

# Understanding and Addressing Conflict: Extension Agents as Facilitators



Have you ever interacted with someone, expecting a positive outcome, only to walk away feeling frustrated and defeated? If so, you recognize that conflict exists. What you may not know is how conflict arises and, consequently, how to deal with it effectively. This publication will deconstruct the components of conflict and discuss ways to address it effectively, particularly if you are tasked with facilitating conflict resolution between other parties.

## Deciphering Conflict

Rather than define conflict as a matter of opposing points of view, it is more useful to identify some of the reasons why conflict occurs in the first place. This is important because conflict is rarely black or white, and if you do not understand the real problem behind the conflict, you will not be able to effectively address it.

So what are some possible causes for conflict? In the workplace, competition, power struggles, performance issues, and compensation discrepancies are but a few common answers. In everyday life, opposing perspectives, ego, pride, jealousy, or simply having a bad day are frequent reasons.

But are these identified causes the real problem behind the conflict? Probably not. More often than not, the root of the problem is poor communication, fueled by one of the causes listed above.

Think back to a recent event in which you experienced conflict. Did you have all the information you needed up front? Even if you did, did you know exactly what you were expected to do with it? Most conflicts borne out of poor communication are a result of insufficient information, incorrect information, or no information at all. "Clear, concise, accurate, and timely communication of information will help to ease both the number and severity of conflicts" (Myatt, 2012).

## Addressing Conflict

Once conflict arises, you must address it. Choosing to ignore it is akin to sticking your head in the sand; the conflict doesn't disappear and often gets worse. The following are recommendations on how to address conflict by using prevention, resolution, and management strategies, depending on the situation.

### *Prevention*

In the early stages, it is possible to quell conflict before it escalates. This is the ideal scenario. One method is to ensure that others' basic needs are met, such as sharing resources, providing sufficient information, and communicating appropriately. In doing so, conflict can be avoided because people feel safe and respected (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007).

### *Resolution*

If prevention is not possible, the next best recommendation is to try and resolve the conflict. This requires a thorough understanding of the root of the conflict so that you can develop a strategy to resolve the situation satisfactorily for all involved. This does not mean that everyone will be happy with the outcome, but they will at least be able to tolerate it.

For example, an appropriate strategy for addressing a situation in which the parties involved are dealing with grief, hurt feelings, egos, or frustration would be to first create a space in which everyone can feel comfortable. This may mean asking the parties to leave one area and move outside, or to a more neutral space. Sometimes a change of scenery can significantly de-escalate a situation. Once everyone involved is in a safe space, it is time to encourage and facilitate open dialogue, ensuring that people will be heard and feel respected (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007).

## Management

In rare cases where prevention or resolution (via facilitation) is not feasible, the final option is management of the conflict. This is a last resort. The key here is to recognize that, at this stage, the conflict will not/cannot be resolved, but it can become manageable.

Managing conflict may involve identifying ways that the parties involved can function with as little interaction as possible. This may mean placing them in different parts of the office or assigning them to different work teams. It is not ideal, but the alternative of letting the conflict fester and escalate is much worse.

## Facilitation Tools

Extension agents, by nature, are both educators and facilitators. In order to effectively educate the public, agents must first facilitate relationships and networks. Many of these natural facilitation skills can (and should) be used when trying to address conflict.

1. **Be aware of self.** As a facilitator of conflict, it is important to be aware of how your values, morals, and ethics shape how you perceive a situation. One strategy for becoming more self-aware is learning to be reflective and critically evaluate the way you interpret your surroundings and your interactions with others (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007).

It is also important to contain your own feelings and reactions about the conflict. As a facilitator, it is your responsibility to remain calm and unbiased in the face of conflict. Failing to do so will only encourage the frustrations of the parties involved and diminish your credibility and power to de-escalate the situation.

2. **Create a safe environment for all involved.** Often, the biggest challenge in addressing conflict is getting the parties involved to talk about it. Fear of escalating the situation, uncertainty about how best to handle the situation, and general discomfort with conflict are common reasons why

people would rather run from conflict than deal with it (Tiffan, 2009). Following are suggestions to help ease those concerns associated with dealing with conflict:

- *Practice active listening.* People like to know that they are being heard and that their voice matters. By truly listening, you provide an opportunity for others to share information with you that they could not share with each other.

Effective listening requires that you remain nonjudgmental. Acknowledge the person speaking by making eye contact and nodding occasionally. However, avoid facial expressions or responsive sounds that might convey agreement or disagreement with what is being said (Blackard & Gibson, 2002).

- *Set ground rules.* Facilitating conflict is similar to being a referee, especially if the situation has escalated. By establishing rules for communicating—such as no interruptions and no criticisms of others' ideas until all ideas are on the table—and holding all parties involved accountable to those rules, you can better address the underlying problem and work toward a resolution.
- *Ask the right questions.* It is important to get as much information as possible from all parties involved in a conflict situation in order to get to the root of the conflict. Having a set of guiding questions can make this process a bit less chaotic. Examples of such questions include (Wilson, 2005):
  1. What are the issues from your perspective?
  2. Who else is involved?
  3. What issues do you think the other parties have?
  4. What goals, needs, or concerns do you think need to be addressed in order to resolve this?

5. What do you think the other parties need?
  6. What would you propose to resolve these issues and satisfy all sets of needs?
- *Have a strategy in mind.* Once you've established the rules and identified the issues at hand, you need to determine what will best motivate the parties involved to improve communication and work toward resolving the conflict. As the facilitator, you may decide to:
    1. Prioritize issues for discussion;
    2. Focus only on the issues that the parties disagree on;
    3. Help the parties build an agenda together; or
    4. Initiate a brainstorming session to identify options everyone can agree to (Wilson, 2005).

## Conclusion

The harsh reality is that conflict is inevitable, and, often, there is no easy way to deal with that conflict. However, conflict situations can be addressed effectively by first determining the real problem—the root of the

conflict. After that, it is up to you to determine whether the conflict can be prevented, resolved, or managed. Being strategic with how you analyze and address a conflict situation and facilitate the parties involved can significantly improve your personal and professional environment.

## References

- Blackard, K. & Gibson, J. W. (2002). Capitalizing on conflict strategies and practices for turning conflict to synergy in organizations. Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black Publishing.
- Littlejohn, S. W. & Domenici, K. (2007). Communication, conflict, and the management of difference. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Myatt, M. (2012). 5 keys of dealing with workplace conflict. Forbes Magazine (online). Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2012/02/22/5-keys-to-dealing-with-workplace-conflict/#54c2479a1e95>
- Tiffan, B. (2009, Sept-Oct). Dealing with difficult people. *Physician Executive*, 35(5), 86-89.
- Wilson, B. (2005). A simple process for resolving business conflicts. Retrieved from [http://www.businesslistening.com/conflict\\_resolution-2.php](http://www.businesslistening.com/conflict_resolution-2.php)

---

**Publication 3091** (POD-06-17)

By **Marina Denny**, EdD, Assistant Professor, School of Human Sciences; **Shawn Gardner**, Graduate Assistant, School of Human Sciences.



*Copyright 2017 by Mississippi State University. All rights reserved. This publication may be copied and distributed without alteration for nonprofit educational purposes provided that credit is given to the Mississippi State University Extension Service.*

Produced by Agricultural Communications.

We are an equal opportunity employer, and all qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability status, protected veteran status, or any other characteristic protected by law.

Extension Service of Mississippi State University, cooperating with U.S. Department of Agriculture. Published in furtherance of Acts of Congress, May 8 and June 30, 1914. GARY B. JACKSON, Director