

## Dealing with Conflict

One of the most difficult things you will deal with in any organization is conflict with or among members. With a few basic skills, you can successfully deal with conflict in a positive manner as it arises. This information is intended to help deal with small and large scale conflicts within student organizations. If you are having a serious issue and can't seem to work it out, please contact the Campus Activities and Involvement Center to get some help.

### **Basics of Conflict: Some things to remember.**

Conflict is inevitable. This is extremely important to keep in mind. It is natural for conflict to occur. When dealt with appropriately, conflict is an opportunity for growth within your organization.

Conflict is not a dirty word. It is NOT a sign that those involved are bad people or that they are less worthwhile as members of our society. Instead, understand that conflict is a sign of diversity of thought within your organization.

Conflict arises for many reasons and takes many forms. Be aware that there are many reasons for people getting involved in conflict and many ways that this conflict can manifest itself. The key is your ability to recognize this and adjust your management approach to the specific context.

Conflict encourages introspection. Conflict keeps an organization on its toes by providing a "checks and balances" system when viewed in a positive light. By dealing constructively with the criticism, strides can be made toward improving the organization. Criticism of an organization is not personal criticism of the people who lead it, so don't take it personally if conflict arises.

### **Suggestions to Manage Conflict:**

*Do not fear conflict.* To successfully solve a conflict, acknowledge it and work through it. Avoidance or surrender often will lead to prolonged or escalated conflict in the future. All progress starts with conflict, so look at it as an opportunity to grow.

*Keep discussion on a specific topic.* Avoid introducing irrelevant issues as they may only escalate the conflict or lead to the discussion of unrelated problems.

*Keep an open mind on views that differ from your own.* The goal in conflict management should be to open your mind as much as possible to allow for variances in perception; a defensive attitude will only heighten the conflict.

*Test criteria used in making value judgments.* Seek a reliable information base for evaluation rather than using your own personal value system.

*Cooperate rather than compete.* Do not attempt "to win" at the expense of the other person; conflict should be managed in cooperation rather than competition. Even if the other person in the conflict is competitive, responding competitively will only heighten the conflict.

### **Confronting Conflict: A Seven Step Plan**

#### Step One: Initiate Contact

- Choose someone to address the conflict. This person should be outside of the conflict, and someone with respect and admiration within your organization. This way they can talk calmly about the conflict and the people who are being confronted won't feel as threatened by their presence.
- Choose a private location. Don't do this in public, it's just not nice. If the people being confronted feel uncomfortable or ganged up on, the conflict is only going to get worse.
- Time the confrontation as closely as possible to the inappropriate behavior. Bringing up stuff weeks later is frustrating to the person being confronted, and a bad habit as a leader. Think about how you'd like to be treated in this situation.
- If necessary, cool off before confronting. Don't walk in mad.

#### Step Two: Establish Rapport

- Show respect for the person being confronted, even if you don't think they deserve it. Remember that their view of a situation is completely different from yours, and they may have information you don't.
- Begin by saying something that will establish a sense of rapport and mutual trust. Think about how you want to continue your relationship with this person after you discuss the conflict. Chances are you want to be on good terms, especially if you're still going to be in the same student organization.

#### Step Three: Identify the Issue/Problem

- Clearly define the issue to yourself before you begin exploring it with the person; be able to succinctly state the problem in non-threatening terms.
- Listen carefully to what is being said, and be empathetic to all sides of a conflict. People don't cause conflict without a reason. Sometimes they struggle to share that reason, and only will do so if they feel you are truly listening.
- Do not ask the question, "why?" as it allows an excuse and justification for the problem; stick to questions of "what?". (What did I do to make you feel that way? What frustrates you about this situation? What do you hope to change about this situation?)
- Keep to the issue. Gain factual knowledge of what happened.
- Do not excuse their behavior. If a member of your organization behaves poorly, you want to make sure they know that behavior shouldn't happen again. Give them alternate avenues to express their frustration so they don't have to spark the same negativity within your group.

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### Step Four: Problem is agreed upon

- Work with the person to identify the problem; he/she must agree with you that a problem exists.
- Condemn the behavior not the individual.
- Your language should reflect that "we have a problem" rather than "you have a problem."
- Help the person identify the impact and consequences of his/her actions.

### Step Five: Obtain Attainable Commitment

- Provide the person with an opportunity to "win," to succeed.
- Don't set standards or announce terms that you are not prepared to enact or enforce.
- Mutually agree upon an attainable commitment on his/her part.

### Step Six: Keep Commitment

- Predetermine a date and time to evaluate progress toward the commitment.
- Follow through on any agreements made.
- Be firm in the standards you set, but not mean or cruel in the way you enforce them.
- Support the individual's attempts to change. Change is pretty hard, and keep in mind how you would struggle if it were you in their shoes.

### Step Seven: Praise Success

- Offer praise and positive feedback for successes.
- Obtain a commitment for further changes by extending the attainable commitment.

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