

Overview of Conflict

(Source: Conservation Technology Information Center, Lafayette, IN)

What is conflict?

Conflict is a natural disagreement resulting from individuals or groups that differ in attitudes, beliefs, values or needs. It can also originate from past rivalries and personality differences. Other causes of conflict include trying to negotiate before the timing is right or before needed information is available.

The ingredients of conflict:

Needs - Needs are things that are essential to our well-being. Conflicts arise when we ignore others' needs, our own needs or the group's needs. Be careful not to confuse needs with desires (things we would like, but are not essential).

Perceptions - People interpret reality differently. They perceive differences in the severity, causes and consequences of problems. Misperceptions or differing perceptions may come from: self-perceptions, others' perceptions, differing perceptions of situations and perceptions of threat.

Power - How people define and use power is an important influence on the number and types of conflicts that occur. This also influences how conflict is managed. Conflicts can arise when people try to make others change their actions or to gain an unfair advantage.

Values - Values are beliefs or principles we consider to be very important. Serious conflicts arise when people hold incompatible values or when values are not clear. Conflicts also arise when one party refuses to accept the fact that the other party holds something as a value rather than a preference.

Feelings and emotions - Many people let their feelings and emotions become a major influence over how they deal with conflict. Conflicts can also occur because people ignore their own or others' feelings and emotions. Other conflicts occur when feelings and emotions differ over a particular issue.

Conflict is not always negative. In fact, it can be healthy when effectively managed. Healthy conflict can lead to:

- Growth and innovation
- New ways of thinking
- Additional management options

If the conflict is understood, it can be effectively managed by reaching a consensus that meets both the individual's and society's needs. This results in mutual benefits and strengthens the relationship. The goal is for all to "win" by having at least some of their needs met.

Managing Conflict

(Source: Conservation Technology Information Center, Lafayette, IN)

There are five steps to managing conflict. These steps are:

1. Analyze the conflict
2. Determine management strategy
3. Pre-negotiation
4. Negotiation
5. Post-negotiation

Step 1: Analyze the conflict

The first step in managing conflict is to analyze the nature and type of conflict. To do this, you'll find it helpful to ask questions. Answers may come from your own experience, your partners or local media coverage. You may want to actually interview some of the groups involved.

Groups involved

1. Who are the groups involved?
2. Who do they represent?
3. How are they organized?
4. What is their power base?
5. Are the groups capable of working together?
6. What are the historical relationships among the groups?

Substance

1. How did the conflict arise?
2. How are the main and secondary issues described?
3. Can negative issues be reframed positively?
4. Are the issues negotiable?
5. Have positions been taken and, if so, are there common interests?
6. What information is available and what other information is needed?
7. What values or interests are challenged?

Possible strategies (see Step 2 for information on specific Strategies)

1. Would consensus serve all interests?
2. Are there external constraints or other influences that must be accommodated?
3. What are the past experiences (if any) of the groups working together?
4. What is the timeline for a decision?
5. How will the public and the media be involved and informed?
6. Will an outside negotiator be needed?

Step 2: Determine management strategy

Once you have a general understanding of the conflict, the groups involved will need to analyze and select the most appropriate strategy. In some cases it may be necessary to have a neutral facilitator to help move the groups toward consensus.

Conflict Management Strategies

Collaboration - This results from a high concern for your group's own interests, matched with a high concern for the interests of other partners. The outcome is "win/win." This strategy is generally used when concerns for others are important. It is also generally the best strategy when society's interest is at stake. This approach helps build commitment and reduce bad feelings. The drawbacks are that it takes time and energy. In addition, some partners may take advantage of the others' trust and openness. Generally regarded as the best approach for managing conflict, the objective of collaboration is to reach consensus.

Compromise - This strategy results from a high concern for your group's own interests along with a moderate concern for the interests of other partners. The outcome is "win some/lose some." This strategy is generally used to achieve temporary solutions, to avoid destructive power struggles or when time pressures exist. One drawback is that partners can lose sight of important values and long-term objectives. This approach can also distract the partners from the merits of an issue and create a cynical climate.

Competition - This strategy results from a high concern for your group's own interests with less concern for others. The outcome is "win/lose." This strategy includes most attempts at bargaining. It is generally used when basic rights are at stake or to set a precedent. However, it can cause the conflict to escalate and losers may try to retaliate.

Accommodation - This results from a low concern for your group's own interests combined with a high concern for the interests of other partners. The outcome is "lose/win." This strategy is generally used when the issue is more important to others than to you. It is a "goodwill gesture." It is also appropriate when you recognize that you are wrong. The drawbacks are that your own ideas and concerns don't get attention. You may also lose credibility and future influence.

Avoidance - This results from a low concern for your group's own interests coupled with a low concern for the interests of others. The outcome is "lose/lose." This strategy is generally used when the issue is trivial or other issues are more pressing. It is also used when confrontation has a high potential for damage or more information is needed. The drawbacks are that important decisions may be made by default.

Step 3: Pre-negotiation

To set the stage for effective negotiation, the groundwork must be laid. The following should occur prior to negotiation.

Initiation - One partner raises the possibility of negotiation and begins the process. If no one is willing to approach the others to encourage them to reach an agreement, a trusted outsider could be brought in as a facilitator.

Assessment - Conditions must be right for negotiation to be successful. Key players must be identified and invited. Each side must be willing to collaborate with the others. Reasonable deadlines and sufficient resources to support the effort must exist. Spokespersons for each group must be identified and involved. Parties need to determine which issues are negotiable and which are not.

Ground rules and agenda - The groups must agree on ground rules for communication, negotiation and decision making. They should agree on the objectives of the negotiation process. An agenda of issues to be covered needs to be developed.

Organization - Meeting logistics must be established, including agreed upon times and places. People must be contacted and encouraged to attend. Minutes must be taken so that information can be distributed before and after meetings.

Joint fact-finding - The groups must agree on what information is relevant to the conflict. This should include what is known and not known about social and technical issues. Agreement is also needed on methods for generating answers to questions.

Step 4: Negotiation

The guidelines for negotiation include:

Interests - When negotiating be sure to openly discuss interests, rather than stated positions. Interests include the reasons, needs, concerns and motivations underlying positions. Satisfaction of interests should be the common goal.

Options - To resolve conflicts, concentrate on inventing options for satisfying interests. Do not judge ideas or favor any of the options suggested. Encourage creativity, not commitment.

Evaluation - Only after the partners have finished listing options, should the options be discussed. Determine together which ideas are best for satisfying various interests.

Written agreement - Document areas of agreement and disagreement to ensure common understanding. This helps ensure that agreements can be remembered and communicated clearly.

Commitment - Every partner must be confident that the others will carry out their parts of the agreement. Discuss and agree upon methods to ensure partners understand and honor their commitments.

When evaluating options...

1. Use objective criteria for ranking ideas
2. Make trade-offs among different issues
3. Combine different options to form acceptable agreements

Step 5: Post-negotiation.

Once negotiation is complete, the group will need to implement the decisions made. Some key steps include:

Ratification - The partners must get support for the agreement from organizations that have a role to play in the agreement. These organizations should be partners and should have been involved in the previous steps. Each organization will need to follow its own procedures to review and adopt the agreement.

Implementation - You and your partners' jobs are not done when you've reached agreement. Communication and collaboration should continue as the agreement is carried out. The partnership will need to have a plan to monitor progress, document success, resolve problems, renegotiate terms and celebrate success.