



CONFLICT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Community Board Development – No. 2

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*“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. It 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, confusion, and sometimes 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 they learn the 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 does not mean agreement. However, acknowledgment recognizes both

the feelings and content behind the statement and is an important step in letting the other person know they 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>I'm sick and tired of our roads in need of repair and nothing ever gets done around here!</i>	Sounds like your saying you're upset with the quality of roads in your neighborhood.	Understanding
<i>You darn right I am! I pay my taxes but I never see the results come back to our neighborhood.</i>	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
<i>That's exactly what I mean, I want to see how much money is collected and how our leaders spend it.</i>	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 & feeling)
<i>Yes. Can we find that out somehow?</i>	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
<i>That sounds great! Thank-you.</i>		

➤ 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 choose not to.** Clues that indicate someone is becoming emotional is when they begin talking faster, louder, or they start interrupting others. You can't change your emotions but you can decide how you will behave or what action you will take in response to the emotions you are experiencing.

Venting of emotions during a conflict is helpful as long as you are focusing on the

problem or conflict itself and not directing it towards 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, this is abuse and no one should be subjected to abusive situations. Using the 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

five counts and exhale with five counts) to regain your focus on the problem, not on your emotions.

➤ **Separate People from the Problem**

In every conflict there is 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 which 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 own 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 about it; 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 their position. However, when you

look behind positions for the underlying interests, you can often find an alternative position that meets not only your interests but 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 re-zoned 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 their 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 them, 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 expressing themselves (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 them 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. As discussed in Time and Meeting Management, it does not matter who presents the ground rules as long as all members reach consensus on following the ground rules. Some helpful ground rules for managing conflict may include:

- ✓ Listen to understand
- ✓ Use “I” statements (*I think, I feel, My interests, etc*)
- ✓ Reframe verbal attacks into problem statements
- ✓ Allow someone to finish speaking before the next person begins.

➤ **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 detailed information on the bin, refer to Time and Meeting Management Skills, Community Board Development – No. 1.

Additional Sources and References

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This is a handout in a series of **Community Board Development** training materials.

- “Time and Meeting Management Skills”
Community Board Development – No. 1
- “Conflict Management Skills”
Community Board Development – No. 2
- “Problem Solving Techniques”
Community Board Development – No. 3
- “Goal Setting and Action Planning Skills”
Community Board Development – No. 4
- “Decision Making Skills and Techniques”
Community Board Development – No. 5