

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION

**Resolving conflict rationally and effectively** In many cases, conflict seems to be a fact of life. We've all seen situations where different people with different goals and needs have come into conflict. And we've all seen the often-intense personal animosity that can result.

The fact that conflict exists, however, is not necessarily a bad thing: As long as it is resolved effectively, it can lead to personal and professional growth. In many cases, effective conflict resolution skills can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes.

The good news is that by resolving conflict successfully, you can solve many of the problems that it has brought to the surface, as well as getting benefits that you might not at first expect:

- **Increased understanding:** The discussion needed to resolve conflict expands people's awareness of the situation, giving them an insight into how they can achieve their own goals without undermining those of other people;
- **Increased group cohesion:** When conflict is resolved effectively, team members can develop stronger mutual respect, and a renewed faith in their ability to work together; and
- **Improved self-knowledge:** Conflict pushes individuals to examine their goals in close detail, helping them understand the things that are most important to them, sharpening their focus, and enhancing their effectiveness.

However, if conflict is not handled effectively, the results can be damaging. Conflicting goals can quickly turn into personal dislike. Teamwork breaks down. Talent is wasted as people disengage from their work. And it's easy to end up in a vicious downward spiral of negativity and recrimination.

It helps to understand two of the theories that lie behind effective conflict resolution techniques:

**Understanding the Theory: Conflict Styles** In the 1970s Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann identified 5 main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. They argued that people typically have a preferred conflict resolution style. However they also noted that different styles were most useful in different situations.

### **The 5 main styles of dealing with conflict are:**

**Competitive:** People who tend towards a competitive style take a firm stand, and know what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, rank, expertise, or persuasive ability. This style can be useful when there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made fast; when the decision is unpopular; or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However it can leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful when used in less urgent situations.

**Collaborative:** People tending towards a collaborative style try to meet the needs of all people involved. These people can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, they cooperate effectively and acknowledge that everyone is important. This style is useful when you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution; when there have been previous conflicts in the group; or when the situation is too important for a simple trade-off.

**Compromising:** People who prefer a compromising style try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something, and the compromiser him- or herself also expects to relinquish something. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and when there is a deadline looming.

**Accommodating:** This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. The accommodator often knows when to give in to others, but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive but is highly cooperative. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning, or when you want to be in a position to collect on this "favor" you gave. However people may not return favors, and overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

**Avoiding:** People tending towards this style seek to evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem. However in many situations this is a weak and ineffective approach to take.

Once you understand the different styles, you can use them to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you're in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach, and learn how you need to change this if necessary.

Ideally you can adopt an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people's legitimate interests, and mends damaged working relationships.

### **Understanding the Theory: The "Interest-Based Relational Approach"**

The second theory is commonly referred to as the "Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach". This conflict resolution strategy respects individual differences while helping people avoid becoming too entrenched in a fixed position.

In resolving conflict using this approach, follow these rules:

- **Make sure that good relationships are the first priority:** As far as possible, make sure that you treat the other calmly and that you try to build mutual respect. Do your best to be courteous to one-another and remain constructive under pressure;
- **Keep people and problems separate:** Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just "being difficult" – real and valid differences can lie behind conflictive positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships;
- **Pay attention to the interests that are being presented:** By listening carefully you'll most-likely understand why the person is adopting his or her position;
- **Listen first; talk second:** To solve a problem effectively you have to understand where the other person is coming from before defending your own position;
- **Set out the "Facts":** Agree and establish the objective, observable elements that will have an impact on the decision; and
- **Explore options together:** Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you can get to this idea jointly.

- **Practice reflection when you communicate.** This involves restating back to a person what they are saying, as it communicates to them that you are hearing and understanding what they are saying. When an aggressive person realizes that their points are being heard, they in many instances will calm down and become less aggressive.
- **Make your point directly and concretely,** do not ramble.
- **Keep your voice tone neutral;** do not be too hostile or too passive.
- **Remain calm.** Explain how you feel, why you feel the way you do, and what you will and will not do in managing a situation. Present options (i.e. you can do this and this may happen, but if you do this, this may happen).
- **Try repeating your original point repeatedly, which will allow you to focus the discussion on the appropriate issue,** if you feel that an individual is trying to manipulate you and move the conversation away from the issue of the confrontation, (i.e. the problem behavior).
- **Never threaten an individual with a specific consequence.** You can always state the possible consequences of behavior, but never threaten a specific end result, because if the end result does not happen, you will lose credibility. When discussing consequences, "**may**" is a much better word than "will".
- **Never get emotionally involved in a confrontation...**it will make you very ineffective.
- **Do not swear or behave inappropriately,** as it will allow the individual who you are confronting to focus in on your inappropriate behavior, instead of their own.
- **Confrontation can be stressful and scary.** Successful confrontation skills are learned, and they are made better with practice. Remember that due to situational and personality issues, being assertive will not always allow you to obtain your desired results. Most likely it will, and if it doesn't, you will at least leave the confrontation with your respect and dignity in place, with no focus on your behavior.
- **Confidentiality for an RA is a fine line.** You want your residents to trust you and you want to be most helpful. In order to be most helpful, you may have to tell someone. The only people with whom you may legitimately share these confidences are your Residence Director, other Residence Life supervisors, and other professionals in the helping fields such as Counseling Services.
- **It is important to assure a resident that you will not share any private information with other residents or friends.** Occasionally, some information may be shared with other members of the RA staff, but only when there is a legitimate reason for them to have this information. The decision to share the information with other staff members should be made by senior staff.
- **Confidentiality is essential.** There is probably no quicker way to lose the respect of your residents and to ruin any opportunity to help students with personal problems than to begin sharing a person's personal problems with others members of the floor.
- **Backfire!** Inevitably, if you violate a student's confidence, it will eventually get back to that student. Not only will that person probably never trust you again with any important information, but chances are that soon his/her friends will not trust you.
- **Be careful!** The appearance of continual association with only the other RAs in the building can also act to develop a perception on the part of the residents that the RAs are an exclusive group who get together and share information about their residents. No one wants his/her personal feelings, beliefs, or confidences shared with large groups of people. If the person chose to share information with you, she/he did not necessarily choose to share it with every other person on the staff.
- **Keep in mind!** Though there may be no need to share some kinds of incidental confidential information with the Residence Director, the confidential information you receive should be considered available to your Residence Director. Don't make promises to keep something confidential when you are unable to do so; be sure to tell the person before she/he shares the information that it may be necessary for you to share the information with your Residence Director.

By following these rules, you can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so-often causes conflict to spin out of control.

### **Using the Tool: A Conflict Resolution Process**

Based on these approaches, a starting point for dealing with conflict is to identify the overriding conflict style employed by yourself, your team or your organization.

Over time, people's conflict management styles tend to mesh, and a "right" way to solve conflict emerges. It's good to recognize when this style can be used effectively, however make sure that people understand that different styles may suit different situations.

Look at the circumstances, and think about the style that may be appropriate.

Then use the process below to resolve the conflict:

#### **Step One: Set the Scene**

If appropriate to the situation, agree the rules of the IBR Approach (or at least consider using the approach yourself.) Make sure that people understand that the conflict may be a mutual problem, which may be best resolved through discussion and negotiation rather than through raw aggression.

If you are involved in the conflict, emphasize the fact that you are presenting your perception of the problem. Use active listening skills to ensure you hear and understand other's positions and perceptions.

#### **Restate**

#### **Paraphrase**

#### **Summarize**

And make sure that when you talk, you're using an adult, assertive approach rather than a submissive or aggressive style.

#### **Step Two: Gather Information**

Here you are trying to get to the underlying interests, needs, and concerns. Ask for the other person's viewpoint and confirm that you respect his or her opinion and need his or her cooperation to solve the problem.

Try to understand his or her motivations and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these.

Also, try to understand the conflict in objective terms: Is it affecting work performance? damaging the delivery to the client? disrupting team work? hampering decision-making? or so on. Be sure to focus on work issues and leave personalities out of the discussion.

Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view  
Identify issues clearly and concisely.

**Use "I" statements**

**Remain flexible**

**Clarify feelings**

### **Step Three: Agree the Problem**

This sounds like an obvious step, but often different underlying needs, interests and goals can cause people to perceive problems very differently. You'll need to agree the problems that you are trying to solve before you'll find a mutually acceptable solution.

Sometimes different people will see different but interlocking problems - if you can't reach a common perception of the problem, then at the very least, you need to understand what the other person sees as the problem.

### **Step Four: Brainstorm Possible Solutions**

If everyone is going to feel satisfied with the resolution, it will help if everyone has had fair input in generating solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you never considered before.

### **Step Five: Negotiate a Solution**

By this stage, the conflict may be resolved: Both sides may better understand the position of the other, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be clear to all.

However you may also have uncovered real differences between your positions. This is where a technique like win-win negotiation can be useful to find a solution that, at least to some extent, satisfies everyone.

There are three guiding principles here: **Be Calm, Be Patient, Have Respect...**

### **Key Points**

- You may become aware of a roommate conflict in a number of ways: one or both roommates may come to you; a concerned friend of either roommate may talk to you; you may notice something yourself; or you may overhear a disagreement between the two roommates. Regardless of how you find out about the conflict, remember there are (at least) two sides to every story. Often the students may try to get you to take their side. Be very careful to avoid taking sides.
- If necessary, set ground rules at the beginning of the meeting (i.e., no yelling, one person speaks at a time, etc.).
- Do not take sides. Avoid agreeing or commenting about their concerns or issues with their roommates. Stating your opinion on the matter indirectly displays that you are supporting their frustrations and thoughts. You want to remain unbiased when speaking to all parties involved in the roommate conflict.
- Listen carefully. Verify what you are hearing with the roommates.

- Make sure the roommates are listening to each other; you may want to ask one person to paraphrase the other's comments.
- Go to the Source! You as the RA should encourage the residents to address and communicate with their roommates about these issues. The roommates may not be aware of the concerns and frustrations that are being communicated to you. Emphasize to them the importance of confronting their concerns to the appropriate roommates in a calm, non-threatening environment.
- Try to get all sides of the story and, if it is at all possible, try to get both roommates to sit down and talk with you acting as mediator. Sometimes students prefer to work things out on their own, and you will have to respect their choice. However, some students say they will speak to their roommate about a situation but then never follow through on this. If one or both roommates continue to come to you and do not seem to be able or willing to work things out on their own, then it is appropriate for you to ask for a meeting with both roommates.
- Be aware of barriers to conflict resolution. Defensiveness, put-downs, judgmental reactions, manipulation, discounting, aggressive attacks, and similar types of behavior are barriers to communication and play a counterproductive role in the resolution of conflicts.
- Use the information generated by the Roommate Contract filled out at the beginning of the semester.
- Try not to leave the meeting without a plan of action or a planned method of follow-up (e.g., another meeting next week).
- When possible, employ a strategy of win-win to resolve conflicts. It is almost always possible that each person can walk away feeling that she/he has made his/her feelings understood and has won at least part of the conflict.
- Help to assure that each person's personal integrity is maintained. It is never acceptable to have one person feel debased or humiliated or that his/her personal integrity has been encroached upon. That simply lays a foundation for greater hostility and is not an adequate resolution to any conflict.
- Do not discuss the issues with other residents. Discussing it with others will only escalate conflicts by involving more people than necessary. Resolve conflicts at the lowest possible level between the individuals who are directly involved. When too many people are involved, some individuals become too concerned with maintaining loyalties and are hence less interested in resolving the conflict.
- Consult your RD about roommate problems. She/He can assist you in developing an approach to help resolve the problems or approve a room change if necessary.

*(Adapted from [The Resident Assistant](#) by Gregory S. Blimling and Lawrence J. Miltenberger And by Jeanne Clark, the Residence Hall Director @ Quinnipiac College; [www.reslife.net/html/tools\\_1100a.htm](http://www.reslife.net/html/tools_1100a.htm) and [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR\\_81.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_81.htm))*