

Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts

By Patrick J. McKenna and David H. Maister

Conflicts are unavoidable when any group that works together comprises differing personalities and impassioned views.

The sequence goes like this: A member of your group does or says something that causes some other member to have strong negative feelings. The offended individual stays upset, perhaps for a day or longer.

She replays whatever happened over and over in her mind. She even talks about it with other group members. Eventually, she calms down and the intensity of the initial bitterness begins to subside. However, the offended does not talk to the offender about what happened. The feelings subside, but they never disappear completely.

Conflicts among group members can take several forms:

- "Chronic bickering" between two members
- Verbally abuse or a harmful "put-down" remarks that demean others opinions or ideas
- "Faulting," publicly, the performance, attitude or almost anything another colleague does
- A coolness between members such that they eliminate all but the most formal of interactions, ignore each other and give each other the cold shoulder or "silent treatment."

Some conflicts actually provoke periods of great creativity and an intensity that fosters team spirit. *Healthy* conflict can result in better ideas and more innovative solutions.

However, *unhealthy* dysfunctional behavior so often results, usually due to chronic reluctance to air the issues. We all are prone to chronic avoidance in our important relationships. When two (or more) professionals are in conflict, if you, as group leader, don't intervene to help them talk out their problems, negative feelings may intensify to the point of seeking release — the psychological equivalent of a toxic spill.

Here are some steps to resolve conflict:

1. Describe the conflict and the nonproductive behavior you are observing

Differences in needs, goals, values or competition for scarce resources are all potential triggers for conflict. A group leader who hopes to resolve an interpersonal conflict must take the initiative to bring the disagreement to the surface as soon as it is apparent and help the people involved to analyze their differing points of view.

By bringing the conflict out into the open, stating it in nonjudgmental terms, and offering it up as a mutual problem, you acknowledge it as "ours." Until then it will be very difficult to progress to a cooperative resolution.

The first step to moving forward is getting your two colleagues to take the time to look objectively at how they are interacting with each other. Your main focus should be on the interpersonal process, not on the content or topic of contention.

What must be addressed are the specific behaviors that seem to be preventing these people from interacting effectively.

2. Ask each person to comment on the causes of the disagreement

To resolve interpersonal differences between people, the group leader must exercise active listening and be able to hear the emotional aspects of what is being said.

Calmly invite each of them to describe what they think is the reason for their apparent conflict. Don't try to solve the problem. Simply invite your colleagues to discuss the underlying cause of their differences.

Sometimes one person may try to focus blame on the other instead of stating their views objectively. There is some merit to allowing someone the opportunity to vent and get any hurt feelings off his or her chest. Should that happen, calmly ask the person to state "what" not "who" is keeping things from moving forward. You need to help both parties see that they each need to take some small responsibility for the situation.

3. Have each person summarize what the other person said

Now ask each person to repeat back what the other person said. By having each one paraphrase the other's main points, you are encouraging them to listen to and acknowledge each other's views.

Then ask each person to confirm, clarify or correct the summary that was repeated back. If you are not sure about what one of your people was saying, ask for clarification.

Maintain a position of neutrality. Your role is simply to gather information.

4. Ask each person, in turn, to identify points of agreement and disagreement

With conflicting views now calmly and clearly expressed, your two colleagues may be surprised as to how much they actually agree. Ask each to first identify the points of agreement in their two respective positions. Then do the same for areas of disagreement.

Should either person just want to rehash where they disagree, ask questions to help them see where they agree. But don't pretend that differences don't exist. Your coaching role is to lay the groundwork for future cooperation by clarifying the various points of view.

An interpersonal conflict is most likely to be productively resolved if both parties can see that they stand to gain something from the resolution. Your task is to highlight

what is in their mutual best interests or where they need each other to accomplish more than either of them could on their own.

5. Invite your colleagues to suggest ways to proceed

Conflict resolution poses the most gain and the least pain when the parties are able to take a cooperative rather than an adversarial approach to working out differences. For this to happen, both of your colleagues need to own the problem and recognize that they have a stake in solving it.

Ask them to suggest actions that address the points of agreement and disagreement they've just reviewed. Your task is to have them reach agreement on the steps that are needed to resolve the situation. Such agreement is usually most effective when it involves some small quid pro quo between the two people.

Look for workable suggestions and small initial action steps. Sometimes the only viable suggestion may be simply to let the dust settle and set a date for another meeting between the two.

The key to this process is to expose destructive differences as early as possible. The longer that unhealthy conflict persists, the more difficult it is to resolve.

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