

Managing Conflict

Communities are groups of people who may not know each other and have had different life experiences, but who live in proximity to each other or who have interests in common. Our vision of the world and how it operates is influenced by our culture, our parents, our age, our personality, and a range of other factors.

This module addresses one inevitable fact of life: Individuals do not always agree. And when they don't agree, the result for group work can be either positive or negative, but it is rarely neutral. The challenge and opportunity for a community leader is to learn how to manage conflict and to channel its energy in a positive way.

Types of Conflict

According to *Leadership Plenty*, a multi-part series created by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, there are four different types of conflict, each with different techniques and strategies to manage and resolve. Understanding the type of conflict you are dealing with as a team will help you best tackle the issue and continue working effectively.

The Four Types of Conflict:

- **Personal conflict** is directed at and between individuals.
- **Subject or issue conflict** is related to a group's work and goals.
- **Procedural conflict** emerges from work methods and strategies.
- **Competitive conflict** occurs when individuals or groups must compete for the same financial or human resources.

If two individuals are clearly in disagreement over the procedures of the group, one remedy is for the group to determine by what norms it will operate. Alternately, when there is conflict in a group for whatever reason, the group members must be clear on their roles. Will individuals take sides? Is the protocol to let conflicting parties work it out alone or will certain group members help to mediate? Finally, the group must decide how it will react and act to prevent conflict from eroding meeting time and derailing the mission of the group.

Reasons for Conflict

While every League has its own issues to manage and resolve, there are several common reasons a conflict would arise.

- **Limited Resources:** Conflict often results when a number of groups are competing for limited resources.
- **Communication Problems:** As groups evolve, they tend to become concerned only with their own issues and also to develop their own vocabulary around those issues.



Communication problems may develop when the receiver of information does not understand the particular vocabulary or communication style or group.

- **Different Interests and Goals:** One individual or group feels its issues are ignored or are more important than another individual or group's issues, and there is a lack of agreement concerning the direction of group activity.
- **Different Perceptions and Attitudes:** Just as individuals perceive things differently, the groups to which they belong also have different perceptions. Groups, as well as individuals, tend to evaluate issues according to their backgrounds, norms, and experiences. This may be a problem, for instance, when there is a difference in performance expectations of members of the group or between groups.
- **Lack of Clarity:** Lack of clarity about the task to be accomplished and who is responsible for specific tasks is a frequent cause of conflict.

Resolving Conflict

Conflict often results in people giving up, disbanding the group, compromising, or having a winner-takes-all outcome. Obviously, on issues of great importance, the hope is that the conflict can be resolved in a beneficial manner.

There are four ways that conflicts are resolved. Some create more positive outcomes than others, but all are part of the range of actions that can be taken.

The Four Ways to Resolve Conflict:

- **Avoidance** is a typical response to conflict. "If we ignore it, it will go away." People who endorse this view think that time will take care of the conflict. This sometimes happens in the short run, but rarely over the long run. Problems and disagreements that are intense enough to be called "conflict" have little chance of resolving themselves without positive effort. Conflicts don't evaporate. Pushing conflicts below the surface and pretending that they don't exist creates tension and holds groups and individuals back.
- **Surrendering** is another way groups attempt to resolve conflict. People who cannot tolerate dissension and conflict often just give up and let the dominant people or groups have their way. It eases the conflict for the moment but it may not be the best thing for the community or organization or for the individual. Maybe the person waving the white flag was actually right and the others were wrong. What damage could be done to an organization or to a cause as a result? Because conflicts rarely have an absolutely right or an absolutely wrong conclusion, the ability to hear people out and sort through the issues in an impersonal, non-threatening way helps



the understanding and eventual resolution of the issue and allows groups to move forward.

- **Verbal attacks** are another way groups grapple with conflict. Some people just want to fight it out verbally. They will use any tactic to coerce others into conforming to their views. The only way to prevent or stop this behavior is for group norms and procedures to refuse to accept that type of negative behavior. This is not to say that individuals should not have strong views and opinions, but to say that using insults or superior force to defeat opposition is not acceptable.
- **Negotiation** is the process by which the different parties to the conflict offer their views of the dispute, describe their positions, and ultimately put their suggestions on the table for resolution. This process involves give-and-take for both parties and can result in a win-win outcome if there is compromise on both sides and a willingness to look for creative solutions. A well-known example is one where both parties want an orange. The only solution appears at first-glance to be to half the orange. Only after both sides clarify their interests and needs does it become clear that one side wants the pulp and the other side wants the peel. Clarifying interests, not locking into a particular position, and listening to the needs of the other side help in this approach.



Check out the “Tools You Can Use” section at the back of the manual for the True Colors, Leadership Compass, and conflict resolution activities to help your League Board recognize their differences and work effectively together!

Conflict as an Opportunity for Growth

How groups learn to handle conflict sets the stage for everything they do together. Research has shown that conflict resolution can spiral up or down. If there is a history of intimidation and argument, the level of trust within the community can be permanently damaged. If, on the other hand, conflicts are handled by cooperation, negotiation, and a win-win approach, it enhances the group’s ability to work on issues despite their obvious disagreements.

Conflict is not easy to deal with at any level. As human beings we may wish that our relations with other people would always be smooth and cordial.

Conflict, if it is handled well, can generate new alternatives, present different perspectives, and allow the group and its members to clarify their own thoughts and ideas.

Stages of Group Development

There are four predictable stages that groups go through as they grow. Each has its own “risk level” for conflict:



Chapter 9: Leading Together

1. **Forming**- The Orientation stage. Marked by confusion over goals and roles of group members, polite communication, strong leadership, and submissive membership. [Output (or work accomplished) is fairly low.]
2. **Storming**- The Conflict stage. Marked by struggles to set the group's goals and members' roles, criticism of ideas, poor attendance, polarization, and forming of alliances. [Output is still low.]
3. **Norming**- The Structure stage. Marked by organization and solidarity, honest communication, and reduced tension. [Moderate to high output is possible.]
4. **Performing**- The Work stage. Marked by productivity, clear goals and roles, harmony, and resolution. [Very high output is likely.]

Making Group Decisions

There are four main ways that decisions can be made by a group. The process used may contribute to the level of conflict in the organization.

Autocratic: One person decides for the whole group.

The Few: The few decide for the whole group. Usually it is assumed that the few are experts and can make the decision for the group.

Majority Rule: The group votes and the proposal or decision with the most votes win.

Consensus Building: Conflicting individuals or groups work together to identify common concerns and develop solutions that will be mutually beneficial. Based on communication and compromise.

Additional Notes on Making Decisions by Consensus

As one of the League's hallmarks is a strong consensus-based approach to decision making, we wanted to provide these additional points on consensus.

Consensus is about collaboration. It is "us" versus some problem/issue. We should be seeking a common, positive outcome (i.e., looking for the "greater good" for the organization).

Consensus is achieved when the leaders involved can honestly state, "The decision reached was not my first choice, but I am committed to it. I will support it."

Consensus means that individual leaders involved give up their right to continuously question or revisit the decision.

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**Except where noted, the following is taken from a larger curriculum on leadership development, Leadership Plenty. It is a multi-part series created by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. Please credit any references to this material accordingly.*