WILLIAM & MARY

CONFLICT RESOLUTION & EDUCATION

The Student Organization Conflict Toolkit

Introduction

Conflict is not all bad – at its core, conflict shows that something is not working and invites you to consider new ways to help your organization and the people in it thrive. However, conflict can quickly escalate, eat up time and energy, and damage the health of your group. Knowing about and planning for common sources of conflict can help you avoid unnecessarily draining and de-railing conflicts in your org.

Table of Contents

Preventing Conflict..... page 2

Addressing Conflict..... page 4

Before the Conversation..... page 4

During the Conversation..... page 7

FAQs..... page 9

Preventing Conflict

Good organizational practices can help avert potential conflict by addressing some common root causes.

Be clear and specific about membership expectations

Unmet and unspoken expectations are a major source of org conflict – people can't uphold what they don't know. Have membership expectations written somewhere and easily accessible for reference (they may already be in your constitution and/or bylaws, but people don't always read those!). Talk about these explicitly in meetings and in written communication. Past leadership can shed light on what expectations have historically been frustrating and would benefit from clearer upfront communication.

Consider issues like:

- Attendance requirements, mandatory events, member responsibilities at events
- Are members expected to communicate when they cannot attend a meeting? If so, how and when?
- How will conflict or disagreements be handled? How will more serious member concerns be handled? [see A Good & Fair process resource for specifics]

Develop group norms collaboratively

Norms describe the way a group works together and treats each other. Norms work well for committees or groups who meet regularly, or with specific people you work with a lot. When groups create norms together, it makes the implicit explicit and creates group buy-in to uphold them.

Discuss questions like:

- What do you need from others in the group to thrive in your role/the group? What can you offer to others to help them thrive?
- What are things that we can do to demonstrate respect to one another?
- How do you prefer to communicate about your role?
- How do you want to be approached when someone has an issue to bring up?

Sample group norms for meetings can be found here.

Plan intentional & equitable meetings

Setting up a good meeting takes more than just finding a time that works for everyone (though that's already hard enough). When you meet, consider:

- Purpose
    - This guides all other decisions you make about your meeting – the space, the timing, the agenda or structure, etc. A purposeless meeting feels frustrating. If you can't articulate a purpose, it could be a sign that you need to think more deeply, or don't need to meet!
- Structure
    - A meeting to bond vs. one to plan vs. one to brainstorm all have different structure needs. Plan for what you want to do and how you want to do it.
- Voices
    - Who you hear from matters. You want your space to invite everyone to both share and listen and avoid being overly influenced by the loudest voices.
- Advance notice
    - Give people advance notice when you want them to do deep thinking OR you want to prepare them for a sensitive or difficult subject.

For ideas for good meetings, see guide here.

Communicate in-person

Emails and groupchats are great, but using them to communicate about tense, difficult, or emotional topics breeds misunderstanding and conflict. Communication is not just what you *say*; it's ensuring that someone knows what you *mean,* which requires more than just words. Without tone and body language, it's easy to misunderstand what someone truly wants to communicate. It's especially important to communicate in-person when:

- Delivering difficult or unwelcome news
- Discussing an area of disagreement
- Addressing a concern or complaint

When delivering news or a decision that you want documented, whenever possible, have an in-person conversation that is followed up by an email or written text (not the other way around). If you're concerned about being in-person with someone, have another mutual friend present, speak on Zoom or FaceTime, or request a CRE facilitator.

Resolve early

Not all small conflicts become big, but all big conflicts were once small. We often default to not addressing things out of fear of making it worse, but when we let real issues slide, it makes it more emotionally charged when we eventually must bring it up. So when should you let something go vs. bring it up?

The "should-I-say-something-test":

1. Does the issue keep coming up?
    a. Look for a *pattern*. We all mess up sometimes and usually feel embarrassed or upset about it. Coming down on someone for a one-time thing may be an overreaction that causes more tension.

2. When you give yourself three days to cool off, are you still bothered by it?
    a. Look for the *impact*. In the heat of the moment, everything feels like a big deal. After three days, are you still upset with them? Is what they did/said causing harm to others? Does it impact the group's ability to carry out its goals? Is it a significant violation of the group's norms or bylaws?

If you answer "yes" to either question, it's usually a good idea to have a conversation. Your governing documents should outline a good and fair process for dealing with more significant member concerns [link].

Addressing Conflict

Conflict is a normal and inevitable part of working with people. How we choose to navigate it can make it helpful instead of harmful.

Before the Conversation: Reflect & Prepare

When an issue weighs on us, when we're upset and stressed, when members of your org are calling for action, it's easy to succumb to the pressure to have an in-the-moment conversation or make a quick decision to try to fix things.

While it's wise to resolve conflict in a timely manner, rushing in means you're likely reacting instead of responding. Give yourself some time to plan so that the conversation is focused and productive for everyone.

Reflect

Process Emotions

"Feelings are too powerful to remain peacefully bottled. They will be heard one way or another, whether in leaks or bursts. And if handled indirectly or without honesty, they contaminate communication." - Difficult Conversations

Good conflict includes space to process our emotions before we engage others. **Emotional processing is what gives us the mental flexibility and openness to do the work of good conflict outlined in all the steps below.** Feeling frustrated or anxious causes us to speed up conflict, which tends to intensify conflict, not diffuse it. Identifying our emotions to ourselves and to others in conversation helps minimize the unintended, negative impact that those feelings have when they are strong and unexpressed.

Processing emotions for conflict involves:

- Identifying your emotions
    - While this sounds simple, it can be difficult to do! We all have feelings that we tend to suppress or shame, we may feel overwhelmed by our emotional response, or we may not be familiar with our emotional world.
    - Use a feelings list or wheel to help put words to feelings. [link]

- Negotiating with your emotions
    - Our emotions are shaped by how we think about a situation. Consider that narrative that you have about the situation, what assumptions you are making, and what other possibilities exist.
    - Recognize where your emotions might be coming out as blame, judgment, or characterizations about the other person.
        - For example, "He's so inconsiderate" isn't an emotion, but indicates potential feelings of hurt, sadness, frustration, etc.

Find the Benefits

Usually, when contemplating conflict, we are flooded with the "what ifs" of how things could get worse, doing the wrong thing, losing the relationship, and more. We need to be dissatisfied with the known discomfort of the conflict in order to move into unknown discomfort of the resolution.

Consider:

- What will you gain by engaging?

    - How does this help you? The other person? The group?
- What are the costs of not dealing with or resolving?
    - Who will bear those costs?
    - What other potential problems could that cause?
- How have difficult conversations benefited you in the past?
    - Is there a difficult conversation that sucked in the moment but that you're grateful for now?

Prepare

Choose curiosity

In conflict, everyone needs to learn information from each other to resolve well. We need to get curious about people, situations, needs, and motives, not stay stuck in our assumptions and interpretations. We hear our own perspective and live our experience the most, so it's hard to remember and hold space for learning new information. Think of yourself as an explorer of the other person's experience.

The goal of seeking information is not to agree, it is to understand. While new information does not change our experience or someone's impact on us, it gives us greater understanding, which leads to better resolution.

Think through:

- What do I know?
- What do I not know? What would I like to better understand about this person, the circumstances, etc.?
- Whose perspective have I heard? Whose perspective have I not heard?
- How might the other person describe the situation? What values or needs might be important to them?

Think through the contribution system

Most conflicts are co-created, often unintentionally, as we react to one another and the world around us. Instead of focusing on fault or blame, which raises defensiveness, focus on contributors to the situation, which acknowledges complexity and creates the safety needed for real accountability. When the role of all people, circumstances, and systems are acknowledged, taking responsibility for your part is normal, not shameful.

Thinking about the contribution system means considering your contributions, the contributions of other people, as well as systemic or circumstantial contributors (policies, culture, power, etc.).

- Who and/or what has contributed to the problem? How have they contributed?
- What is their ability and responsibility to contribute to resolution?

Identify shared problems and collaborative goals

It's easy to view the other person in the conflict as the problem. Good conflict comes from separating problems from people. When you can identify a shared problem, it moves you and the other person from being against one another, to being co-problem solvers who are united against a common problem.

For instance, if you are talking to a member about their disruptive behavior in meetings, some potential shared problems or goals could be: having productive/inclusive/enjoyable meetings, furthering the goals of your org, the person contributing meaningfully to the group, etc. That makes for a different conversation than if you approach it just wanting to get them to stop doing something annoying.

Questions to consider as you create goals for a conversation:

- Do my goals seek good for the other person, or seek to punish them for something?
- Do my goals reflect flexibility to change as I learn about the other person's experience?
- Do my goals treat the other person as the problem, or do they identify an issue that we both see and could address?

During the Conversation

Lead with questions to explore their story

Questions help people experience your desire to understand. Brainstorm open, non-leading, non-judgmental questions in advance that will help you learn more information. Want to ask a direct question but not sure how to make it not feel gas-light-y? Start the question with a phrase like "I'm curious about…" or "Help me understand…". Ask genuine questions and focus on listening, not coming up with your responses. Reflect back what you learn to check for understanding. Acknowledge their emotions and perspective.

Describe & acknowledge emotions

Use your emotional language to describe your emotions, not the other person. Take the judgments, blame, and attributions you have out of these statements and focus on your emotional experience. An easy way to do this is to start sentences with "I feel…". When others share their emotions, acknowledge that these matter to you and refrain from evaluating them (ex: telling people that they are overreacting, too sensitive, not sensitive enough).

Share impact, ask about intent

One of the most common assumptions we make in conflict is about other people's (bad) intentions. In reality, intent is invisible – we only know it when someone shares it with us. When we address conflict by leading with someone's ill intention, this naturally raises people's defenses and focuses them on defending their (good) intentions, rather than hearing and responding to your experience.

Instead, focus on talking about the impact of their actions and invite them to clarify their intentions. A good intention doesn't negate a harmful impact, but this distinction helps make the conversation more productive and leads to greater understanding to repair the relationship and avoid similar conflicts in the future.

Assuming Intent: You don't trust me enough to let me do my role.

Sharing Impact: When you check in so frequently with me about how the event planning is going, I feel annoyed. I feel less confident in my work and start second guessing myself. It communicates that you don't trust me to do a good job.

Raise shared problems and problem-solve

Most often, everyone in conflict comes in with an idea of what they want to happen next. Resist the urge to lead with this. Talk about the contributions and shared problems you thought of when preparing and prepare to add to or change these as you learn new information. Re-frame personalized problems to be shared issues, and brainstorm together options that involve action from everyone (as appropriate). Even in accountability conversations, consider how you or others can provide support to someone to make different decisions or right a wrong.

A common obstacle to resolution is when someone has a one strong idea of what needs to be done to resolve. Sometimes, this is not a fair, mutually agreeable, or even possible solution. In these cases, get beneath the surface – what is the deeper need this solution

meets? Find a positive need that you can validate and discuss other options to meet it. As appropriate, share the obstacles to a desired outcome and invite the other person to problem-solve those obstacles.

Over-communicate care

Conflict is tough for everyone. Verbalize your care and desire for good for the other person, to help move out of the "me vs. you" mindset and affirm the safety of the relationship amidst conflict (particularly for good friends). Share the benefits you reflected on in a way that connects with what matters to the other person. You don't have to be close with the other person (or even like them very much) to express basic care for their wellbeing.

Create space for continued emotional regulation

Even with good reflection and emotional preparation, a conversation can bring up strong emotions. Be mindful of when this could and does happen. Take deep breaths, ask for breaks, or even to stop and continue at a different time.

This is especially important when someone brings up an issue to you unexpectedly and wants to talk right away. The other person has had time to consider what they want to say, while you have not. Ask for time to think about what they've shared so you can respond more thoughtfully and set a follow-up time in the moment, to prevent the temptation to avoid dealing with it.

For more planning resources, check out the Conflict Conversations worksheet.

FAQs

I know we're not supposed to treat people like the problem…but what if this person really *is* the problem?

It's not that people are never problems – it's that treating them like problems is *never* the most helpful way to approach a situation. This raises defensiveness, emotionality, combativeness, and aggression, and lowers trust, flexibility, and openness.

You only have control over how you handle a situation – not the other person. There are situations in which you cannot be collaborative in resolving conflict because the other

person won't go there. However, we're usually too quick to write people off as unwilling and fail to see that how we treat them may be part of why they won't work with us. Lean into being humble, curious, direct, and kind with them. Over-communicate your care and desire to support them as a part of addressing an issue. It may take more than one conversation for them to trust your intentions and start to engage differently.

Sometimes, it may be your position that makes it difficult for them to respond to you differently – you may be part of the conflict or seen as biased. In these cases, CRE can help as uninvolved third parties, with coaching, facilitation, or mediation, to improve communication.

This all seems good, but most of our conflict happens between members, so we don't have much control over how it gets handled.

As a leader, you can still influence how conflict is handled, even if it isn't directly with you. Lead the group in setting norms to encourage proactive communication from your members about their needs and agree together on how issues will be navigated. Intentionally coach members as they navigate challenges with one another, don't assume they know how to have good conflict. Avoid taking sides when people come to you and focus on helping them communicate more effectively with one another.

A lot of this advice requires extra time, and I'm in a conflict situation that needs an immediate response. What should I do?

Differentiate between crisis and conflict – crises require in the moment action to avoid imminent or escalating harm, while conflict deals more in systemic, interpersonal, or complex issues. A crisis response can involve temporary measures that help create the time needed to deal with the issues raised more effectively.

Slowing down almost always feels bad (and may lead to accusations from others that you don't care, aren't taking a concern seriously, etc.), but it's good for conflict – it moves you and others out of reacting and provides the needed space to be thoughtful and responsive. Avoid making decisions in crisis that cannot be changed or that deal with issues without taking time to hear from people involved, consider options, access help, etc.

How do you handle conflicts that should be kept private, but everyone in the group knows about?

This is always a tough one in orgs. Here are some best practices:

- Keep discussions limited to those most involved with/impacted by an issue and a small number of people who can support resolution. Establish a small number of trusted co-leaders who are supporting resolution.

- Maintain privacy, even when you know that other people know things. When people in an org are talking, it's easy for them to feel entitled to information. Distinguish between what people need to know and what they want to know.

- Decide how you will respond to people who ask for more information. A simple, "We're choosing not to share more information about the situation with people right now, in order to best support the people involved" is often sufficient. Communicate this language to leaders who may get questions so everyone is on the same page.

- Communicate publicly about conflict on a need-to-know basis
    - When something happens publicly between specific people, it's appropriate to acknowledge it publicly and resolve it privately.
        - Example: If two members have had a heated exchange on the groupchat, it may be appropriate to let the group know, "We're aware of what's been happening in the chat and we're working with them to sort it out," or send a message (from leadership or members involved) indicating that they have addressed the issue.

    - When something happens privately but impacts the group, consider what the group needs to know, not what they want to know. Organizations are not responsible for commenting on or adjudicating membership behavior generally but should be involved only when the concern impacts the healthy function of the org. Tell directly involved parties about any large group communication before it happens.

    - Center resolution on the people who are most directly involved/impacted. While a conflict may happen in the context of your group, it doesn't necessarily mean that the org itself needs to respond or be involved. It may be an interpersonal issue that is best worked out between the individuals themselves.

    - For bigger conflicts involving many people, it may be appropriate to use resolution processes that allow broader participation. Circles and facilitated conversations give conversations structure, so they stay productive and focus on resolution, rather than becoming a venue to air grievances. CRE can help plan or facilitate these.

- For example, if a friend group issue has spilled into the org, it may be helpful to have the friends meet to address the issues, and/or have them meet with others in the group to talk through the impact and next steps.

What if my org conflict involves a Title IX (sexual misconduct) or Title VI (discrimination & harassment) concern?

All concerns involving allegations of sexual misconduct or discrimination/harassment based on protected class should be reported to the Office of Compliance & Equity. Orgs do not have the authority to run investigations, make judgments, or come to conclusions about facts of a Title Vi or IX allegation but should report these to OCE. Orgs should not make final determinations about membership status until university processes have concluded.