

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Social
Sciences
Team

Conflict Management

Why is Understanding Conflict Management Important?

Social conflicts begin with one party wanting something that another party resists doing or providing. Conflicts cover a myriad of different circumstances that range from mundane tests of wills between parents and children, to conflicts between legal adversaries, to negotiations between sales agents and customers. Conflict management can be used to achieve consensus among individuals and groups and it can increase your understanding of differing points of views. You can learn to identify positive and negative effects of conflict, which can help you optimize your actions and understand difficult situations. Below are some potentially positive and negative aspects of conflict and how they can affect you and others.

Negative Aspects of Conflict

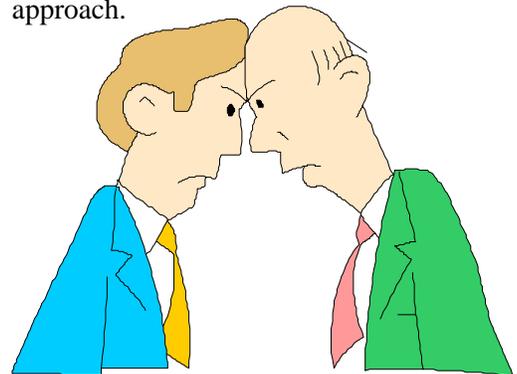
- become less motivated and inactive
- confused by differences of opinions
- increases inter-group tension and diverts attention from objectives
- causes negative emotions and possibly violent behavior
- creates the desire to abandon the problem situation for a safer subject
- creates or increases antagonism
- causes stress and frustration

Positive Aspects of Conflict

- learn more about the people involved and grow with each conflict experience
- defines issues and provides opportunities to resolve these issues
- increases group cohesion
- leads to alliances with other groups

Who Can Use Conflict Management Techniques?

Anyone in The Conservation Partnership is potentially capable of learning how to constructively deal with conflict. You have to keep in mind that conflict situations should not be taken lightly. Resolving conflict is not a mechanical process in which applying steps “A” through “Z” guarantees a happy ending. Conflicts that are based on personalities or value systems may never be resolved but they could be minimized using the following approach.



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Emotional Balance

- Keeping your own emotions under control affects the emotions of the other person.
- Keep your voice at a normal or below normal volume.
- Use phrases like, “*I understand what you are saying...*”.
- Use pauses and speak deliberately to keep the discussion at a slow pace.

When and Where is Conflict Management Used?

The process of conflict management can be used at any time, in a one-on-one or group setting. It can be applied at the office, in the field, or at home. What is described is a standard process of effective communication.

How Do You Manage Conflict?

In order to successfully manage conflict, you need to understand the principles of conflict, develop and refine your communication skills, and be able to go through a series of steps specifically designed to help you manage potential conflict situations.



Principles

The basic principles to help avoid destructive conflict and promote constructive dialogue are as follows:

- Preserve everyone’s dignity.
- Don’t expect to change people’s personalities.
- Listen with concern.
- Be flexible while also maintaining your independence.

Knowledge, Tips, And Skills

There are knowledge, tips, and skills you can learn that will enable you to manage conflict more effectively.

Knowledge in Organizational Settings

- Be observant of physical conditions of the meeting site; e.g., confined, hot areas can intensify conflicts; outdoor meetings can reduce tensions; meetings held at neutral sites can relax people; meetings on one’s home turf may cause him/her to act in the extreme, either calmer or more defensive.
- Round tables give everyone equal seating status.
- Rectangular tables have two dominant seats – the head and foot of the table. Try not to allow antagonists to sit in these seats. Sit in one of these seats, yourself, if you are facilitating a meeting or if you want an advantage.
- If possible, sit potential male and female antagonists side by side, not across from one another. Females may prefer to sit further away from potential antagonists than males do.
- Call breaks if a situation gets heated.

Communication Tips

- An effective communicator is a good speaker, keen observer, smiles at appropriate times, provides feedback, and can use humor to diffuse a situation and keep everyone at ease.
- Establish ground rules and verbalize them or display them: For example:
 - ▶ everyone has the opportunity to talk *uninterruptedly*
 - ▶ discuss one topic or problem at a time
 - ▶ everyone needs to treat each other with respect

- Confront issues by setting up a process that allows everyone to speak.
- Deal with issues, not personalities.
- Verify that you understand what a speaker says by summarizing their statement (e.g., “...so it’s the inflexibility of the rules that bother you.”).

Listening Skills

- Listen specifically for feelings or emotions underlying a person’s message. Some people quickly reveal their core values or personality.
- Maintain eye contact, nod frequently, say “yes” or “I see” often.
- Look for nonverbal messages and their meaning; some are listed below:

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Caveat: These skills, observations, and steps are not necessarily the same for all cultural groups. Consequently, if you are working with non-traditional groups, you may need to read specific information on this group and modify your approach.

Where's more information?

- ❖ *Conflict Management, National Association of Conservation Districts in cooperation with National Association of State Conservation Agencies and the USDA Soil Conservation Service, 1994*
- ❖ *Sociological Training: Module 5, Conflict Management. USDA Soil Conservation Service, National Employee Development Staff, 1990*

- ▶ *signs of aggression* — leaning forward, pointing, standing/sitting close, rapid or loud speech, glaring, interrupting others
- ▶ *disagreement with the message* — arms folded, turned away from speaker, poor eye contact
- ▶ *alert and agreeable* – sitting upright, good eye contact, quick to respond, arms open.

Six Steps to Manage A Potential Conflict

Step 1 — Diagnose the situation. Determine the conflict's content and history. Evaluate personalities and positions.

Step 2 — Involve all parties. Be a skillful questioner by asking open-ended questions. Use processes that solicit discussion, opinions, information, priorities, etc. from all people.

Step 3 — Collect all information. There are many ways to gather information; e.g., use facts, historical records, data, maps, ideas from around the table, unbiased experts, and interviews. *Remember, people's feelings are just as real to them as facts.*

Step 4 — Reinforce agreements. People who disagree often share some common goals and common values. Discover these common concerns and reinforce agreements. Write these agreements so that everyone can see them.

Step 5 — Negotiate disagreements. Disagreements are not negotiated until everyone understands the facts and feelings that caused the conflict. Review steps 1 through 4; list important disagreements; have everyone rank order their disagreements; begin with the smallest issue and work toward the largest.

Step 6 — Solidify agreements. Identify agreed upon solutions and offer compromises for unresolved issues. If a compromise cannot be reached, table the issue and move to the next issue; review any proposed agreements carefully so you are sure that everyone understands them.

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