certain sign-off requirements for common changes/requests).
- Once a solution has been proposed, ensure that all the parties involved have committed to it. Have each individual record the behavioural modifications which are required of him or her.
- Monitor the individuals' performance against this behavioural contract. Be aware of the interpersonal progress of the group and reinforce positive behaviours/behavioural changes whenever possible.

**Keep a log, over the next month, of situations that are particularly stressful and involve conflict and stress.**

- Write down the key points describing the situation.
  - ⇒ When did it occur, who was involved, what was the outcome?
- Note how you reacted to the situation.
  - ⇒ What did you think, feel and do at the time?
  - ⇒ What was the outcome?
  - ⇒ Were you satisfied with the result of your behaviour?
- Review the situations and try to identify any common themes.
- Recognize if there are specific types of situations that cause you to react badly.
- Work on improving your reaction to those particular situations.

- Reflect on the patterns that you might see emerging. Are there organizational or workplace issues leading to your stressful situations?
- Formulate a plan to begin to address the emerging organizational or workplace issues.