

# Managing Conflict

Lynette Flage, Extension Specialist

## Why Does Conflict Occur?

Conflict is an inevitable part of life and exists when people don't agree on an issue, decision or action. Some conflicts are minor and dealt with easily, while other conflicts can be major and require a significant amount of time and attention. When conflict is not managed appropriately, it can bring out personal attacks and blame, generate distrust, stifle collaboration and encourage those who think they are "right" to feel elevated above those whose are "wrong."

Conflict is a normal part of working in groups. Conflict is generated from ineffective communication, different perceptions on an issue, or differing personal beliefs or values. It often is thought of negatively because it makes people uncomfortable, but conflict can be a positive force in group work. Conflict can help the group consider multiple options, boost creativity and allow everyone's opinion to be heard on an issue.

Regardless of the situation, conflict has the following characteristics:

1. Involvement of at least two parties
2. Some type of real or suspected struggle
3. An interaction between the parties
4. An emotional reaction

## Managing Conflict

Group leaders or facilitators should be aware that many methods exist for handling conflict situations. By setting simple group rules and clarifying the expectations of the group beforehand, conflict may be minimized or even eliminated before issues arise. Ground rules may include the following:

- One person talks at a time.
- Be respectful of each other; no name calling.
- Everyone gets a chance to be heard.
- Ask questions if you don't understand.
- Stick to the issue.
- Disagreeing is okay, work toward understanding.

**NDSU**  
**Extension Service**  
 North Dakota State University

Fargo, North Dakota 58108

April 2011

# Five Methods to Address Conflict

Five basic methods often are used to resolve conflict if it does arise in a group. These methods are avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise and collaboration.

| Method                         | Definition   | When Appropriate  | When Inappropriate   |
|--------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Avoidance (denial)             | Problem solved by denying it even exists.  | Conflict is small and not worth the time to respond. More time is needed to gather information.       | Issue is important. A decision is needed quickly and postponing will make matters worse. |
| Accommodation (smoothing over) | Differences in the group are suppressed. Everyone is asked to try to get along even though it may involve one person giving in to another. | Conflict is small and not worth the time to respond. Preserving relationships are important.          | Issue needs to be addressed immediately.   |
| Competition (exercise power)   | Using personal power to make a point. This is a win/lose situation.  | The method has been agreed upon beforehand. The group should accept that one party will win.          | Those on the losing end cannot express their needs.                                      |
| Compromise (negotiation)       | Individuals seek middle ground. Each party must give up something.   | Both parties are willing to reduce some demands. Compromise saves time and efforts.                   | Initial demands are too great. No one is committed to honoring the compromise.           |
| Collaboration                  | No winner or loser but the emphasis is on a group solution.  | Time is available for all parties to share their views. Members are willing to change their thinking. | Time is limited or not enough trust, respect and communication exists in the group.      |

No ONE correct method of resolving conflict exists. Every situation is different, and the strategy of conflict resolution will depend on the issue, the group and the time available.

# Additional Suggestions for Managing Conflict

Conflict can arise at any time. These tips may be useful when managing difficult situations.

**Deal with one issue at a time** – More than one issue may be involved in the conflict. If someone in the group starts to get off track or a problem from the past resurfaces, it should be dealt with to help move the group forward.

**Avoid rude, unintentional comments** – Use caution when selecting words that may be misconstrued by the group involved. Words such as “always” and “never” may not convey what the speaker means and can get others on the defensive.

**Avoid resolutions that are easy but not satisfactory** – People need time to think about all possible scenarios and solutions to issues. Quick answers or accommodating only a few people’s ideas may not give everyone the same satisfaction that the decision was agreed upon by all.

**Avoid becoming a threat to the other person** – Avoid name calling and threatening behavior. Everyone involved in conflict situations should be able to preserve his or her pride and dignity.

**Conflict resolution often has more than one right answer** – Don’t insist on being right. By listening carefully and considering all options, conflict often can be resolved and an agreement or compromise reached.

**Use humor when appropriate to help diffuse an uncomfortable situation** – Laughter sometimes can relieve tension in situations of conflict. However, humor should not be used to insult or belittle anyone. Use a humorous story to set the tone or be prepared with a humorous example if the group culture allows.

**Discuss the conflict openly. Communicate** – Strategies for good communication include:

- Proper listening – Give your full attention to whomever is talking.
- Paraphrasing – Test your understanding of what the speaker said by stating it in your own way. “Let’s see if I understand what you are saying.” OR “I hear you say ... . Is that correct?”
- “I” messages – Instead of using “you” messages, (“You never listen,” “You are so mean.”), an “I” message can be a much more positive way to express yourself (“I get frustrated when you don’t listen to me,” “I feel badly when you yell at me like that.”).
- Use neutral language – Try not to use words that provide judgment to others up front (should or shouldn’t, always or never, right or wrong, good or bad). Some of these words put others on the defensive and can intensify the conflict.
- Use “Yes, and ... .” instead of “Yes, but ... .” – The word “but” can cause or increase conflict. It often conveys, “I heard what you said, but I think you are wrong. What I am about to say is going to be better than what you suggested.” The word “but” can sound like an excuse is being presented.

Conflict is unavoidable and plays a part in many groups. A better understanding of conflict, along with learning to manage conflict, can lead to a more productive team and satisfied team members who feel welcome to communicate openly, take risks and exchange ideas.

## References

- Bens, I. (2000). *Facilitating With Ease*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Bolton, E.B. (2009). *Managing Conflict Creatively*. Publication #FCS9065. University of Florida IFAS Extension. Retrieved from <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/HE/HE74600.pdf>.
- *Facilitation Resources: Dealing with Group Conflict* (1999). University of Minnesota Extension Service.
- Fisher, R., and Urey, W. (1991). *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreements Without Giving In*. (2nd ed.). New York: Penguin Books.
- Lesmeister, M. (1992). *Managing Conflict*. North Dakota State University Extension Publication HE-500.
- *Youth Leadership Curriculum* (2004). Green and Iowa counties, University of Wisconsin Extension.
- *Tackling Community Controversy* (2005). *A Spotlight on Leadership and Poverty – Facilitation Guide*. Northwest Area Foundation Horizons program.

**For more information on this and other topics, see: [www.ag.ndsu.edu](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu)**

The NDSU Extension Service does not endorse commercial products or companies even though reference may be made to tradenames, trademarks or service names. NDSU encourages you to use and share this content, but please do so under the conditions of our Creative Commons license. You may copy, distribute, transmit and adapt this work as long as you give full attribution, don't use the work for commercial purposes and share your resulting work similarly. For more information, visit [www.ag.ndsu.edu/agcomm/creative-commons](http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/agcomm/creative-commons).

County commissions, North Dakota State University and U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. North Dakota State University does not discriminate on the basis of age, color, disability, gender identity, marital status, national origin, public assistance status, sex, sexual orientation, status as a U.S. veteran, race or religion. Direct inquiries to the Vice President for Equity, Diversity and Global Outreach, 205 Old Main, (701) 231-7708. This publication will be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities upon request, (701) 231-7881.