



Coping with Conflict

What is a conflict?

When two or more parties, with perceived incompatible [goals](#), seek to undermine each other's goal-seeking capability.

Types and Modes of Conflict

A conceptual conflict can escalate into a verbal exchange and/or result in fighting.

Conflict can exist at a variety of levels of analysis:

- intrapersonal conflict
- interpersonal conflict
- intragroup conflict
- intergroup conflict
- intra-state conflict
- international conflict

Parties can conceptualize responses to conflict according to a two-dimensional scheme; concern for one's own outcomes and concern for the outcomes of the other party. This scheme leads to the following hypotheses:

- High concern for both one's own and the other party's outcomes leads to attempts to find mutually beneficial solutions.
- High concern for one's own outcomes only leads to attempts to win the conflict.
- High concern for the other party's outcomes only leads to allowing the other to win the conflict.
- No concern for either side's outcomes leads to attempts to avoid the conflict.

In a positive sense, conflict can be a/an:

- Time of growth for the parties involved.
- Time in which problems can be solved creatively by looking together at a variety of alternatives.
- Time for us to increase our knowledge of one another.
- Chance to reveal our unique ways of thinking, acting, and feeling.
- Chance to show understanding, respect, and acceptance of the unique ways in which others think, act, and feel.
- Opportunity to clarify and define the rules of interaction in an attempt to strengthen our relationships.
- Process by which feelings ultimately can be aired openly and freely.
- Breath of fresh air in a stagnating relationship.
- Moment of honesty, and clarity which can result in a lifetime of improved communication.
- Opportunity to draw close to one another in intimate self-disclosure.

- Challenge to growth.
- Chance to problem solve; thus, creating a more productive environment.
- Time to talk and communicate openly and honestly, reducing hostility, anger, or misunderstanding in relationships.
- Time to clarify our expectations of others; a time to modify existing rules or sanctions based on our expectations.

Why should conflict be resolved?

In your personal and professional arena, the ability to think critically and resolve conflicts, both big and small, is a key to success. Coping with conflict is important because it gives student leaders a starting point to help them address tensions and potential harm, ensure safety and comfort, and create constructive dialogue.

What behaviors help in managing conflict?

- Use “I” statements. Let the other party know how you feel when the conflict is occurring. Let the other person know how you react to the conflict. Let the other person know which of your rights you feel is being ignored in the conflict. When you do _____ I feel _____ (fill in the blank)
- Be assertive, not aggressive. Speak about your feelings and your reactions. Keep the statements focused on how you are behaving, thinking, and feeling rather than on how the other is acting.
- Speak calmly, coolly and rationally. In this way you will be listened to, and you will be able to maintain better control of yourself. Otherwise the other person may be put in a defensive attitude.
- Avoid blaming. This will keep the communication flow going. It encourages understanding and empathy for each other’s feelings. It recognizes that for a conflict to exist there must be at least two parties who are adversely affected by the conflict.
- Create an atmosphere of healing. In an attempt to heal the wounds resulting from a conflict, all parties involved must feel that they are being listened to and understood; that their rights are being respected. They must feel the desire to work things out and a commitment to the process of working out the problems. They must feel wanted and cared for by the parties involved.
- Be willing to forgive. Forgiveness is a powerful tool of healing. You have a chance for personal growth by forgiving others for their part in the hurt and pain you suffered. At times, this is the only way to resolve a conflict.
- Be honest. In resolving a conflict it is imperative that you be honest with yourself and others about your feelings, and reactions to the conflict and to the resolutions. If you are feeling in a way you think you must, or in a way the others wants you to, then the resolution of the conflict is a false one. The conflict is sure to recur. You gain nothing by being dishonest in the management of conflict. You waste your time and energy and end up feeling failure or guilt rather than growth.
- Show respect for yourself and for others. You will gain more in resolving a conflict by showing respect (honey), than by showing disrespect (vinegar), e.g., being vindictive, taking revenge, threatening, yelling, accusing, belittling, ostracizing, ignoring. If you are on the receiving end of disrespect, remove

yourself as soon as possible. When the other has cooled down, perhaps the discussion can be continued in a respectful manner. If you lose your “cool” and become disrespectful, stop as soon as you can by either removing yourself or by silencing yourself. Maintaining a respectful atmosphere is essential in resolving conflict.

- Be willing to apologize or admit a mistake. It is necessary to admit to one’s mistake and to apologize for one’s behavior before a stalemate in conflict resolution can be overcome. It takes courage, character, and fortitude to admit an error: a lack of judgment; an uncalled for action; disrespectful behavior; or a lack of caring, concern, or understanding. Stronger relationships can result when such willingness is exhibited.
- Be willing to collaborate. If you cling to your position as the only one to be considered, you are closing out the other person(s). To succeed in resolving conflict, all parties must feel like they have gained in the resolution. In order to resolve a conflict where the opposing parties are at opposite extremes on an issue, there is a need to come to the middle if all are to experience a winning posture. Only through compromise can each be a winner in conflict resolution. Without collaboration, you have either given in, or have gotten your own way with the other party having lost. Ideally, all parties should feel that they have won.

How to handle conflict?

- Determine if a conflict exists. If you sense a conflict, answer the following questions in a journal/ or note paper:
 - What is the content (or issues) involved in the conflict?
 - Who are the parties in this conflict?
 - When does the conflict manifest itself? For how long?
 - Under what circumstances is this a conflict?
 - What are the hidden issues, those below the surface, in this conflict?
 - What is the worst possible consequence if this conflict is:
 - (1) never addressed?
 - (2) addressed and not resolved?
 - (3) addressed and I give in?
 - (4) addressed and the other gives in?
 - (5) addressed and we both win?
 - What are my feelings when facing this conflict?
 - How does this conflict fit into my belief system about myself?
 - What does this conflict say about the personality of the people involved?
 - What is the conflict really about? (i.e. fear, pride, money)
- Begin to problem solve in your mind. Write out alternative resolutions to the conflict.
- Narrow down the alternatives until you come to the top priority resolution in your mind:
 - Respecting the rights of all parties.
 - Will the resolution ultimately have all parties feeling like winners?

- Will the resolution allow a healing process to begin, with no one being blamed?
- Will the resolution result in better understanding by all parties with all feelings being respected.
- All parties closely examine the top resolutions. Jointly analyze the options. Spend time discussing them, then use a joint problem solving
- Once a jointly owned conflict resolution is decided upon, the parties set an implementation time and an evaluation procedure to determine if the resolution is successful in averting similar conflict(s). They commit to implement the resolution and set a specific date to meet and review the resolution.

Other options in coping with conflict:

Work with Faculty and Staff

Various faculty and staff are in the appropriate position to assist students who are dealing with a conflict. They not only have experience with such issues but have resources and authorities that students don't have to appropriately address the controversy as well. Since faculty and staff and students usually strive toward the same goals during a controversy, faculty and staff can help students develop a plan of action.

Engage in a dialogue with the campus community

A common goal in plans of action that address controversy is the engagement of dialogue that the entire campus community is invited to participate in. Dialogues can vary in format from town-hall meetings to small-group discussions to written editorials pieces. Regardless of the form it takes, a dialogue should focus on learning the feelings and opinions that everyone has. All feelings and opinions are welcome. Those that are unpopular shouldn't be silenced because they are important in developing a solution.