

Dealing with Conflict

Conflict resolution is a way to diplomatically settle disputes by finding the root of an issue and creating a solution that all parties can agree upon. This can be a complicated process, especially if the conflict is personal, however it is important to recognize and address issues that arise.

Identifying and Mitigating Conflict

When conflict arises the first step is to identify the cause and ensure that it does not adversely disrupt other scheduled activities. Below is an outline of tips to help your meetings stay on track when conflict occurs.

- Allow the opposing party to state their issue
- Identify the problem to the best of your ability
- Check with everyone in attendance for opinions/suggestions
- Present any ideas or comments you may have, but do not make demands

At this point it is possible that conflict has been quickly resolved and the meeting can continue as scheduled. If you notice arguments beginning to be repeated and feel that progress is not being made it may be time to table the discussion or schedule a special meeting to discuss the conflict.

- When tabling an issue until the next meeting:
 - Ensure the meeting minutes include all arguments
 - Make resolving the conflict the first topic for the next meeting
 - Avoid tabling an issue if you feel it will be tabled at the next meeting
- When scheduling a special meeting:
 - Pick a time that all parties are free
 - Hold the meeting at a neutral location, such as a conference room on campus
 - Plan multiple meetings for more complicated issues
 - Keep regular business and conflict resolution separate

Common Problems to Avoid

There are a number of common mistakes people tend to make when dealing with conflict, below are some things to avoid. Make sure to read the Communications Xcel Point as well for more tips on verbal and non-verbal skills that are essential for solving conflicts.

- **Need to explain your side first** - Let the other person state their opinions, this will make them less defensive
- **Non-Active Listening** - Do not formulate replies or retorts while listening, instead restate what the other person is saying to ensure everyone understands the issue
- **Fear** - Do not be afraid that you will look foolish or that you may be wrong
- **Assumption of winning & losing** - You should always be striving to collaborate
- **Not Seeking Help** - Do not feel that you must solve the problem by yourself, talk to your organization's advisor or contact the *Student Activities Office* for help in resolving your conflict

Adapted from Boston University Terrier Tricks - Conflict Resolution.

Conflict Management Styles

There are different methods of managing conflict and while your goal should always be to collaborate on a solution, that may not always be possible. The list below defines five of the most common styles of conflict management.

- **Competing** - Defending your position at the expense of another party
- **Accommodating** - Giving in completely to another party's demands
- **Avoiding** - Completely ignoring a dispute, diplomatically sidestepping the issue
- **Compromising** - Creating a mutually acceptable solution that mostly satisfies all parties
- **Collaborating** - Reviewing the issue to generate a solution that fully satisfies all parties

The first three styles should be avoided, but it is important to note that most conflict arises due to competition within the organization. While compromising and collaborating appear the same, collaborating involves an in-depth review and discussion of the conflict (detailed below) to generate the best solution for all parties.

How to Collaborate

The best results can be achieved if a special meeting is scheduled with all parties. Use the following steps to work towards finding and implementing the best solution. If you need help with any of these steps come to the *Student Activities Office* or email sao@wpi.edu.

Diagnosis - Determining the nature of the conflict

- Is the issue a value conflict?
Value conflicts may sometimes require you to accommodate or compromise
- Are there different expectations?
Establishing everyone's expectations can help to resolve the conflict

Initiation - Stating the issue

- Give a tangible effect the conflict has on you
- Use "I feel..." statements to avoid argument
- Let the other parties state their issues, you may be surprised by their complaints

Active Listening - Hearing another point of view

- Do not create responses while others are talking
- Avoid anger-provoking replies, the goal is to pacify, not anger
- Restate what others say to show you are listening and understand their point of view

Problem Solving - Finding a lasting solution

- Clarify the problem that was defined in the first three steps
- Allow all parties to talk about what is needed or wanted
- Generate a list of solutions
- Decide on the best solution acceptable to all parties
- Plan the implementation of the solution, including individual responsibilities
- Design an evaluation to review the solution after some time

Adapted from The University of Michigan Managing Conflict Handout.