Conflict Management Skills

"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." – Sir Winston Churchill

Most people perceive "conflict" as a difficulty rather than as an opportunity. Those who view conflict as the difficulty in every opportunity are not necessarily pessimists, however they may not be viewing the conflict as a creative dynamic. The reality is, no matter what you do or how you act, there will always be some conflict — especially when you serve as a community board member. Conflict can be both positive and negative. Conflict allows people to learn about a problem from different sides, and often the most creative ideas and solutions emerge from conflict. Negative aspects of conflict can involve frustration or confusion and sometimes lead to violence. The key to approaching conflict constructively is to recognize it as a process to be managed, not something to be avoided or eliminated.

Managing conflict requires certain skills and techniques that, although easily understood, may not always be easy to implement.

For example, when a person learns to paint it involves learning strokes and techniques to create an image. However, only after continuous practice does the person finally become an artist. You may think of conflict management as an art that benefits everyone through learning the skills, but it takes practice implementing the techniques to be a skilled conflict manager. The skills and techniques outlined on the following pages work best when the person applying them carries the attitude that conflict is about a problem that needs solving, rather than something to win.

Conflict Management Skills

Listen Actively
Listening involves more than simply hearing the words spoken, it also requires active involvement that includes understanding, acknowledging, and responding.

When actively listening you are also listening for content, meaning, and feelings. To make sure you understand what the person has said (especially when you think you disagree with the statement) summarize or paraphrase what you heard. Start by saying out loud, *"What I think I heard you say was … Is that right?"*

When paraphrasing or summarizing statements, make sure you are working to understand where the conflict lies. By *acknowledging* the conflict you need to understand it before you can *respond* appropriately. Remember, understanding and acknowledging do not equate agreement. However, acknowledgment recognizes both the feelings and content behind the statement and is an important step in letting the other person know the words have been heard and understood. Summarizing and paraphrasing may take a few times before you can respond appropriately. For example the following conversation may unfold at a board meeting.

Upset Resident	Board Member	Active Listening Skills
I'm sick and tired of our roads in need of repair and nothing ever gets done around here!	Sounds like you're saying you're upset with the quality of roads in your neighborhood.	Understanding
You're darn right I am! I pay my taxes, but I never see the results come back to our neighborhood.	So what you're saying is you don't feel like you're getting your money's worth for the taxes you pay. Is this right?	Understanding
That's exactly what I mean. I want to see how much money is collected and how our leaders spend it.	I understand what you're saying, and I see how important this issue is to you. Essentially you want to know how the collected tax money is spent?	Acknowledging (content and feeling)
Yes. Can we find that out somehow?	What if we send a request to the commissioners/city council with a copy of this month's meeting minutes. Does that sound agreeable to you?	Responding
That sounds great! Thank you.		

Keep Emotions in Check

Another important skill in managing conflict is to monitor emotions, both your own and others'. Although Newton is famous for stating, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," he was referring to objects, not people. *Objects react, but people can chose not to.* Clues that indicate someone is becoming emotional: They begin talking faster, louder, or they start interrupting others. You can't change your emotions, but you can decide how you want to act.

Venting of emotions during a conflict is helpful as long as you are focusing on the problem or conflict itself and not directing it toward any person or entity. Venting emotions constructively can sometimes help diffuse the conflict because it allows people to blow off steam.

However, if venting is directed in the form of personal or physical attacks, it is abuse. No one should be subjected to abusive situations. Using ground rules can help in preventing verbal attacks and provide guidelines for constructive venting.

During intense conflict, some people's emotions may dominate their actions. If this occurs, ask the group for a break from the discussion to keep your emotions in check — go to the restroom, get a drink of water, go outside for a few minutes. Concentrate on breathing in even patterns (e.g. breath in with 5 counts and exhale with 5 counts) to regain your focus on the problem, not on your emotions.

Separate People from the Problem

In every conflict there exists both the substance (or content of the problem) and the human relationships (or people). As a consequence, "people and the problem" often become entangled in discussions that sometimes lead to treating people and the problem as one. A useful technique for separating people from the problem is to think in terms of perception, emotion, and communication.

Conflict ultimately lies in people's heads: their perceptions. Understanding how one perceives the conflict opens the way to a possible solution. As stated earlier, it's important to keep emotions in check, but it is equally important to understand both your and the other person's emotions or feelings. If you don't actively listen and understand the other person's concerns, then you don't fully understand the entire conflict.

Separating people from the problem is not something you do only once and forget. It requires continuous work. The best approach is to deal with people as human beings, and deal with the problem on its merits or the underlying interests behind the conflict.

Focus on Interests, Not Positions
The difference between interests and positions is critical to managing conflict constructively. A position is something you have decided upon. An interest is what caused you to decide on your position. In other words, interests create positions. For every interest there usually exist several possible positions that could satisfy it. Unfortunately, most people simply adopt the most obvious position and dig their heels in, fighting for the position. However, when you look behind positions for the underlying interests, you often can find an alternative position that meets not only your interests but interests of others as well.

The best way to focus on interests is to *ask "why?"* and *ask "why not?"* Asking why allows you to put yourself in their shoes. For example, you may ask *"What's your basic concern, Mrs. X, in wanting this parcel of land rezoned for commercial property?*

Recognize that by asking why (or why not) you are not asking for justification of their position but rather trying to understand the needs, hopes, fears, or desires the position serves. In other words, getting at the underlying interests. Important as it is to focus on another's interest, it is equally important that you explain your interests. One technique for sharing your interests is to *be specific,* ask yourself why or why not. People tend to listen better if they feel that you have understood, so if you want someone to appreciate your interests, you need to begin by demonstrating that you appreciate and understand their interests.

Reframe
Reframing is one of the most powerful tools in dealing with conflict. Reframing means to reinterpret a statement or comment into a problem-solving frame. For example, if someone is yelling and screaming, don't think of the person as being disrespectful and rude, but reframe your perception of that person as having limited skills in communication. (Easier said than done, right?) In addition, help the other person reframe the conflict into a problem by asking for their advice. For example, *"What would you suggest I do?" "Knowing what my interests are, what would you do if you were in my shoes?"* Being asked for advice is flattering, and it provides an opportunity for the other person to become better educated about the problem. Another helpful tactic for reframing is to ask the person why or what makes that solution fair. *"You must have good reason for thinking that's a fair solution. I'd like to hear why."* When verbally reframing with the other person, your questions should begin with "how," "why," "why not," "what," or "who."

Physical Aides to Help Manage Conflict

Ground Rules
Ground rules are explicit rules that the group agrees to follow to help them facilitate productive discussions. It does not matter who presents the ground rules as long as all members reach consensus on following them. Some helpful conflict ground rules for managing conflict may include:

- Listen to understand
- No "You" statements (Instead say, *I think, I feel, My interests, etc.*)
- Listen actively
- Focus on interests, not positions
- Separate people from the problem
- Soft on the people, hard on the problem
- Reframe (Stay focused on the problem)
- Everyone participates
- Use the Bin

Bin

The bin serves as an important meeting tool during conflict to help members keep discussion focused on the present problem. When non-pertinent issues emerge, place those items in the bin to be dealt with at a later date.

For additional information on this topic:

Fisher, Roger and William Ury. 1991. Second Edition. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In.* Penguin Books, New York. 200 pp.

Ury, William. 1991. *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way From Confrontation to Cooperation.* Bantam Books, New York. 189 pp.

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