



# Resolving Community Conflict

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As the human race becomes more interdependent, our very survival increasingly depends on our ability to relate to each other. Nowhere is that need more evident than in the global microcosms of our own communities.

Change, we know, is inevitable. Even to the enlightened, it can be threatening. In the process of change, conflict is a natural, expected and healthy component. Occurring within groups and between/among individuals, conflict is a normal expression of human behavior. While conflict can be painful, it gets people involved. It is one of the ways in which people and communities grow.

Wherever people live and work together, conflict (social tension) exists. Its cause may be nothing more than a misunderstanding or personality clash. Or the source of conflict may reflect a more serious weakness in the community's social structure. No matter what the cause, conflict can be disruptive to life in our communities.

It is important to understand that conflict is not inherently good or bad, despite the fact that the presence of conflict frequently elicits negative responses and expectations. The problem for each of us is learning how to respond to and handle conflict creatively, so that we can resolve our differences.

As community leaders working with and for change, we need to learn how to bring conflict out in the open and deal with it productively, so it can become an integral part of the change process.

It is our reaction to conflict that shapes its outcome.

Our power to influence the lives of others and the community around us is only as great as our ability to communicate effectively. We can do so by using appropriate assessment tools and communication skills.

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### A definition of conflict

What is conflict? Every person characterizes conflict in a different manner. Some of the words commonly used to describe conflict are:

- Anger
- Disagree
- Anxiety
- Attack
- Organize
- Frustration
- Argue
- Emotional
- Win/Lose
- Communication
- Power
- Clash
- Threat
- Sabotage
- Consensus
- Challenge
- Stress
- Confront
- Rebel
- Resolution

### Interpersonal and Intrapersonal

The first observation that can be made about conflict is that it occurs either within a person (intrapersonal) or between two or more people (interpersonal). Community conflict is most often interpersonal, due to the large diversity in viewpoints, backgrounds and experiences of community members. In a community context, it is often impossible to exchange ideas or propose solutions without having a difference of opinion between people. Rather than spending time trying to avoid conflict, use the conflict that occurs naturally to promote new ideas or clarify community values.

### Levels of Conflict

Conflict also arises with different levels of intensity. Disagreement or anger is often indicative of low-level conflict. Mid-range conflict may occur when there is not attempt made to deal with the conflict. As a result, individuals involved initially feel stressed or anxious. Eventually emotions build to produce threats or arguments between parties. Unresolved high level conflict can be very destructive. As the conflict grows, some people resort to attacks on others in order to “win the battle.” Others will attack silently by attempting to sabotage events rather than confront the person directly.

### Conflict Can Be Positive

One of the most common myths about conflict is that it is always a negative experience. In fact, conflict can bring about very positive results. If all parties understand that conflict is a normal part of the process of creating solutions, then incidences of heated disagreement are not seen as threatening or intimidating; rather they are considered normal communication practices. This open-minded area allows people to express opinions that may not be popular, but are needed in order to reach a solution that is fair and agreeable to all involved.

-----2008 Farmer Mentor Handbook-----

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### Conflict Response Styles

Once you have identified the sources and causes of conflict, it is helpful to look at how you typically react to conflict.

There are four basic conflict response styles:

1. Avoider: "Don't call me; I'll call you."

This style can work well when the conflict is over something unimportant, or when a cooling-off period is needed. (However, continued avoidance or denial of the conflict usually leads to frustration, and even sabotage or revenge.)

2. Confronter: "We need to deal with this here and now."

In this response, one person assumes power over another, usually entering with a win/lose attitude. If the parties never get a chance to express their needs and feelings, this style doesn't work. (In certain situations, power can be a useful intervention; if the relationship is unequal, or if parties treat conflict very differently, or if a speedy resolution is vital.)

3. Peacekeeper: "Let's try to get along."

In this style, parties involved in conflict may suppress the issue or delay the situation, in order to "get along." Any peace is usually temporary and does not address (and may even confuse) the cause of conflict. If one of the parties is ready to deal with the problem, this style can result in confusion about the issues and low satisfaction. (It can work well if the relationship is more important than the issue in conflict, and if all parties take turns accommodating each other.)

4. Negotiator: "Let's reason together."

This style appeals to fairness. In this approach, those involved work toward consensus or a win-win solution, clarifying issues and considering multiple options. Negotiation takes a lot of time, and usually results in a high level of satisfaction for all parties. (This style won't help if the parties don't believe in negotiating, or are unwaveringly attached to a position so that there's no chance for a shared goal.)

Remember, there is no one "correct" conflict management style. Each is an available "tool" in your conflict tool kit. Depending on the situation, you may find it helpful to use all four response styles. The key is to identify and use the most appropriate style(s) and strategy for each conflict situation with which you may be faced.

\*Adapted from "Managing Community Conflict" a 1995 publication from the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, Lincoln, Nebraska