

LEADERSHIP AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict is an inevitable part of any group's development. The presence of conflict isn't necessarily a bad sign—differences of opinion, style, or approach can lead to creative solutions and a more energized group. People tend to think that conflict is terrible for groups and should be avoided at all costs. Good leaders can help people relax around conflict, instilling confidence in the group's members that the conflict will eventually be resolved, and even while the conflict exists the group can still function and even thrive.

WHAT CAUSES CONFLICT?

Generally, the root cause of all conflicts is a feeling by one party that his/her needs are not being met. Needs can fall into a range of categories:

- ✓ Substantive needs—concerns about tangible benefits. "I joined this group to make sure the park was safe at night for kids—why isn't there a safety committee yet?"
- ✓ Procedural needs—concerns about a process for interacting, making decisions, etc. "Are we just going to go along with what you say because you're the president? What does the group think?"
- ✓ Psychological needs—concerns about how one is treated, respected, etc. "I've had my hand raised for ten minutes and people continue to talk out of turn!"

PREVENTING CONFLICT:

While some conflict in a group setting is inevitable, and even welcome, a good leader can create an atmosphere that helps avoid those conflicts rooted in **procedural** and **psychological** needs.

- ✓ Foster an environment of open communication. Listen to all comments, even those that seem unhelpful or off-topic, and respond respectfully.
- ✓ Don't respond in kind to negative remarks, criticism, or inflammatory statements. Instead, try to acknowledge the content of the comment and turn it into a constructive remark.
- ✓ Avoid sweeping things under the rug—conflicts will and do arise. For tips on dealing with them, see below.

TIPS FOR RESOLVING CONFLICT:

- ✓ **Acknowledge the presence of conflict and discuss it openly with the group.** Reframe the conflict, if necessary, to take out the emotion and open up the possibility of cooperative resolution
- ✓ **Deal with one issue at a time.** A leader needs to guide the group through breaking down the conflict into separate issues. This will help people to feel their needs are being addressed.
- ✓ **Don't smooth over past issues.** If there is another problem from the past that is lurking behind the current conflict, identify it and list it as one of the things to be addressed.
- ✓ **Choose the right time for resolving the conflict.** At the same time, it's important for people to feel that meetings are productive and not devoted entirely to rehashing old issues. If something can be tabled while another project is being discussed, do it. People need to be ready to talk about a conflict before they can help resolve it.
- ✓ **Avoid resolutions that come too soon or too easily.** People need time to think about all possible solutions and the impact of each. Quick answers may disguise the real problem. All parties need to feel some satisfaction with the resolution if they are to accept it. Conflict resolutions should not be rushed.
- ✓ **Agree to disagree.** In some cases the effort required to settle a disagreement is so great it would jeopardize the entire group—in these cases it's better to agree to disagree.

- ✓ **Don't insist on being right.** There are usually several right solutions to every problem. A leader helps the group discover the solution that works best for the group, rather than forcing his or her views on everyone else.