

F ● HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL GROUP

Every person in a group has different characteristics and ideas. Sometimes, conflicts arise that threaten to incapacitate the group. This section has ideas for using everyone's unique contributions, resolving conflicts, and growing as a group.



Why are some groups more successful than others? Why are some groups able to work together more easily than others? People who have worked with groups and studied group behavior report these differences:

IN PRODUCTIVE GROUPS

1. People listen and pay attention to one another.
2. People discuss the subject at hand.
3. Everyone's ideas and suggestions are welcomed.
4. Everyone has a chance to state his or her views.
5. The group uses its agenda as a guide for discussion.
6. One or two members are appointed to summarize the discussion and to see that everyone has had a chance to speak.
7. Members know and use problem-solving steps. (See F2)
8. Members are clear about group decisions and committed to them.

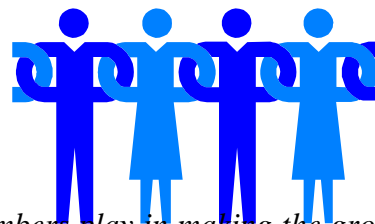
IN LESS PRODUCTIVE GROUPS

1. People do not listen and all tend to talk at the same time.
2. The discussion jumps from one idea to another.
3. Some members' ideas don't seem "to count", so these people do not act as if they really belong to the group.
4. One or two people do all the talking.
5. The agenda is not clear and there is no written guide for discussion.
6. No one summarizes or checks to see if everyone who wants to speak has actually spoken. Discussions go on and on until people get tired.
7. No order is followed for identifying and solving problems.
8. Decision making is muddy and people are not committed to the group's plans.

Adapted from "Research Utilizing Problem Solving",
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

In the following pages, these and other characteristics of successful neighborhood associations will be discussed. Other characteristics include:

- Having a process for making decisions.
- Having a clear set of goals.
- Knowing how to manage conflict.



Note: See B5 for more information on the role group members play in making the group more productive.

PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

F2

It is helpful for groups such as neighborhood associations to choose a particular problem solving/decision-making method. There are many decision-making techniques, and all can be adapted or used in combination with others, in order to fit your group's particular needs. In order for a group's selected manner of making decisions to be effective, the group should feel comfortable with the technique and have some flexibility within it. Choosing a decision-making approach helps avoid inefficiency, redundancy, and delay; however, a group that is forced to stick with a set of rigid procedures can become concerned more with procedure than the quality of their decisions. Following are some decision-making models.

ROBERT'S RULES OF ORDER

One way to ensure fair, orderly, and expedient decision-making is to adhere to the principles of "Robert's Rules of Order," which many neighborhood associations' bylaws specify will be used to conduct board meetings. "Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised" is the generally accepted version of Parliamentary Law, and is based on the following principles of democracy:

1. Justice and courtesy for all
2. Doing only one thing at a time
3. Rights of the majority to rule
4. Rights of the minority to be heard
5. Rights of the absentee to be protected
6. Each proposal entitled to full and free debate
7. Facilitate action, not obstruct it

MOTIONS are used to introduce business to the group. The steps necessary to present and dispose of a motion are:

1. Address the chair - rise if your group's model calls for it.
2. Be recognized by the presiding officer.
3. State your motion - "I move" - the key to action (see Appendix M5 for a guide to making motions).
4. Motion is seconded, by another member.
5. Presiding officer states the motion.
6. Debate is held - maker of motion has chance to speak first.
7. Vote is taken.
8. Presiding officer announces result of vote and action to be taken.

QUORUM

A *quorum* is defined as the minimum number of members who must be present at a meeting in order for business to be transacted. The requirement of a quorum is a protection against an unduly small number of members doing business in the name of the group.

The number of members that constitute a quorum is defined by each association's bylaws. If no quorum is specified in the bylaws, it is a majority (50 percent plus one) of the current board members. A quorum does not require that members vote on each issue, only that they are present.

Absence of Quorum

Before beginning a meeting, the chairperson or presiding officer should determine whether there is a quorum. If not, s/he may choose to wait a reasonable amount of time before starting the meeting to allow more board members to show up. If a quorum is present at the beginning of the meeting, but the chairperson notices that sometime during the meeting a quorum is no longer present, s/he must declare the fact before the next vote is taken or a new motion is stated. If another board member notices the absence of a quorum, s/he may point out the fact in a point of order, as long as a speaker is not interrupted. In cases where the loss of quorum is not noticed until after a board action has been taken, that action is not automatically negated, even if after a discussion the board determines that a quorum was not present at the time of the vote.

Once it has been announced that there is no quorum present at a meeting, no business may be transacted, except to fix a time to adjourn, adjourn, recess, or take other measures to obtain a quorum. Even if all present unanimously consent, no other business may be conducted. In cases where certain business must be conducted immediately, present board members may, at their own risk, adjourn the board meeting and open an “adjourned meeting,” at which they may take an emergency action in the hope that it will be ratified at a later meeting where a quorum is present. If individual board members’ approval is obtained by telephone, e-mail, or some means besides having everyone in a room where debate can take place, that does not constitute the approval of the board until it is ratified at a regular board meeting where a quorum is present.

IS A FORMAL MOTION NECESSARY?

Business of Little Importance

One of the purposes of Robert’s Rules of Order is *expediency*. In times where the business at hand is of little importance and there is no minority opinion to protect, the formal process of making, seconding, stating, and voting on motions serves no purpose except to slow down the progress of business.

The most common example of this is in the correction and approval of minutes. The chair may use a simple process of obtaining unanimous consent by making a statement such as: “If there is no objection . . .”, or, “Without objection . . .”, or in the case of the approval of minutes, “If there are no (further) corrections, the minutes are approved.” If someone does indicate an objection, the action must then take the form of a formal motion with a second, a debate, and a vote. In some cases, a member’s objection may be to simply say that s/he is more comfortable putting the question to a formal vote. It should also be noted that the “unanimous” vote may mean that those who object simply don’t feel it worthwhile to oppose or discuss the issue.

In cases where a piece of business is controversial, or much hinges on an action (such as a recommendation to City Council), a formal vote is preferable.

Board Meeting Where Not More Than a Dozen Members Are Present

Robert’s Rules of Order recognizes that some of the formality necessary in a large group would hinder business in a very small group. The rules governing small board meetings are unique in the following respects:

- Members do not need to obtain the floor or stand up while making motions or speaking, and

- the chairperson may remain seated while putting a question to a vote.
- Motions do not need to be seconded.
 - The number of times a member can speak to a question is unlimited, and there is usually not a reason to entertain motions to close or limit debate.
 - Informal discussion of a subject is permitted while no motion is pending.
 - If a proposal is perfectly clear to all present, a vote may be taken without a motion's having been introduced.
 - The chairperson may make motions and vote on all questions.

The neighborhood association's bylaws may override any of the above practices, and more formal rules may be followed if the board so desires.

TYPES OF MOTIONS (according to RANK)

1. **Privileged Motions** have no connection with the main motion, but are of such importance as to demand immediate consideration. (i.e., Adjourn, Recess, Call for the Orders of the day.)
2. **Main Motion** brings a question before the assembly. No two main motions may be pending at the same time.
3. **Subsidiary Motions** are for the purpose of modifying or disposing of the main motion under discussion. (i.e., Amend, Refer to Committee, Postpone definitely)
4. **Incidental Motions** - miscellaneous motions which cannot be placed in above groups. (i.e., Appeal the Decision of the Chair, Division of Question, Reconsider, etc.)

Information from *The Scott, Foresman Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 10th Edition. Edited by Robert, Henry M. III, and Evans, William J. Harper Perennial, 1990.

See appendix N4 for a guide to making motions.

For online information about *Robert's Rules of Order*:

www.robertsrules.com (up-to-date edition, rules in brief, how-to)

The complete *Robert's Rules of Order, Revised*: www.constitution.org/rror/rror-00.htm

www.csufresno.edu/comm/cagle-p3.htm (questions and answers from Professor John Cagle of California State University)

www.robertsrules.com (survival tips)

CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING MODEL

Consensus - A feeling of agreement. Originally - the harmonious working together of parts of the body.

A consensus decision is a "hammered-out" decision, where everyone is permitted a say. After discussion, give and take, and compromise has occurred, consensus is reached when everyone can honestly say, "I am willing to support and implement this decision. It may not be exactly what I

personally want, but, given the range of opinions, the time factor, and all that is involved, it is a good, working decision.”

Consensus decision making involves a cooperative effort to find a sound solution acceptable to everyone rather than a competitive struggle in which an unacceptable solution is forced on the losers. With consensus as a pattern of decision making and interaction, group members need not fear being outsmarted or outmaneuvered. They can be frank, candid, and authentic in their interaction at all steps in the decision-making process.

The process of arriving at consensus is a free and open exchange of ideas which continues until agreement is reached. A sound consensus process assures that each individual’s concerns are heard, and a sincere attempt has been made to take them into consideration in the search for and the formulation of a conclusion. This conclusion may not reflect the exact wishes of each member, but since it does not violate the deep concerns of any, it can be agreed to by all.

To achieve real consensus, rather than the illusion of it, requires skill in straight communication and working through differences. The following communication guidelines assist in coming to consensus:

1. Take responsibility for what you want and do not want. Be specific about who you want it from.
2. Make your interests known: what you think, want, or feel.
3. Do not hide behind questions.
4. Watch “shoulds.”
5. Respond to others; do not leave them hanging
6. Talk to, not about a person.
7. Listen to feelings and try feeding them back.
8. Check out assumptions; do not “mind read.”
9. Avoid “chicken soup” smoothing over problems.
10. If you strongly disagree with another person’s point of view, restate it before offering your own.

Consensus Information from:

McCarthy and Company, Organization Consultant, Inc., West Linn, Oregon

A RATIONAL AND SYSTEMATIC MODEL

This approach to solving problems in groups is an excellent guide for discussion. The model is an effective summary of several sociological methods of group decision making and problem solving. Following are the rational steps to solving a problem in a group:

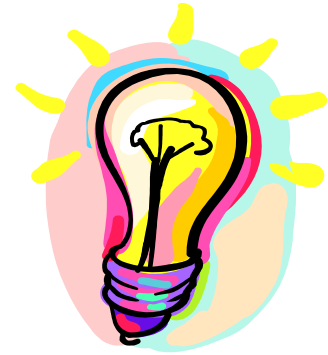
1. Define and Limit the Problem

- C Define the problem specifically; try to phrase it as a question.
- C Discuss the group’s goals and determine the importance of the issue to the group.
- C Identify the group’s available resources, as well as its constraints.

2. Analyze the Problem and Gather Information

- C Research the history and causes of the problem.
- C Discuss how the problem relates to other issues with which the group is concerned.
- C Collect and discuss relevant information.

- C Challenge the group's facts and assumptions.
- 3. Establish Decision Criteria (what will make a decision acceptable?)**
 - C Decide what an ideal decision would look like.
 - C Discuss what a reasonable, less-than-ideal decision would look like.
- 4. Discuss Possible Solutions**
 - C Use brainstorming techniques to produce ideas.
 - C Consider all possible solutions.
 - C Identify evidence in support of and against each alternative.
- 5. Determine the Best Solution**
 - C Does the solution minimize the problem?
 - C Does the solution fit the decision criteria?
 - C Is it consistent with the facts and information gathered?
- 6. Determine How the Final Decision Should Be Implemented**



This material adapted from:

Fisher, B. Aubrey. Small Group Decision Making. 3rd ed. McGraw-Hill, 1990.

For more information on group processes see:

Comish, Newel W. Effective Leadership of Voluntary Organizations. Anna Publishing Inc, 1976.

When a group takes the time to set goals, they take the first step toward achieving them. Without goals, the group is vulnerable to unplanned, unorganized behavior, and nothing ever seems to be accomplished. The purpose of goal setting is to clarify direction and to set a long-term plan toward that direction. A goal, therefore, is a clear realistic statement of what the organization wants to accomplish.

GUIDELINES FOR GOAL SETTING

- **Include All Members of the Group in Setting the Goals**

If everyone has had the opportunity to have his/her say in determining the goals, they will be more motivated to participate in accomplishing the goals. Goals also increase effective communication, because every group member knows where the group is going.

- **Set Goals Early On**

Goals give direction to your energy, determine how the group will spend its time, and give all members a solid tool for evaluation.

- **Build a List of Group Wants and Needs**

Answer questions such as: What do we want to do? What do we believe is important? Who will do it? Ask these questions of your members and let them respond without being criticized. (Brainstorming is one way of doing this.)

- **Evaluate This List of Group Wants and Needs to Determine the Top Priorities**

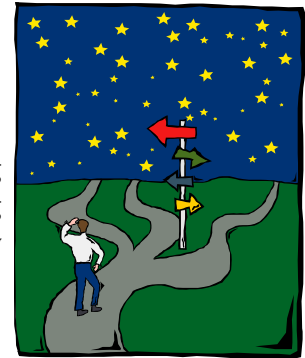
Goals must be attainable, measurable, and meaningful with an identifiable outcome. It is important to be realistic about the obstacles that may stand in your way and decide how you will overcome them.

- **Write the Goal**

In writing a goal, the statement should be realistic, easily understood, and able to be measured and observed. The statement should be agreed upon by the group. The goal then needs one or two action statements that are clear, concise, and short range. These are called objectives and they specify how the goal will be accomplished and who will accomplish it.

- **Evaluate Goals and the Group's Progress Toward Them**

A goal is like a map; it helps you get from point A to point B. By referring back to the goal periodically, you can see how far you have gone and if you have kept on course. Goals are also changeable. Periodically, goals should be reviewed to see if they are still appropriate and to be sure that progress is being made toward attainment.



GOAL WORDS

When setting goals, problems may arise if you use words that do not clearly communicate to others what you are trying to accomplish. Whenever possible, it is better to use words that leave little room for misinterpretation and point to precise action. Below are some examples:

**Words Open to Many Interpretations
(Non-Action Words)**

know
appreciate
learn
understand
comprehend
believe
use
develop
master
try
discover
attempt
acquaint
keep abreast
improve

**Words That Give Specific Interpretations
(Action Words)**

identify
locate
list, itemize
write
select
describe
compare, contrast
differentiate
construct
plan
solve
predict
choose
evaluate
organize
formulate
translate
integrate

GENERATING IDEAS

There are many ways to generate ideas for goals. The more open you are to finding new ideas the more successful your group will be in setting goals. Be creative. Brainstorming is one way to go about generating new ideas.

BRAINSTORMING

Brainstorming has become a favorite way to generate as many creative ideas as possible. It encourages people to think of new possibilities without concern for their practicality or appropriateness. It is often the seed for that new, great plan of action!

- Have participants state all their ideas that might be possible goals for your group. These do not have to be well thought out or standard ideas. Anything goes.
- Write each idea on a blackboard or large piece of paper posted at the front of the room.
- Do not discuss the idea. (That comes later.)
- Do not judge the idea. All ideas are welcome—even those that seem crazy or impossible.
- The wilder the better. Be really creative. Sometimes the best idea comes from the most outlandish.
- After all ideas are stated, go back and discuss each idea. Do not dismiss ideas without discussing their merits.
- Determine the top priorities by consensus of the group.

Do not forget to evaluate goals periodically to see if they are still appropriate and being worked on.

SOLUTIONS TO COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS IN MEETINGS

F4

Whenever you gather a group of people together—for any reason—you're bound to run into differences of opinion and clashes of personality. Neighborhood association meetings are no different. But you can calm the waters and stay productive if you're prepared to troubleshoot some common meeting problems. Below are some common meeting-related issues and advice on how to resolve them:

1. “People start veering off topic, and soon the entire meeting runs off track.”

Here are a few ways to bring a meeting back on track quickly and tactfully:

- **Designate a “parking lot,”** where all off-topic ideas can reside. It can be a whiteboard where you can list ideas as they pop up. Tell participants that those ideas will be pursued at a more appropriate time.
- **For minor diversions,** use these phrases to lightly steer people back on course: “I’d like to go back and see how that relates to our original agenda item,” or “OK, let’s come back and focus on the problem we need to solve.”
- **When a small group starts a side conversation**—one that doesn’t meet the objective of the meeting—make the situation public. Say: “This discussion appears to involve only a few people. Is it something that can be resolved quickly or is there another way to handle this? What does the group want to do?”
- **When the entire group has delved into an unrelated topic** and needs serious redirecting, say: “This discussion appears to be straying into areas outside the scope of this meeting. Can we table it, or do we need to add it to the agenda?”
- **Call for a clarity check** when you suspect a conversation has moved away from the objective of the meeting. Ask for their attention, then say to the group: “Excuse me, I’m not clear that this conversation relates to our topic. I’d like to check to see if it’s important to pursue now.” Let others in the group give their opinions, if they confirm your suspicion, ask that the conversation be continued outside the meeting.

2. “Long-winded people are eating up time and keeping other participants from speaking.”

The trouble with pontificators is that they tend to crowd out quiet participants whose ideas may never be heard. *In that situation:*

- **Step in with a polite interruption** that cuts the speaker short. Say: “Brent, our time is running short. Can you please wrap up?” If the rambler doesn’t comply, then stop him short with this direct statement: “Thank you, Brent. We need to move on. Judy, you’re next. Go ahead.”
- **After repeatedly trying to tone down the nonstop talkers,** if you still feel they’re dominating the meeting, take them aside. Explain that you cannot allow them to continue monopolizing meeting time. Let them know that if they keep it up, they’ll be ousted from the next meeting.

3. “A person I’d describe as ‘difficult’ is ruining our meetings.”

Difficult behavior puts a strain on the assembled group—and can sabotage productivity. Here’s how to step in:

- **Set the tone for the meeting.** Say something like: “I don’t expect us to all agree with everything said, but I want to hear all viewpoints. So say what’s on your mind and don’t criticize other ideas until we can fairly evaluate all input.”
- **Try to make him more aware of his behavior.** Say “John, [pause] is this really going to solve our problem?” At the same time, attempt to change the climate of the room by gently prompting other participants to speak up.
- **Give feedback as soon after the incident as possible.** Take the offender aside and report what you observed, not your interpretation of what the person was thinking or implying: “Susie, I noticed in the meeting that you had your arms crossed and an angry look on your face.” Use “I” statements, since these are observations about how the person’s behavior affected you.

Tie the behavior to the negative result caused by it “And Susie, I noticed that after you spoke, everyone else quit talking and started finding excuses to leave the meeting before we were done.” You need to establish that the behavior was serious enough to cause negative results.

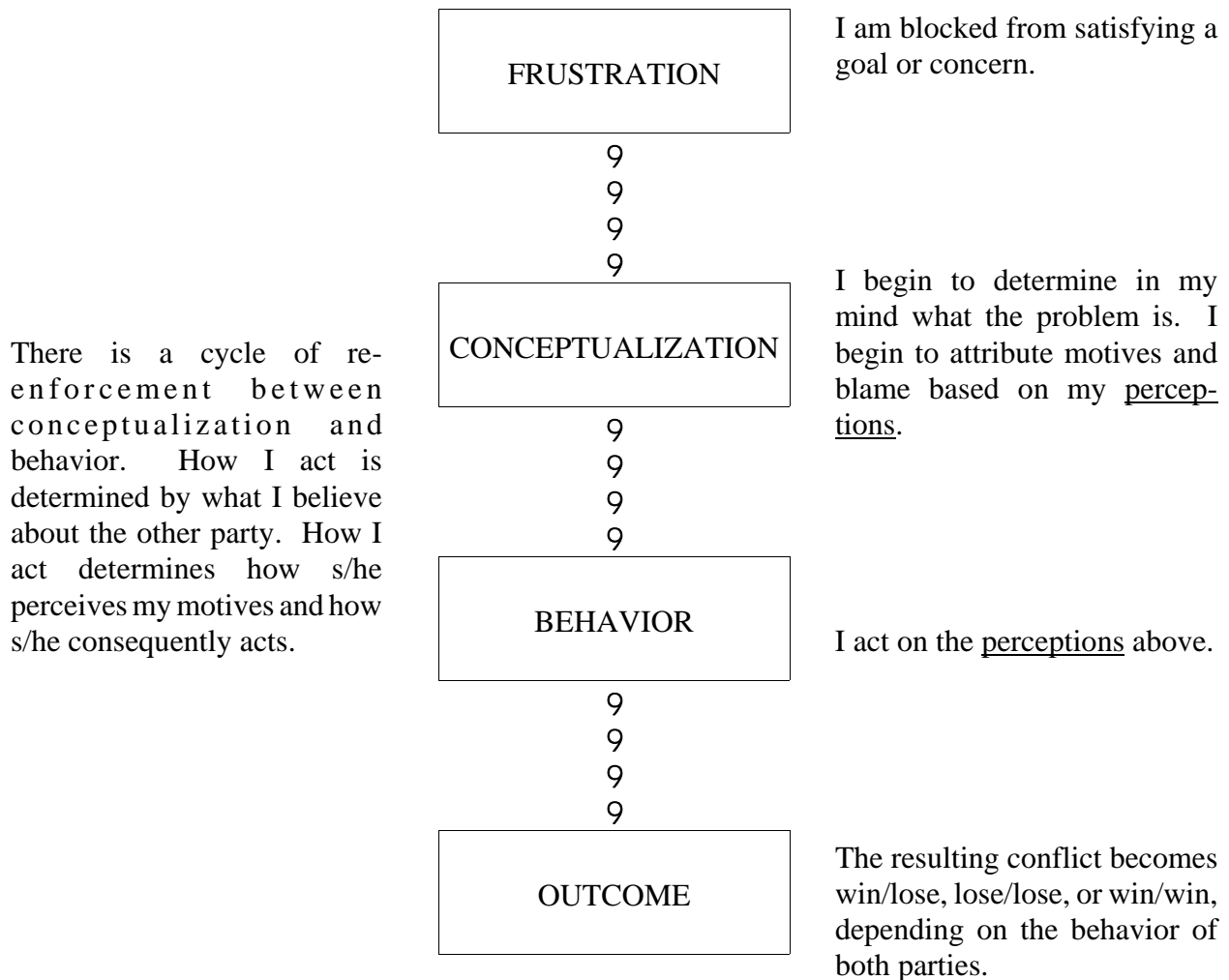
Ask for what you want to be different in the future. Example: “I’d appreciate it if in the future you would voice your opinion without getting upset.”

UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

Most authorities claim some conflict is inevitable in human relationships where people and groups are interdependent. Often clashes occur more over *perceived* differences than real ones...people anticipate blocks to achieving their goals that may or may not be there. Thus a conflict can be defined as:

Two or more people perceiving that what each one wants is incompatible with the other's wants.

There is a normal process of development in any conflict and this process tends to be cyclical, repeating itself over a series of episodes:¹



This diagram illustrates how important it is to verify the accuracy or inaccuracy of our perceptions about the other party's motives. Our subsequent behavior and outcome of the conflict are directly determined by the *conceptualization phase*.

We act on our beliefs about the other party. For example, I may have decided that the person has rejected my idea because he or she is threatened by me or does not like me when in fact, I did not communicate clearly or give enough information. How I respond depends on which of these I believe to be true.

Being aware of warning signs can minimize conflict situations. The following social relationship

characteristics should alert our attention as they signal an increased likelihood of conflict.

1. **Ambiguous Jurisdictions**
Boundaries of responsibility and authority are unclear.
2. **Conflict of Interest**
Competition for perceived scarce resources(or rewards) exists.
3. **Cultural Conflict**
Differences that are driven by cultural point of view exist.
4. **Communication Barriers**
There is a lack of communication, misunderstanding of terminology, lack of time for discussion, unwillingness to listen to other party, etc.
5. **Over Dependency of One Party**
One party depends too heavily on the other for resources or tasks.
6. **Differentiation in Organization**
There is a great degree of differentiation in an organization (i.e., levels of authority, types, and numbers of specific tasks).
7. **Association of the Parties**
Parties frequently interact both in decision-making situations and informally. (*However, major incidences of conflict decrease as participation increases.*)
8. **Need for Consensus**
All parties must agree on the outcome.
9. **Behavior Regulations**
Controls (i.e., rules, regulations, formal policies) are imposed.
10. **Unresolved Prior Conflicts**
There are a number of past *unresolved* conflicts. (This underlines the importance of managing conflicts at their earliest stages since they do not go away!)

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING CONFLICT

Frost and Wilmont suggest that one reason people still hold very negative opinions about conflict is because of the following *misconceptions* which seem to be perpetuated:²

1. **HARMONY IS NORMAL AND CONFLICT IS ABNORMAL. *This is untrue.*** Conflict is very normal and, in fact, inevitable.
2. **CONFLICTS AND DISAGREEMENTS ARE THE SAME.** Conflicts are more serious and usually involve incompatible goals.
3. **CONFLICT IS THE RESULT OF "PERSONALITY PROBLEMS."** Personalities do not conflict, people's behavior conflicts.
4. **CONFLICT AND ANGER ARE CLOSELY MERGED IN MOST PEOPLE'S MINDS.** Conflict involves *issues* as well as *emotions*, and the issue and the participants determine the emotions generated. They may feel fear, excitement, sadness, frustration, and other emotions as well as anger.

LEVELS OF CONFLICT

One of the things that determines the depth and complexity of conflict is the basic issue(s) at stake. Most experts identify four areas of disagreement which are involved in conflict situations. Each one gets more complex and thus more difficult to resolve:

Level I Facts or Data

The parties simply have different information. This is often a basic communication problem and, when all pertinent information is shared with those concerned, differences disappear.

Level II Process or Methods

The parties disagree over the best way to achieve a goal or solve a problem. This becomes somewhat more difficult, but by using sound problem-solving techniques it can usually be settled.

Level III Goals or Purpose

The parties cannot agree on what the group's basic purpose or mission is or what they would like it to be. Negotiating goals takes patience and skill, but it is vital if collaboration is ever to be attained.

Level IV Values

The parties disagree about the basic *meanings* of the situation and things they hold dear. They are, in fact, coming from very different and alien places. These conflicts are extremely difficult and can best be dealt with by an expert third party.

MANAGING CONFLICT WITHIN A GROUP

Conflict not managed within a group will bring about delays, disinterest, lack of action, and may even cause a breakdown of the group. Unmanaged conflict may result in withdrawal of individuals and an unwillingness on their part to participate in other groups or assist with group action programs.

Resolving conflict situations often requires the assistance of a third party. Professionals and leaders in a group or organization may have to become the third party "arbitrator" in a conflict situation. This requires an understanding of the conflict situation, the conflict cycle, the reactions and adjustments that may occur in the resolution process, and an ability to objectively pursue some sort of resolution.

The third-party conflict manager must be an active listener, be aware of timing, and use feedback techniques to check for accuracy of communication during all phases of conflict management.

The third-party conflict manager must seek to involve both parties in a collective solution to the conflict, because people are more likely to support what they help create.

Phases of Conflict Management

1. **Collect data** - Know exactly what the conflict is about and analyze behavior of parties involved.
2. **Probe** - Ask open-ended questions, actively listen, and facilitate communication.

3. **Save face** - Work toward a win/win resolution. Avoid embarrassing either party. Maintain an objective (not emotional) level.
4. **Discover common interests** - This will help individuals to redefine dimensions of the conflict and perhaps bring about a compromise.
5. **Reinforce** - Give additional support to common ideas of both parties and know when to use data collected.
6. **Negotiate** - Suggest partial solutions or compromises identified by both parties. Continue to emphasize common goals of both parties involved.
7. **Review** - Review, summarize, and confirm areas of agreement. Resolution involves compromise.

Conflict cannot be avoided, although the seriousness can be minimized by early conflict resolution.

Negative outcomes are:

- People feel defeated and demeaned.
- Distance between people increases.
- A climate of distrust develops.
- Cooperation may decrease.
- Resistance develops when team work is needed.
- Some people leave because of the turmoil.

Positive outcomes are:

- Better ideas are produced.
- People are forced to search for new approaches.
- Long-standing problems surface and are dealt with.
- People are forced to clarify their views.
- Tension stimulates interest and creativity.
- People have a chance to test their capabilities.

*Conflict, like power, is neither good nor bad.
It is what we do with it that makes the difference.*

REFERENCES:

Robinson, Jerry Jr., *Management in Community Groups*, 1976.
Wilson, Marlene, *Survival Skills for Managers*, 1981.

2 . *Frost and Wilmont*, Interpersonal Conflict, 1978

THIS IS A DIFFICULT MEMBER: HANDLE WITH CARE

F6

Every association has one. Members inwardly groan just at the thought of having to deal with it. The "it" is the difficult member - the one who always complains about association programs but never offers solutions; the member who stands up at a convention and spends 45 minutes lambasting the officers and directors; or the board member who goes off on his or her own, speaking for the association without the authority to do so. Fortunately, difficult members are small in number. Unfortunately, they are large in the havoc they wreak.

The problem with difficult members is that they are hard to understand. They seem to be impervious to normally successful techniques of communication and methods of persuasion. And their behavior is habitual: you can always count on them to be difficult, no matter what the circumstances.

If you have ever had to face a difficult member, you know how frustrating and potentially demoralizing the experience can be. But there are general strategies and specific techniques which can help you cope. By understanding them and adopting a constructive response yourself, you can influence their behavior. This will lead to a more productive group environment.

GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR HANDLING DIFFICULT MEMBERS

1. **Assess the situation.** Is the person really difficult or just cranky for a short time?
2. **Stop wishing the person were different.** You cannot change it. It is not even a good idea to try.
3. **Put some distance between yourself and the difficult behavior.** Develop a detached and distanced view of that difficult person while he or she is in the process of being difficult. By removing yourself to a distance, you can achieve a better perspective.
4. **Formulate a plan for interrupting the situation.** You cannot change the behavior of the other person, but you can change yours.
5. **Put your strategy into operation.** Plan your timing, and prepare for the confrontation.
6. **Monitor the progress of your strategy** so that you can make adjustments to it when or if it becomes necessary.
7. **If your strategies for coping don't work, abandon your efforts.** Do not wait until the situation has done you more harm.

SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES FOR COPING WITH THE SEVEN MAJOR CATEGORIES OF DIFFICULT PEOPLE

1. Hostile-Aggressives...

Try to bully and overwhelm you by bombarding you. They make cutting remarks or throw temper tantrums when they do not get their own way, which they are convinced is the only way. To cope with hostile-aggressives:

- a. Stand up for yourself, but do not be threatening.

- b. Give them time to run down.
- c. Do not worry about being polite, just charge in and make your point.
- d. Get their attention, but carefully; do not startle them.
- e. Have them sit down; this will make them less aggressive.
- f. Speak for your own point of view; do not attack them.
- g. Avoid a head-on fight.
- h. Be prepared to be friendly. Hostile-aggressives are often very friendly after you have stood up to them.

2. Complainers...

Gripe incessantly, but they never try to do anything about what they complain about. This is either because they feel powerless to do so or because they refuse to bear the responsibility for a solution. Use this strategy to turn a complainer into a problem-solver:

- a. Listen attentively even though it will be very difficult.
- b. Acknowledge what the complainer says by paraphrasing the complaints.
- c. Do not agree with the complaints.
- d. Be prepared to interrupt and take control of the situation: complainers love to ramble.
- e. Use limiting responses that will pin the complainer to specifics.
- f. Avoid the accusation-defense-reaccusation sequence where you defend an accusation and then are reaccused. This can be like an error loop in a computer program that goes on and on and on.
- g. State the facts without comment and without apology.
- h. Switch to problem-solving.
- i. Be prepared to begin this strategy from the beginning several times: complainers are slow learners.

3. Silent-Unresponsives...

Answer every question you might have and every plea for help that you make with a “yep,” a “no,” or a grunt, and sometimes with an “I don't know.” A longer answer you will not get. You can:

- a. Ask open-ended questions.
- b. Use the friendly, silent stare.
- c. Pause for long periods, inviting them to fill the void.
- d. Comment on what is happening in the discussion.
- e. Recycle the conversation if necessary.
- f. Break the tension by helping them to say what they are thinking.
- g. Set time limits on the length of the discussion.

4. Super-Agreeables...

Are always very reasonable, sincere, and supportive. At least in your presence. But they do not produce what they say they will produce. And sometimes they even act contrary to what they have led you to expect.

- a. Make honesty non-threatening. They are afraid you do not want to hear the truth.
- b. Be personable if you can, but only if you mean it.
- c. Do not allow them to make unrealistic commitments when you know they couldn't possibly fulfill them.
- d. Be prepared to compromise so you are both in a win situation.
- e. Listen to their humor. They often hide the truth there.

5. Negativists...

Object to everything. They assert that whatever you propose will not work or is impossible. All too often their effect on you is to completely deflate any optimism you might have for a project.

- a. Avoid getting drawn into their attitude.
- b. State your own realistic optimism.
- c. Do not agree with them.
- d. Do not hurry to propose solutions.
- e. Use their negativism constructively. It never hurts to have a devil's advocate.
- f. Be prepared to take on the project by yourself if you can't change their attitudes.

6. Know-It-All Experts...

Believe and want you to believe that they know all there is to know about anything worth knowing. They are usually condescending, imposing, or pompous. And, in all likelihood, they will make you feel like an idiot. You can blunt their effect, if you:

- a. Do your homework on the subject.
- b. Listen to and acknowledge what they say.
- c. Question them firmly, but do not confront them; they hate being wrong.
- d. Avoid being a counter-expert.
- e. Let them be the expert they think they are.

7. Indecisives...

Can ruin a program because they put you off until it is too late to do anything about it. They put off making a decision until the decision is made for them. They also will not let go of anything until it is perfect, which it never is. To get around them, try this:

- a. Bring the issues out in the open, and make it easy for them to be direct; pursue all signs of indecision.

- b. Help them solve the problem or problems.
- c. Place all the alternatives in rank of importance.
- d. Tie your program to values of quality and service.
- e. Give them lots of support after they have finally made a decision.
- f. If at all possible, keep control of what you are working on.
- g. Watch for signs that they are being overloaded by the pressure to make a decision.

Regular communication with them, diversionary activities for them, and strength to be firm with them are good prevention mechanisms to minimize the damage difficult members can do to an organization, to the morale of its members, and to its program.

Every group has to spend time and energy learning how to work together. Usually some feelings develop between members while folks are learning. It takes time for group members, each different, to learn how each can fit into the group and contribute best. Frequently, things seem "all mixed up," and group members may quite naturally become disturbed and discouraged—even aggravated at each other.

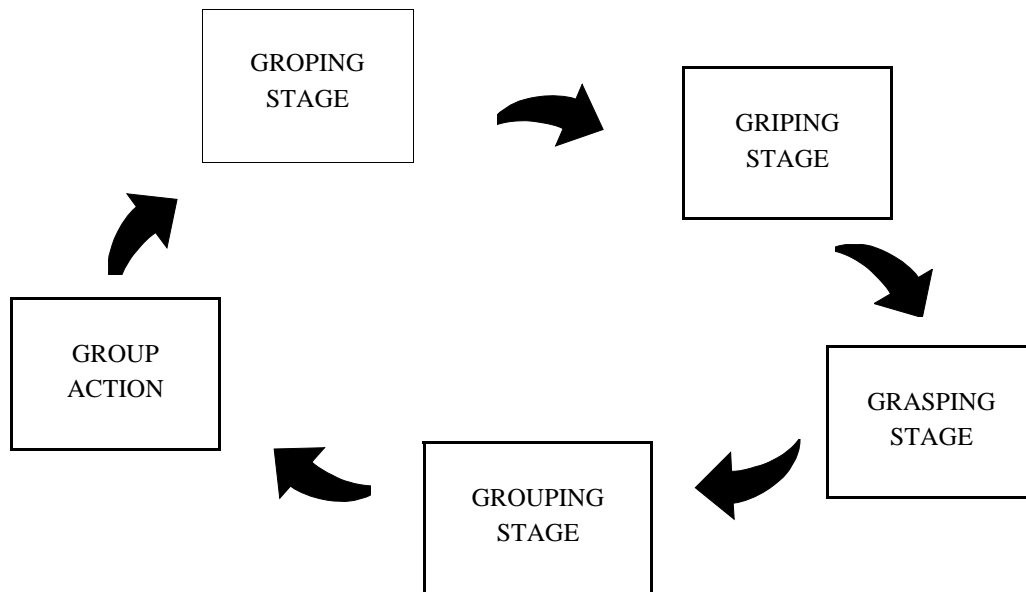
It helps to know that these are natural "growing pains" of democratic groups. That these feelings between members tend to follow a predictable cycle or sequence, and that, in most cases, the group will soon become productive and efficient as people work to solve group problems.

Let's take a look at the stages in this developmental process:

1. **"Groping"** When we are first finding out how to plan and work together, we may not all agree. We do not know and understand one another well enough to really trust the group, and we still have to determine each others' skills, knowledge, personality, and attitude. So we often feel uncomfortable and "lost."
2. **"Gripping"** We get discouraged when we can't seem to work together, when there isn't much progress, and our attempts are frustrated. We say wrong things to others, play negative roles, and block group action because we are uncomfortable. This is the place for more "self-other" understanding, to remember that we are all different. We eventually learn to understand why folks are gripping and learn to give ourselves time to work things out.
3. **"Grasping"** Now ideas and suggestions are beginning to fit. We begin to agree on questions and can start to see some direction to group activity. Everyone begins to feel more comfortable now that we are getting somewhere.
4. **"Grouping"** We are really getting to know each other and can understand and enjoy how each one works and fits into the tasks to be done. Group tasks, building and maintenance roles come into play, and a surge of enthusiasm spreads through the group.
5. **"Group Action"** Now the group is in full swing. With members playing constructive roles, the leadership is shared and everyone is participating. It was difficult at first, but worth it to learn to work well together and feel this is a good group to work with. We are busy making our group more democratic.

It is important to remember that this may be a continuous cycle in any group. A group may work very successfully in the completion of one project and then find itself back at the "groping" stage when it begins a new activity. The same regression may occur when the people in a group change. A smoothly running group may be disrupted and have to retrace the stages of group growth when new people are added or "old timers" are missing. Each time it can be less disturbing and the group becomes more effective.

The following is a picture of the stages that people experience as they work at problems they all want to solve. Although pictured as separate steps, there will be considerable overlapping as a group moves from one stage to another.



It is important that we recognize *how* we feel about each other in the many groups to which we belong, to know that these feelings are *natural* whenever we really tackle important jobs, and to realize that each group can move ahead toward better relations between members. As we get to know each member better, "the group" gradually becomes "our group" because we have shared plans and work, and have tried to practice ways of behaving which are cooperative, considerate, and friendly.

Understanding that the "stages of group growth" is a normal process may not make your job as a leader easier, but it should ease some of the frustrations you may feel as a leader or member of a group.