

Guidelines for Effective Conflict Resolution

Effective conflict resolution means being able to use differences in ways that strengthen rather than divide. Seek principled and productive use of conflict to build healthy relationships and make effective decisions. You should prepare for conflict in three ways:

- A. Preventing unnecessary conflict - by building strong relationships within and outside of any working group or community, based upon clear and shared understanding of roles, purposes, and meeting processes, so that destructive conflict is less likely to occur;
- B. Preparing for conflict - by anticipating that differences will occur, and devising legitimate ground rules and processes for handling such differences when they come up; and,
- C. Transforming conflict - by developing the capacity (shared knowledge, skills, and commitment) to resolve conflict as it occurs.

A. Preventing Unnecessary Conflict

Four elements are fundamental for collaboration and building consensus:

1. Develop clear purposes and goals;
2. Ensure appropriate representation and understanding of roles;
3. Design and conduct effective meetings; and,
4. Build consensus for public decisions and public work.

B. Preparing for Conflict

Healthy groups prepare in advance the ways in which they will address conflict. Taking time to develop shared expectations for ways in which you will make conflict productive will ensure that you are not wasting time fighting one another unnecessarily. The key steps in developing a covenant (a statement of your group's aspirations and ground rules) follow:

1. Establish the need for a group covenant;
2. Educate and inspire;
3. Begin with a vision for the group's highest aspirations for working together;
4. Articulate specific behaviors to support those aspirations;
5. Promote full participation;
6. Be accountable;
7. Evaluate and revise.

While conflict can be hard, everyone can improve their ability to handle conflict. Ways that individuals can develop their own skills include:

- Come to meetings prepared to listen and learn;
- Take training in conflict mediation;
- Bring in an outside facilitator or mediator to train your group;
- Ask for opportunities to observe a mediator or facilitator at work.

C. Transforming conflict

By effectively addressing emotions and engaging in principled negotiation, any group will be able to make conflict productive rather than destructive. Principled negotiation includes the following components:

1. Focus on interests, not positions;
2. Separate people from the problem;
3. Invent options for mutual gain;
4. Develop objective criteria.