



MANAGING DIFFERENCES AND CONFLICTS

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MANAGING DIFFERENCES AND CONFLICTS

In all relationships between people or organisations there are differences. People think differently, have different values, interpret information in different ways, act and react differently in the same situations. Differences are the basis on which individuals, relationships and organisations grow and change.

In effective organizations or teams there is a shared sense of unity, of commitment to common goals and ideals. But there is also a shared sense of diversity. Differences are welcomed, people are given the opportunity to express and discuss their different perspectives and adopt an approach that values everyone's contributions and beliefs.

This does not mean that everyone can always get what they want. People need to realise that they work together as a team and sometimes have to do things they don't want to do, implement decisions they don't fully agree with or even, if the organisation takes a completely unacceptable direction, break with it.

Conflict arises when differences cannot be resolved satisfactorily.

Differences become conflict if:

- people are unwilling to accept that there are different values, priorities and views on what is „right“ or „important“;
- individuals have different or unclear standards of action, behaviour or performance and cannot reach common standards;
- Something (money, attention, work, responsibility) is distributed, or perceived as unfair;
- people feel that an individual or collective wants to win/divide, be right, get their way or dominate;
- people succumb to fear, mistrust and the need to define someone different or unknown as „other“, „outside“ or „enemy“;
- the people involved do not want to change;
- there are unclear or no procedures for discussing and resolving differences before they escalate into conflict.

Conflict is a tricky thing, but if managed properly it can enable an organisation and all the people involved to learn, grow and change.

There can be no talk of ‚equal opportunities‘, ‚valuing diversity‘ or ‚belonging to a community‘ if people are unwilling to value each other’s ideas, opinions and contributions.

The differences or conflicts that people say they are concerned about (the „existing problem“) are not always the actual problem. Sometimes resolving a conflict involves looking beyond the existing problem to discover what else is going on in the organisation. Unless the hidden causes of the conflict are discovered and addressed, it will continue to grow.

This Resource Material includes:

- questions that should be asked when (or preferably before) conflict arises;
- different approaches to conflict resolution;
- guidelines for dealing with conflict.

Viewpoints and issues

When problems, disagreements or conflicts arise, people's first reaction is usually to define their own position. The resolution of a conflict is then seen as a process of negotiation between the designated positions in order to find a solution to a pressing problem.

This way of resolving conflict is important. But, ultimately, it is more meaningful for the whole organization (not just the people directly involved in the conflict) to look beyond the existing problem to the hidden issues or clashes. This requires time and commitment, but can facilitate the resolution of the existing problem and prevent collateral ones from arising.

Of course, even better would be to look at what and how the organization was doing before the problem occurred!

The most common hidden problems can be divided into four broad categories, discussed below:

- different views on policies, objectives and priorities;
- conflicts arising from inadequate resources for needs or requirements;
- inappropriate structures and procedures;
- personal, past and hidden problems.

When researching the sources of conflict, it is important to remember that no one has a monopoly on the truth. Issues that seem perfectly clear from one perspective are always less clear when viewed from another angle. People involved in resolving a conflict must be willing to listen and take seriously different points of view, even if they are uncomfortable or difficult.

Policies, objectives and priorities

If an organization has issues stemming from different aspects of policies, goals, and priorities, Resource Materials 14 and 21 can be helpful.

- Does the organisation have clear objectives (what it wants to achieve) and priorities (what is most important for it to achieve) in the long, medium and short term? Does everyone involved know and understand this? Are there clear criteria for setting priorities? How does it deal with differing opinions about goals and priorities?
- What, according to the constitution, is the actual activity of the organization? (People often interpret clauses in articles of incorporation and similar documents very differently.) Is there a conflict between the purposes set out in the act and the actual work of the organization?
- Does the organisation have clear policies for its work? What are they? What do they mean? Do the policies need to be clarified?
- Do we need new policies?

Pressure on organisational resources

Resource materials 14 and 22 offer guidance on how to overcome problems in this area.

- What needs, pressures and demands (from users, members, community, staff, volunteers, donors, board or others) does it expect to meet?
- Is the organization trying to be too many things to too many people and creating a risk of organizational and personal overload?
- What resources (money, people, time, facilities, commitment, energy) does the organization have or can procure to meet the needs? Are resources being used as effectively as possible? Is the organization creating problems for itself by loading itself with more responsibilities than it can realistically handle?
- What are the priorities for existing and potential resources? Is there a conflict due to the organization continually meeting urgent demands, interfering with the achievement of its long-term goals?
- Are people in the organization realistic about what it can or cannot take on? How much time should be allotted for administration, meetings, communication, fundraising, and all the other important activities?

Structures and procedures

Resource materials 6, 7, 8, and 10 can help address these issues.

- How clear are the boundaries between different staff, teams and departments, the staff group as a whole, the volunteers, the board, individual contributors, executive committees, users they, the members? Does everyone understand what they can and cannot do, and what decisions they can and cannot make?
- Are the decision-making procedures followed as set out in the constitution? Is there a conflict between the constitutional procedures and what actually happens?
- How clear are the channels of communication? Are the relevant people getting the information they need to make informed decisions?
- Are meetings held regularly? Too infrequent? Too often? Are they well run, with clear agendas, good chairing and decision-making, and accurate minutes? Do people attend and participate?
- Are there clear procedures for setting professional expectations and performance standards, monitoring whether they have been met and addressing the situation if they have not?
- Are there clear, practical procedures for dealing with day-to-day problems, complaints and disciplinary issues? Do staff, volunteers and board members know what they are?

Personal, past and hidden problems

These problems are more difficult to manage because they are related to personalities and not the organisation. If a group is in a stressful situation or is poorly managed, these problems can take an inordinate amount of time and energy. This is counterproductive: it makes employees feel bad, the group can't get on with what it is supposed to be doing, and it and its employees soon get a reputation for being 'unable to organise'.

This Resource Material and Resource Material 13 deal with this type of issue.

Some of the questions to be asked are:

- Where are the hidden hierarchical structures and/or power struggles within the group? How can they be brought out into the open, acknowledged and overcome? (Hidden hierarchical structures are informal and arise because of age, level of involvement in the group, level of knowledge, personal power or friendships. They exist in all groups, whether there is a formal hierarchy or they operate in non-hierarchical structures.)
- What role does „commitment“ play in what is happening? („Commitment“ in this context refers to personal or emotional levels of investment. People who are too emotionally invested often think that the group should at all costs do what they think it should. There is no room for anyone else's views or ideas.)
- What role do racist, sexist and other unacceptable prejudices and discriminatory behaviour play? What needs to happen for them to be recognised, acknowledged and changed? How can this be done in ways that are constructive rather than destructive to the individuals and the group?

- Are accusations of racism, sexism, and other unacceptable prejudice and discriminatory behavior addressed in a way that recognizes their seriousness and importance, but without overly engaging the group? (Sometimes race, gender, or other such element in a conflict gets all the attention, while other fundamental issues are ignored.)
- Does the group have a past that still causes problems? Do old complaints still need to be addressed?
- Do personal disagreements and mistrust interfere with work? How can the people involved be helped to overcome this and get on with working together?

This list does not cover all possible causes of conflict in groups, but it is a starting point for identifying actual or potential problems and initiating measures to overcome them.

It is not easy to explore these hidden factors when passions are heated, people feel vulnerable, and the organisation seems to be falling apart. It may take someone external to the organization to help the group realize what is happening, how the urgent problem can be solved, and how the hidden problems can be overcome. The bottom section describes some of the processes for conflict resolution, and Resource Material 5 looks at how to bring in a consultant or other outsider.

Conflict resolution

Even when dealing with only one general type of conflict - organizational disputes - conflict resolution terminology is imprecise, inconsistently applied, and confusing. However, there are significant differences in approaches to conflict resolution or dispute settlement, and the terminology should somehow reflect these.

The definitions in this section can help clarify which processes are most appropriate for different types of disputes.

Desired results

Solution: agreement on how to resolve a conflict.

Measures: specific steps or series of steps needed to resolve the conflict.

Agreement: building or restoring a good relationship between parties who have been in conflict. Agreement is not the same as reconciliation. Agreement is the responsibility of the people involved in the conflict.

Processes

Most solutions to everyday conflicts involve only the parties to the dispute. But more serious conflicts may require a mediator or a third party: a person or organisation not directly involved in the conflict who intervenes to help the parties to the conflict reach a resolution.

Crisis intervention: (1) intervening in a scandal or heated conflict by separating or shielding people or by calling for help; (2) intervening in a situation that is on the verge of becoming heated by asking people to calm down or questioning what is going on. Crisis intervention may not be a direct part of the conflict resolution process, but it gives people an opportunity to calm down.

Facilitation: helping people to listen to, communicate with, and respect each other. The facilitator focuses more on communication than conflict resolution - but with the hope that better communication facilitates conflict resolution.

Reconciliation: the process of working towards a solution. It may not involve mediation, but if it does, a person or organisation is called a conciliator or mediator.

Mediation: reconciliation through a mediator.

Advocacy: mediating or negotiating on behalf of one of the parties. The advocate supports one of the parties to the conflict; the conciliator or mediator cannot openly support either party.

Negotiation: discussing the needs, requirements and interests of each party and agreeing which aspects should be included in the solution. The use of a negotiator is optional.

Arbitration: a legal or semi-legal process in which the parties to a conflict agree in advance to accept the decision of an arbitrator.

Adjudication or litigation: the settlement of a dispute by formal legal process.

Steps in conflict resolution

Regardless of the processes applied or the use of a mediator, the goal of conflict resolution is an agreement to take specific actions by some or all of the parties involved in the conflict to address the situation.

This requires:

- to give each party to the conflict the opportunity to clarify and identify issues it considers important;
- to give each party an opportunity to say why they want something to be done about this situation;
- identify common interests and, if possible at this stage, common objectives;
- to identify issues where agreement is particularly important and/or possible;
- to clarify facts, opinions and values on any issue;
- identify and discuss proposals to address each issue;
- agree a specific solution and the steps to implement it;
- to give assurance that all parties are willing to implement the decision, even if they do not fully agree with it;
- agree a procedure to check if the situation really works and/or to deal with people who do not want to do what they have accepted.

All this is easier said than done.

In an organization that faces conflict, the first reaction is usually to try to deal with it within the organization.

Common approaches are:

- to pretend nothing happened and ignore it;
- to enforce the decision;
- to enable people in a conflict to work towards a solution (with or without the involvement of a third party).

If these internal approaches are not effective, an independent third party can be brought in from outside to start the mediation process.

Denying that a conflict exists may escalate the situation for a short time, but the conflict will not go away and is likely to keep resurfacing, often in cases that are not related to the real problem at all. It is painful to accept and overcome a conflict, but it almost always turns out to make the situation worse if we pretend it is not there.

When people acknowledge that conflict exists but refuse to deal with it, they suppress it. „When have you ever seen us argue?“ they say, or, „There’s no point in trying to fix it because we’ll never come to an agreement.“

Suppression may be appropriate for minor conflicts that do not directly affect people’s work or their working relationships. It may be futile to spend time or energy over minor differences that people do not consider that serious.

Suppression is not appropriate just to demonstrate that they are „one big happy family“. Conflicts suppressed for this reason will erupt in other ways.

But in situations where power is very unequally distributed, suppression may be the only reliable way. Someone low in the hierarchy may feel, quite justifiably, that there is simply no point in trying to resolve a conflict with a powerful and intransigent person high up in the hierarchy. It is a matter of survival, not conflict resolution. But ultimately, the person trying to survive will have to make a choice: find a way to accept and overcome the problem; recognize that she or he can do nothing about it or leave the organization. If the person cannot make a choice, the inevitable result will be personal or organizational stress (see Resource Material 13).

Imposed solutions on people in conflict

The use of formal or legitimate authority or power (see Resource Material 4) means that a person or group with the right to do so finds a way to deal with the conflict and impose the decision on those involved. The people who have this right could be, for example, project managers, chairpersons of a board of directors or a staff meeting.

They can exercise power in an authoritarian way, or in a caring and considerate way, or something in between. The important thing is that the solution is external to the people directly involved in the conflict. Even if the parties to the conflict accept the right of a person or the entire organization to impose a solution, they may not be very committed to implementing it because they have not arrived at it themselves. Nor will it necessarily resolve any hidden conflict.

Sometimes decisions are imposed by people who do not actually have the right to do so, but who for some reason have power or „clout“ in the organization. Such a decision may or may not be acceptable, depending on who imposes it and whether the people involved in the conflict are willing to accept it.

DIY conflict resolution

Neither denial nor suppression nor imposed solutions get to the heart of the problem. It is almost always better for the people involved in the conflict to come to their own solution.

A „do-it-yourself“ solution to conflict does not mean that the person with the most power puts others in a position where they have no choice but to agree with his/her solution. Conflict resolution means discussing, negotiating and reaching a joint solution through a process of compromise or consensus.

For this to work, all countries need:

- be willing to find a solution;
- be willing to talk reasonably among themselves;
- be willing to listen;
- be willing to explore all possible solutions, not just their own;
- be willing to accept a solution even if it does not meet all their needs and requirements.

A quiet, neutral place and time specifically dedicated to this discussion can facilitate the resolution of conflict.

Compromise begins when each party states their concerns, needs and wants and then indicates what they can (or cannot) give up. Compromise only works if all parties have relatively equal power, or relatively equal things to keep or give up. If power is not equal, a false sense of balance can be created. „I'll agree not to reprimand you in front of other employees anymore if you agree to bring me my coffee when I ask.“

Compromise can also lead to solutions that are unworkable because no one is truly committed to them or because some aspects of the solution combine in an unworkable way.

Like compromise, consensus begins when each side lays out its problems, needs and desires, but further on the approaches diverge. In reaching a consensus solution, people's differences are respected and the goal is to try to find a solution that accepts and takes into account those differences. Each side sets out what is important to them and why. Both or all parties then work together to find a solution, it may be something quite unexpected that has the most important thing to each of them in mind.

„You were doing fine until you had to decide who should listen first!“

„DIY conflict resolution kit.

On paper, it may sound almost like a compromise. But the actual positions are different. In compromise, what matters is what each side is willing to give up. With consensus, what matters is what each side is willing to do to meet the other side's needs.

Getting people to reveal their ideas can take a lot of time and skill. But without that, they will remain locked into the narrow viewpoint of their existing position, which means it becomes a compromise instead of a consensus solution.

„Do-it-yourself“ conflict resolution doesn't work when one party (or all of them) behave irrationally, refuse to listen or insist on having their way. „DIY conflict resolution can also be hindered by other people in the group who have a compelling interest in the conflict continuing and who stir things up or say „this will never work“ if a solution is imminent.

First three steps approach

A very simple start for a DIY approach to conflict resolution is to have everyone involved complete the sentences given below:

1. The problem is...
2. The consequences of this problem are...
3. I think it's important to do something about this because...
4. Some of the reasons for this problem are...
5. Things I can do or help to improve the situation are...
6. The things that I think other staff [or council members or anyone else] should or can do on their end are...[name the people and what they can do]
7. The things that we as an organization need to do or can do are...
8. The things that other people (outside the organization) should or can do are...
[specify who should do it and what they should do]

9. The first three steps to tackle this problem are:

a. Yes

b. Yeah...

c. Yeah...

If the people involved in the conflict can generally agree on the problem (even if they disagree about the causes or consequences) and can understand why each wants to do something about it, then they may be able to agree on some steps as a start. So the only issues they need to discuss are number 1, 3 and 9 - but the rest need to be filled in so that it is possible for people to reach position 9 in their thoughts.

Supporting people to find their own solutions

Someone within the organisation can take on the role of facilitator or mediator, encouraging people in conflict to step back from their rigid positions and work towards an agreed solution. The facilitator or mediator will help them define the problem as they see it, clarify its importance and work towards a solution that is acceptable to both, or all, parties.

A person in this situation has to try:

- become aware of their biases, prejudices and feelings, and try to forget them in the process of conflict resolution;
- commit to finding a solution acceptable to all parties;
- be able and willing to listen;
- be able to ask relevant questions and get the information they need;
- Be able to recognize and build on agreed positions;
- to accept differences and coincidence of facts, opinions, values, prejudices, judgments, feelings and fantasies;
- Accept cultural, ethnic, social, gender, class and age differences in the perception and presentation of conflict in general or in a particular case;
- Willing to investigate hidden issues as well as urgent or ongoing problems if appropriate;
- to be able to recognize negativity („it will never happen“, „it will never change“) and fight it;
- to be creative;
- to be patient;

- to be a realist - and an idealist;
- wish to maintain confidentiality, if required;
- to be supported in his personal life so that he is not obsessed and overwhelmed by the conflict.

Attracting an outside person

If the people involved in the conflict cannot resolve it themselves and there is no one in the organisation with the authority (or willingness) to enforce a solution or help people reach one, it may be necessary to bring in an outsider. This external person may simply help the people involved in the conflict to find their own solution or be asked to suggest one.

The section in Resource Material 5 on using the services of a consultant will be useful when considering whether to invite an external person.

Decisions taken with the assistance of a third party

If people are more concerned with communication than finding an immediate solution, facilitation may be appropriate. An external facilitator can help balance the forces in situations where one side is stronger than the other and can encourage people to break the deadlock they have put themselves in while trying to resolve the dispute themselves.

The mediator will be more directly involved in resolving the conflict. The mediator is usually independent or impartial, but need not be if everyone involved knows and is willing to accept her or his biases. The mediator may (or may not) offer solutions, but in no way

imposes a solution. If the parties to the conflict cannot agree on a solution, the situation remains unresolved - but hopefully at least the parties understand each other better.

The main forms of mediation are face-to-face, where the parties meet together with the mediator, and „shuttle“, where the mediator works with each party separately in an attempt to reach an agreement.

People from another part of the organisation can act as facilitators or mediators if they are not directly involved in the conflict. But they must be very clear about their role and not get involved in the conflict or abuse their rights.

In Bulgaria, various organisations provide dispute resolution and mediation services. The Institute of Mediation and Dispute Management (IMDM) (<https://imeus.bg/>) is one example of an organisation that provides such services. You can find other mediation organisations on the Centralised e-Mediation Portal (<https://mediation.mjs.bg/>).

Decisions imposed by a third party

If neither facilitation nor mediation is successful, it may be necessary to resort to legal or semi-legal procedures.

An arbitrator will encourage the disputing parties to participate in the resolution and reach a voluntary agreement, but the arbitrator has the final say on what should happen.

As a last resort, legal proceedings may be necessary.

To seek perspective

When talking about conflicts, there are several important points to remember.

- Conflict is not inherent, but differences are. Conflict arises when difference cannot be accepted and accommodated.
- Conflict is not always negative and destructive. It can be used creatively and in a positive sense.
- Conflict can only be resolved if the people involved want it to be. Otherwise, another dispute will arise immediately after the previous one is resolved.
- The resolution of the conflict only occurs if the people in it accept the decision for themselves. The imposed solution works for a short period.
- People who are not directly involved in the conflict can be useful in helping the parties make sense of the positions in which they are entrenched.

Conflict management issues

Do people in the organization truly value and respect diversity and diversity of opinion?

Do people in the organization sincerely want to deal with issues in a way that it reflects and respects diversity of viewpoints?

If the answer to each of these questions is no, what will you do?