

Conflict Resolution

LAST UPDATED

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Now is probably around the time when you are realizing that being an officer in an organization is a lot of work, and not all of it very fun. There is a conflict among members of your group and everyone is looking to you to handle the situation. What do you do?

First of all, don't worry. Conflict is a normal result of a lot of different people with different ideas working together. Conflict can result in a group coming together more cohesively if everyone listens to each other and works toward problem solving. Conflict should be considered an opportunity for significant and positive change.

There are all different communication styles that exist. Some people avoid conflict. Some accommodate the other person's needs and give up their own. Some compromise, while others want to win at all costs. The most effective style is **collaboration** - working together to find a solution that satisfies everyone's concerns. This might mean having to do some difficult work to get at the real source of the issue, but it is well worth it. When you collaborate, both sides win and are satisfied. Everyone feels good about what took place and therefore mutual respect is enhanced.

How to use the collaborative approach to conflict resolution:

1. **Diagnose the problem.** It is important that you start out with a clear understanding of what the true conflict is. Is it philosophical, personal, cultural? Is it about different expectations that people might have of each other? To determine the problem, it's important that you really listen to what everyone is saying (see Active Listening handout).
2. **Initiate a discussion.** Bring the conflicting parties together and state the problem simply and nondefensively. Remind everyone to listen to and respect each other and try to "respond" rather than "react". Paraphrase what others are saying in order to be sure everyone is being understood.
3. **Problem solve.** As a group, generate as many solutions as you possibly can. Make sure everyone understands that this is just brainstorming, there is no good or bad answer. Don't judge other people. When it seems that there are no more ideas for alternative solutions, it's time to move on to discuss what you have come up with. Let everyone have a say, but be careful to control the way things are said. Don't let anyone coerce others in the group into agreeing with them. Try to reach a consensus and then implement the solution. This might include assigning people to certain tasks.
4. **Evaluation.** It's important to follow up a little bit later and see how everyone feels about the solution that was reached and whether or not it has been successful. Also evaluate the process that was used and find out how the group members felt about themselves and the group during the process.

Realistically, there may be situations where this process does not work, such as when someone will not participate in the negotiations. If that happens, try explaining to them that it's in their best interests to participate in the discussion. Discuss how collaboration will help solve their problem. If they still refuse, start negotiating anyway.

Another problem might be the establishment of trust. If the conflict has created a situation where the group trust has been broken, it's important to reestablish it by modeling trustworthy behavior yourself. Start small, do what you say you are going to do, listen well. Try to find a position that everyone agrees is important, like you all want the group to project a positive image. If there are still people who can't trust - do your best anyway.

If you have gone through all of these steps and you still don't feel that the situation has been remedied, you might want to try having someone from outside the group facilitate the discussion. This could be your group's advisor, staff from the Student Involvement office, or Bill Oye, from the mediation office on campus.

Good Luck! Though this may be the toughest part of your work as a student leader, it can also be the most rewarding. Learning to collaborate will benefit you in your personal and professional relationships throughout your life.