Conflict Resolution Techniques
From Notre Dame's top-ranked Mendoza College of Business

Listen, Then Speak Out

Believe it or not, just listening to an employee's issue is the first and most important step in resolving conflict. You should simply listen to all parties involved to completely understand the nature of conflict, and then start troubleshooting solutions.

Gather the Group

As a leader, you'll need to arrange a meeting with all involved parties to discuss the issue. Give everyone a chance to speak; this is a good opportunity to hear all sides and gain a full understanding of the conflict. Having a group meeting may also expedite a resolution that will satisfy everyone.

Be Impartial

Don't take sides! In a leadership position, you shouldn't display any sort of opinion that favors one person over another. If you are partial towards one person, try to access the situation from all sides to come up with a fair and reasonable solution.

Do Not Postpone Conflict Resolution

Address the conflict immediately. Otherwise, the situation could escalate and could affect employee performance. Just make sure not to address the situation too quickly or without careful consideration, as your decision will directly affect the demeanor and performance of your staff.

Promote Teamwork

Encouragement and motivation are powerful. Remind your staff of successful projects that required teamwork to complete. This is one of the most effective conflict resolution techniques and will really make the employees think about the importance of working in a team.

Broadcast Praise

As stated above, the power of encouragement and motivation can be multiplied when it is spread to recognize those who are modeling the teamwork and cooperation that is desired within any conflict. Try to give suitable models in these instances because behavior modeling can be risky if there are elements in the model that are undesirable.

Alternative Dispute Resolution

From U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

"Conflict" Defined and Described

Conflict happens when two people disagree about something. Despite the fact that people have a lot of similarities, since each of us is different from everybody else, we will have conflicts. Conflict is a natural part of life; it happens to us often.

For example, if a driver coming the opposite way from us wants to turn the same way we do, that can cause conflict. Most of the time we agree, almost instinctively, on what we each need to do. In another setting, suppose that my friend wants to play cards with me, but I want to go to a movie; or suppose that he or she wants to play golf and I want to go fishing - that can create conflict. Or how about choosing a place to spend the holidays? Shall we go to see my spouse's parents, my parents, both sets of parents, stay at home, or go someplace else? Perhaps we choose to go to each place for a different holiday throughout the year. Most of the time we work it out.

Conflict can be positive and healthy, as well as a learning and growing experience. When we deal with it in a healthy way, we can generally find a solution that satisfies both of us. This is what we call managing or dealing successfully with conflict.

Unfortunately, conflict also has its negative side, where we can not only disagree with each other, but sometimes we can also hurt feelings and fracture relationships. The purpose of this Paper is to show you that there are options for finding a better way to manage disagreements.

Methods for Handling Conflict

Customarily we handle conflict through avoidance or position-based competition. In the avoidance approach, people in conflict simply do not deal with their differences in order, for example, to keep peace in the family or in the office. This approach is useful if the differences are thought to be insignificant or if the people involved need time to "cool off." But it may be non-productive if the parties just let the conflict fester, as in the case of conflict between employee and manager.

In the position-based competitive approach, we hold to our positions and try to prevail over the other person. This approach has two strains: power-based and rights-based.

In the power-based strain, people settle their differences according to who has more power. This is a legitimate and important way to handle conflict. For example, without a chain of command, the organization has no way to organize its efforts. Additionally, without good employees working efficiently and efficiently to provide excellent care and services, we cannot carry out our mission.

In the rights-based strain, the parties in a conflict refer to their legal rights as the basis for resolving their differences. If they cannot reach agreement, they submit their claims to recognized authorities. The rights-based strain is also a legitimate and necessary way to handle conflicts.

The problem with both strains of the competitive approach is that one person wins and one person loses. As a result, feelings may be hurt, relationships may be unnecessarily weakened or destroyed, and commitment to decisions may be weak. There must be a better way to deal with conflict than this. And there is! We can work together on conflict management initiative to increase the understanding and practice of interest-based problem solving throughout the organization.

Interest-Based Problem Solving

What interest-based problem solving (IBPS) means is that there are times when it makes sense for people who have a problem to sit down together to see if they can solve it by talking about their mutual concerns.

People who are in conflict with each other often have common interests. In the workplace, for example, common interests include: the overall success of the organization, communication and team-work, professional competence for everyone, both quality and productivity, ethical treatment, and recognition of our diversity.

IBPS has some significant advantages over the avoidance and competitive approaches:

1. The parties will be more likely to feel that the decision-making process has been a fair one.
2. The parties will tend to be more committed to carrying out the agreements made.
3. They are likely to have a greater understanding of, and respect for, each other.
4. If future conflicts arise, they will have an example to follow, making it easier for the parties to address the conflict and deal with it constructively.
5. IBPS often costs less in the long run than power or rights-based strains. IBPS produces results and consistently maintains relationships between the parties - it may even improve the relationship.

That is not to say that all conflicts should be handled the same way. Some differences just are not that big a deal. Others may be caused inadvertently, and there is just not much that can be done about them. On the other hand, some disputes are big, important and tough enough that it makes sense to address them directly. It is important to realize in such situations that we have not two but three choices in how to do this: avoidance, competition, and analyzing our interests. There will always be a legitimate need for avoidance and competition as solutions to conflict situations. But let's reflect for a moment on the organization's objectives:

- Courtesy and Caring
- Improve quality-driven productivity and customer satisfaction

In general, do you think that these objectives would be met better by basing our relationships with each other on power, on rights or on interests? We think it is fair to say that quality work is rarely achieved in an adversarial relationship.

Recap on How We Deal with Conflict

There are three primary strategies that we use to deal with conflict:

1. Flight - avoiding conflict and hoping that it will go away.
2. Fight - using authority, rights or force to attempt to prevail over others.
3. Unite - talking with other people to develop solutions that will satisfy mutual interests, some result that they all can "live with."

Experience shows that we will be more successful in accomplishing our mission to the extent that we shift the balance in the way we manage differences.

Using various conflict management techniques supports our objectives. By improving how we deal with conflict, we can change the culture of our organization, removing some of the barriers to reaching our objectives. The shift of balance in how we deal with people's differences will help, as we know from our own experience. If you treat people well and fairly, most of the time they will respond the same way.

If we treat each other honestly and fairly, we will create a friendlier working environment. And, ordinarily, that can increase quality-driven productivity.

Two Simple (but not easy) Principles on Interest-Based Problem Solving

Principle #1: Use Conflict as a Natural Resource

Conflict is Natural -- Each of us perceives the world around us differently; we make decisions differently. We act in these ways due to our upbringing, our personalities, where we sit in the organization, our cultures, or even what part of the world we come from. We all have different points of view about different topics, and it would be strange indeed if we did not disagree from time to time.

Conflict Can Even Be a Good Resource -- You may remember that we mentioned this idea earlier. Conflict can be a first step on the way to improving communication, solving a problem, and even building trust and cooperation. If you belonged to a Quality Improvement Team you experienced these things. You practiced Interest-Based Problem Solving to develop agreements.

Principle #2: Respect People; Attack Problems

When we have a difference with someone, it is not unusual for us to think something like: "We have a problem here, and the problem is YOU!"

Usual or not, this attitude will not get us moving down the road to mutual problem solving. Think about it the other way around: when someone feels that we are the problem, we tend to "get" the message (whether through their tone of voice, their body language, or simply the "vibes"). And our reaction tends to be defensive: "If I am the problem, then we have a big problem - because I am not likely to become someone else in the near future!"

But there is more. Deciding that "the problem is you" not only is not effective, it is also usually not true. In fact, the other person is a human being, in many ways like you and me, with hopes, dreams, fears, and imperfections.

If we need a more practical basis for distinguishing between people and problems, then look at the fact that making people the problem does not work. If we put people down, they are likely to put us down in return.

So do whatever you need to do to "distinguish between the person and the problem." This is an internal activity, and only you know how to do it for yourself. Some people draw on their religious heritage for guidance on how to do this. Others recommend "going up onto the balcony" in your imagination to see the conflict situation from an outsider's perspective. Whatever works for you, go ahead and do it before you move on to the next step. You will know you have succeeded when you can imagine yourself and the other(s) involved in the conflict standing side by side, facing the problem together: respect people; attack problems.

The Four Steps in Interest Based Problem Solving

Step #1: Raise the Issue

"Issues" are the problems that are bugging us.

"Positions" are our unilateral solutions to those problems. If a problem is bothering you, and you want to solve it with the other person, you need to raise the issue.

When you raise the issue, do it in a way that shows respect for the other person, but that clearly expresses the problem and its effect on you. Do this as briefly as possible, and be immediately ready to listen to the other person's point of view. It may be that the other person raises an issue first or tells you (sometimes in no uncertain terms!) what his or her position is.

Step #2: Discover the Underlying Interests

The good news about positions and issues is that they tell us exactly where to begin in resolving the conflict. The bad news about positions and issues is that they are only the beginning.

As you explore your positions and issues, you will find out about your interests, which are the foundation for agreements. But getting to that point requires work. For example, suppose you and your manager disagree on a due date for submitting a report. How could you approach this? To discover interests, first ask, then listen. "What needs to be done in order to complete the report?" "How much detail is desirable?" "How much time will it take to obtain that much detail?" "Does this assignment take precedence over other assignments?" "Why does the manager need the report on that particular date?" Asking the questions is just the first part. It is the second part that most of us find difficult: listening. We tend to be so frustrated with the situation that we want to talk to get our point of view across. But of course that only gets the other party more frustrated; and, unless we are aware of what is happening, we tend to get ourselves into a situation where we can only fight or flee.

So the guideline is: If you are not in a mood to listen, do not raise issues. But when you do raise an issue, listen. Listen actively. In other words, really try to understand the other's point of view. And Listen!

If you do not understand what the other person is saying, ask more questions -- genuine questions, not "cross examination" or "leading" questions. Those are for the courtroom.

As you begin to think you understand the other's point of view, check it out with him or her. Repeat it back to see if you heard it correctly. If you did not understand what was said, ask the other person to tell you. That will give you another chance to understand. Someone once said, "To understand means to stand under, which means to look up to, which is a pretty good way to understand."

It is important to let the other person know your interests as well. Once someone feels genuinely listened to, he or she will tend to be more ready to hear your side. And then you will both have an understanding of the interests that must be satisfied if you are to reach agreement.

Once you both realize that you do understand where the other is coming from, ask about the reasons why, i.e., their underlying interests. Once you are clear on that, you will be starting to get some ideas on how to resolve the problem - you will have many more pieces of information to work with. But notice also what else happens through this "active listening": the other person gets to vent feelings. As a result, the "emotional temperature" begins to come down, and he or she begins to realize that you respect his or her point of view (and, by extension, him or her), whether or not you agree with the other position. (Ah, the luxury of simply being heard!)

In short, you are helping to shift the balance from "win-lose" position-based to "win-win" interest-based problem solving. This is worth solid gold as you move on to the next steps. Incidentally, "interests" almost always relate to some form of our "basic needs," such as shelter, safety, or satisfaction.

Step #3: Invent Options for Mutual Gain

Here is where any training you may have received in "brainstorming" will come in handy. The basic rules for brainstorming are:

- Go for quantity- as many ideas as possible.
- Build on each other's ideas.
- No critiquing or "killer phrases."
- Any idea is okay for brainstorming.

Your goal here is to work together to generate as many possible solutions as you can which could satisfy the underlying interests you have identified in the previous step.

Step #4: Develop Agreements Based on Objective Standards

You have just brainstormed options for mutual gain. Now evaluate those options as potential solutions - but against what? Two people who differ on something need to compare their proposed solutions to something besides their own desires and wants, to something outside themselves.

Normally for an option to provide a win-win solution, must meet objective standards such as being workable, equitable for both parties, fair, legal, ethical, within cost, and capable of being implemented.

Rather than assume that the other person has the same standards in mind that you do, discuss them to make sure that both of you have the same understanding of what the standards are and what they mean. For instance, what do "workable," "fair," and "ethical" mean to both of you within the context of your particular situation?

It may be important to consider more specific standards too. Are there community, industry, or professional standards that must be met? Think of the times that you have referred to the "Blue Book" value of a car: that is an industry standard, a commonly accepted reference point for sales price or trade-in value. What about the neighbors who want to put an addition onto their house? They must comply with local building codes and zoning regulations. We have a professional code of conduct that we must follow.

Once you have agreed on the standards, then together choose a solution that appears to meet both of your needs. Usually when all the facts are laid out, one solution seems to have advantages over the others. Arrive at a solution that both of you can buy into and live with. Then test the solution. If that solution is not as effective as you thought it would be, or if the circumstances change, regroup and choose another potential solution. Try it out and see if that one works better.

Sometimes people come to agreement without spending a lot of time creating standards. As you become more experienced at IBPS, you may see the solution becoming clear as you list options. Just remember not to assume that you understand what the other person thinks or feels - check it out with him or her. Then if the solution meets both of your interests and needs, try it out.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education identified the following individual learning and development outcome domains in regards to conflict management:

1. Intellectual growth
2. Effective communication
3. Enhanced self-esteem
4. Realistic self-appraisal
5. Clarified values
6. Career choices
7. Leadership development
8. Healthy behavior
9. Meaningful interpersonal relationships
10. Independence
11. Collaboration
12. Social Responsibility
13. Satisfying and productive lifestyles
14. Appreciating diversity
15. Spiritual awareness
16. Personal and educational goals

Conflict Resolution

Facilitated, or managed, conflict can be a mechanism for individual and collective learning and change. Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution believes that provided the resources and means are available, students are the most capable of resolving their own disputes. Services in Alternative Conflict Resolution provide educational opportunities for students to improve their conflict resolution skills.

Conflict can be a challenge for anyone, so the campus offers many services to aid students and registered student organization leaders in addressing these issues.

For our purposes, *conflict resolution* is defined as an act or process that brings a peaceful end to conflict. Because conflicts frequently center around incompatible (perceived or real) behaviors, beliefs, values, and opinions, it is important to consider which *resolution* services best incorporate those issues. Other things to consider include but are not limited to:

1. What are the ideal outcomes or goals of the resolution process?
2. How willing are those involved to be actively engaged in the process?
3. Which resolution pathways (see below) have strengths and weaknesses that most effectively meet your needs?
4. Are there institutional obligations that dictate a particular approach?
   Listed below are four pathways/services that can be facilitated by The Department of Student Life. Each option is designed to offer unique strengths and weaknesses to meet the needs of the parties involved.

Conflict Coaching
One-on-one discussion between a Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution staff member and a student in conflict with another who is unwilling to engage in meaningful dialogue. The goal is to identify the resolution approach that best meets the student's interests and needs.

Facilitated Dialogue
A constructive conversation between two or more students, guided by Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution staff to increase the potential that students will arrive at a mutually satisfying outcome.

Mediation
A process guided by Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution staff where students clearly identify their interests, needs, and resolution options. Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution staff may provide suggestions or recommendations. A written agreement will result, and the Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution staff member will follow up with all parties to make sure it is being fulfilled.

Restorative Justice
A discussion process where a student, or designated registered student organization representatives meet with other community members in order to identify actions to repair harm done.