

Training module on conflict management

Definition of conflict management

Differences are inevitable in a local group having members with different experiences, attitudes and expectations. However, some conflicts can support organizational goals. Indeed, too little conflict may lead to apathy, lack of creativity, indecision and missed-out deadlines. Clashes of ideas about tasks also help in choosing better tasks and projects. These are 'functional conflicts'.

Functional conflicts can emerge from leaving a selected incidence of conflict to persist, which can be overcome by 'programming' a conflict in the process decision-making by the group by assigning someone the role of a critic. This also helps to avoid 'group thinking' where group members publicly agree with a course of action, while privately having serious reservations about it.

The most difficult conflicts are those arising out of value differences. The most important thing is to understand the real cause of the differences. Yet every resolution of a conflict can also feed a new conflict in a group. It is, therefore, useful to see conflicts as a series of expressions of existing differences within a group, having some links to each other. How effectively a group deals with conflict management largely affects the efficiency level of its functioning.

Common ways of dealing with conflicts within a group

1. *Avoiding* - withdraw from the conflict situation, leaving it to chance.
2. *Harmonizing* - generally cover up the differences and claim that things are fine.
3. *Bargaining* - negotiate to arrive at a compromise, bargaining for gains by both parties
4. *Forcing* - push a party to accept the decision made by a leader or majority.
5. *Problem solving* - confront differences and resolve them on a collaborative basis.

Conflict-management styles

Collaborating - Conflicting parties jointly identify the problem, weigh and choose a solution.

Accommodating - Playing down differences while emphasizing commonalities.

Competing - Shows high concern for self-interest and less concern for the other's interest. Encourages 'I win, you lose' tactics.

Avoiding - Either passive withdrawal from the problem or active suppression of the issue.

Compromising - A give-and-take approach involving moderate concern for both self and others. Each party has to give up something of value. It may include external or third party intervention.

Managing conflict

- Allow time for cooling down.
- Analyse the situation.
- State the problem to the other person.
- Leave the person for some time.
- Use a win-win approach.

Factors affecting conflict

- Personality traits affect how people handle conflict.
- Threats from one party in a disagreement tend to produce more threats from the other.
- Conflict decreases as goal difficulty decreases and goal clarity increases.
- Men and women tend to handle conflict similarly. There is no 'gender effect'.

Table 9.1 **Matching conflict-management approaches with group level conditions**

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Conflict-management approach</i>				
Considerations	<i>Forcing</i>	<i>Accommodating</i>	<i>Compromising</i>	<i>Collaborating</i>	<i>Avoiding</i>
Issue importance	High	Low	Medium	High	Low
Relationship importance	Low	High	Medium	High	Low
Relative power	High	Low	Equal-High	Low-High	Equal-High
Time constraints	Med-High	Med-High	Low	Low	Med-High

Table 9.2 **Matching conflict management with process of goals-setting by the group**

<i>Conflict-handling style</i>	<i>Appropriate situations</i>
Collaborating	• When both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised • When objective is to learn • To merge insights from people with different perspectives • To gain commitment by incorporating concerns into a consensus • To work through feelings that have interfered with a relationship
Accommodating	• To allow a better position to be heard and to show reasonableness • When issues are more important to others than yourself • To build social credit for later issues • To minimize loss when you are outmatched and losing • When harmony and stability are especially important • To allow subordinates to develop by learning from mistakes
Competing	• When quick, decisive action is vital • On important issues where unpopular actions need implementing • On issues vital to organization and when you know you are right • Against people who take advantage of non-competitive behaviour
Avoiding	• When an issue is trivial, or more important issues are pressing • When you see no chance of satisfying your concerns • To let people 'cool down' and regain perspective • Gathering information supersedes the immediate decision

- Compromising
- When others can resolve the conflict more effectively
 - When goals are important, but not worth potential disruption of more assertive modes
 - When equal power opponents are committed to mutually exclusive goals
 - To find temporary settlements of complex issues
 - To arrive at expedient solutions under time pressure
 - As a backup when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful

What to do when you are:

The lead person to present and clarify the background of the conflict

Problem identification

i) Clearly explain your problem in terms of behaviour, consequences, and feelings.

- Maintain personal ownership of the problem.
- Use a specific incident to illustrate the expectations or standards violated.
- Stick to the facts, avoid drawing evaluative conclusions and attributing motives to the respondent.

ii) Persist until understood and encourage two-way discussion.

- Restate your concerns or give additional examples.
- Avoid introducing additional issues or letting your frustration and emotions grow.
- Invite the respondent to ask questions and express another perspective.

iii) Manage the agenda carefully.

- Approach multiple problems, proceeding from simple to complex, easy to difficult, concrete to abstract.
- Conversely, don't become fixed up on one issue. If you reach an impasse, expand the discussion to increase the likelihood of an integrative outcome.

Solution

Make a request. Focus on things you share in common (principles, goals and constraints) as the basis for recommending preferred alternatives.

A chairperson in the group conflict management

Problem identification

i) Establish a climate for joint problem solving

- Show genuine concern and interest. Respond empathetically, even if you disagree with the complaint
- Respond appropriately to the lead person's emotions.

ii) Seek additional information about the problem

- Ask questions that channel the lead person's statement from general to specific and from evaluative to descriptive.

iii) Agree with some aspects of the complaint(s)

- Signal your willingness to consider making changes by agreeing with facts, perceptions, feelings or principles.

Solution

Ask for recommendations - to avoid debating the merits of a single suggestion, brainstorm and seek multiple alternatives.

A mediator for managing conflict

Problem identification

i) Acknowledge that a conflict exists

- Select the most appropriate setting (one-on-one conference vs. group meeting) for coaching and fact-finding.
- Propose a problem-solving approach for resolving the dispute.

ii) Maintain a neutral posture

- Assume role of a facilitator and not judge. Do not belittle the problem or criticize the disputants for their inability to resolve their differences.
- Be impartial towards the disputants and the issues (as long as policy has not been violated).
- If correction is necessary, do it in private.

iii) Manage the discussion to ensure fairness

- Focus discussion on the conflict's impact on performance and the detrimental effect of a continued conflict.
- Keep the discussion issue-oriented, not personality-oriented.
- Do not allow one party to dominate the discussion. Ask directed questions to maintain balance.

Solution

Explore options by focusing on interests behind stated positions

- Explore the 'why' behind the disputants' arguments/claims.
- Help disputants see what is common among their goals, values and principles.
- Use this to generate multiple alternatives.
- Maintain a non-judgmental manner.

Table 9.3 Comparison of conflict-handling styles

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Objective</i>	<i>Your posture</i>	<i>Supporting rationale</i>	<i>Likely outcome</i>
I. Collaborating	Solve the problem together	"This is my position, what is yours?" "I am committed to finding the best possible solution." "What do the facts suggest?"	The positions of both parties are equally important (though not necessarily equally valid). Equal emphasis should be placed on the quality, outcome and fairness of the decision-making process.	The problem is most likely to be resolved. Also, both parties are committed to the solution and satisfied that they have been treated fairly.
II. Accommodating	Don't upset the other person	"How can I help you feel good about this encounter?" My position isn't so important that it is worth risking bad feelings between us."	Maintaining harmonious relationships should be our top priority.	Other person is likely to take advantage.
III. Competing	Get your way	"I know what's right" Don't question my judgement or authority."	It is better to risk causing a few hard feelings than to abandon an issue you are committed to.	You feel vindicated, but other party feels defeated and possibly humiliated.
IV. Avoiding	Avoid having to deal with conflict	"I'm neutral to this issue." Let me think about it." "That's someone else's problem."	Disagreements are inherently bad because they create tension.	Interpersonal problems don't get resolved, causing long-term frustration manifested in many ways.
V. Compromising	Reach an agreement quickly	"Let's search for a solution we can both live with so we can get on our work."	Prolonged conflicts alienate people from their work and engender bitter feelings.	The participants become conditioned to seek expedient rather than effective solutions.

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Table 9.4 Contents, objectives and methodology on partnership and conflict management

<i>Partnership content</i>	<i>Sub-content</i>	<i>Specific objective</i>	<i>Methodology</i>
Role of stakeholders in poverty alleviation	Role of officials, elected representatives, NGO representatives and civil society including beneficiaries	1. Clarification of role of local development agencies like DRDA, banks, PRIs and NGOs	Lecture-cum-discussion
Behavioural aspects of building partnership		2 Understanding the attitudes, beliefs, motivation, awareness, socio-cultural aspects and development of partnership among all stakeholders for poverty alleviation	Role-playing
Knowledge of basic government management functions; tendering, budgeting etc.			Brainstorming
Organizational abilities for			Self-analysis techniques
			Simulation

PRI meetings			game
Communication skills			Story telling and problem-solving
			Field visit to success and failure sites
<i>Conflict-resolution content</i>	<i>Sub-content</i>	<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Methodology</i>
Concept and sources of conflict	<i>Panchayat</i> role in summoning development officers	To clarify the concept of conflict and collaboration	Lecture-cum-discussion
Collaboration		To identify the sources of conflict	Brainstorming
Methods of conflict resolution		To understand the process of effective conflict management	Role-playing
Institutional mechanism for conflict management among government and NGOs at <i>panchayat</i> level		To plan collaboration with stakeholders	Simulation game
Leadership development on problem-solving, development-oriented attitude and social communication skills		To clarify the institutional set-up and interests of stakeholders in conflict- resolution	Case study
Negotiating skills			PRA

Source: *Conservation Extension Manual for Mid-Level Technicians*, Local Development Training Academy, Kathmandu, Nepal. pp.113-119.

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