

Conflict Management

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Conflicts are points of tension between two or more parties that trigger a strong emotional response, discourage objective review, and in which one or more of the people involved feel their physical or emotional well-being is threatened. Generally, it is far more than a simple disagreement, and avoiding rather than addressing the issue does not lead to resolution. Instead, it tends to drive the issue “underground” where you cannot see it, and it can cause widespread damage to the morale of a group. Conflict can arise in any organization, and the health of the group often depends on the speed and effectiveness with which it is addressed. However, if properly resolved, conflict can act as an agent for positive change.

Mediation 101:

- Set the location. Find a neutral, private location for the people who require help working through their issue. We don't recommend using someone's room or any common spaces to attempt mediation: there should be no sense that you are in someone else's “territory” and no social distractions. Once you have a spot in mind, determine a time to meet for mediation. Ensure that this time is convenient for everyone, and then let all parties know the time, location, and reason for the meeting: no one should feel ambushed by the contents of the discussion. Discourage immediate confrontation if one or both parties are angry.
- Determine who needs to be there. Make sure all mediators can remain objective! Let the parties in conflict know in advance who will be meeting with them and give them an opportunity to accept or refuse these mediators.
- Once the group has met, reaffirm that everyone is willing to be there. Set clear guidelines for the discussion. Identify the mediators and explain their role (not to determine who is right or wrong but to referee a discussion to ensure both parties get an equal say, and to guide the two parties as they find a solution that works for both of them). Ask everyone involved to put away any distractions and focus entirely (and respectfully) on the discussion. Restrict statements to “I” statements rather than “you” statements. All parties should take turns speaking, and refrain from interrupting each other, and recognize that even if they disagree, the other party is entitled to their own perspective. Anyone may request a break at any time and may speak up if something about the mediation is not working for them. All parties should understand that mediation is not the time for launching attacks, or proving they are right, but rather is a time dedicated to being heard and finding a solution that works for everyone. Ideally, everyone should be working from a position of mutual respect and generosity.
- At the start of the conversation, ask each party to give their version of events without criticizing or attacking the other person involved, and to state what they feel the other party does not yet understand, and to provide the additional information for their understanding. The other party must listen without interrupting and then repeat back what they heard to show they have been listening. Getting perceptions out in the open at the beginning of a mediation can help people understand where sources of tension originate and understand not everyone sees the situation the same way they do or is going to react to a

situation in the same way. It is important to remind each person that conflict resolution can be an emotional experience. Ask everyone to remain calm and not react defensively or aggressively or respond to an emotional outburst if there is one. Warn them that if they begin to do so, you will stop them and ask them to take a moment to get back into a calmer frame of mind.

- Once both parties have related their version of the events that made this mediation necessary, they can begin to search for solutions. This search will shape the rest of the mediation. Have them focus on what they need, what they are afraid will happen, and what will provide relief for them, and then work to shape a compromise or a collaboration to get both of them to a better place. Compromise is an appropriate act when both parties have something to give and have relatively equal power in a situation. Collaboration (when all parties are willing to seek a win-win situation) is appropriate to use when all parties have the time to commit to an extensive dialogue and the issues are too important to be compromised on (someone's personal safety would be a good example of an issue of that caliber).
- Make sure you guide the conversation appropriately. When one or more parties deviate from the guidelines set out at the start of the mediation, stop them immediately in whatever they are doing and ask them (with kindness!) to notice their action and make an effort not to continue. For example, "George, I see that you are interrupting Anna when she is talking. Please remember that I asked you to listen carefully without interruption to the other person, so let her finish what she has to say. Then you will have a chance to speak without interruption yourself."
- When one person makes a statement, allow the other person time to process what has been said, and then make a response. Again, always make sure people frame their responses to the issues, rather than to the person. If party A says something, party B should be responding, "That statement makes me feel X, because..." rather than "Saying that makes you a real jerk."
- If the parties you are mediating seem to be having trouble seeing eye to eye, it is your job to step in to clarify. Always explain what you are doing. "I'm jumping in here because I think you two may need help. Anna, if I'm hearing you right, what you're saying is..." Rephrase what you've heard as objectively as possible. Try to pinpoint the heart of the issue, and then give that person a chance to agree or disagree. Once you feel the two of you have created a clear point, the conversation can be transferred back to the other party for a response. Don't rush or try to convince them your opinion of their feelings is the correct one! You've got the time to make sure this is done correctly.
- Keep both parties focused! Stop tangents when they happen, and when either party begins to ramble or repeat themselves, it is time to let the other person speak. Only attempt to mediate one issue at a time.
- When you feel an important breakthrough in understanding has been reached, or that a solution is starting to form, take the time to point out that fact, and thank the parties for continuing to stay invested in the conversation.

- It's time to end mediation at one of three points: You have reached the end of an agreed time limit, you can see that you are losing the focus of all parties, or you have reached a solution. In the first two, make sure to set a time and date to continue the conversation before everyone leaves. In the final case, schedule a follow-up in a few weeks to see how things are progressing. Avoid premature resolutions! Take the time you need to examine all the options available to a group. If you don't, you may end up selecting one that is not the best for everyone.
- Remember that one conversation often does not solve the problem. You may need to have a series of meetings to fully resolve a conflict, and you may need the help of outside parties.
- Resources that can help: Community Standards, Undergraduate Deans, COSO advisors, Collis advisors.