

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc.
Affiliate Chapter Relations Committee

Affiliate Chapter Handbook
Third Edition
Section 5

Tools and Strategies for Conflict Management:
I'm Okay, You're Okay – How to be Different Together

© Copyright 2006, 2004, 2003 Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.
Written/Compiled by the Affiliate Chapter Relations Committee, 2001-2007.

Tools and Strategies for Conflict Management

By Paula Gajewski Mickelson

Conflict happens. It happens any time two or more people come together with differing thoughts, ideas, life experiences, world-views and/or approaches to the world at hand. It is also experienced anytime incompatible activities occur – that is when one activity blocks, prevents or interferes with the completion of another activity. Such incompatible activities may originate with one person, between two or more people, or between two or more groups. Conflict, and the resulting consequences, can be as serious as that which is seen during a war, or as “seemingly” trivial as that which occurs when answering the age old question: should you put the toothpaste on your brush by squeezing the tube in the middle, or by rolling the end of the tube?

In our culture here in the United States, conflict generally is something to be avoided. When thinking of the term, few people identify positive attributes or benefits of conflict. In fact, when looking in Webster’s dictionary for the definition of conflict, words like “antagonistic”, “incompatible” and “sharp disagreement” are only a few that are listed. It is clearly not a term that generates warm and comforting feelings.

Just like there is good cholesterol and bad cholesterol, there is also a positive side to conflict. There is, in fact, research that has demonstrated that groups which embrace a conflict of ideas in problem-solving activities produce more creative solutions, and that members of groups which successfully resolve conflict and produce creative solutions are more satisfied with the group's decisions. It has also been shown that groups engaging in conflict in problem-solving dig into a problem, raise issues, and settle them in ways that demonstrate the value of a wide range of ideas, a high degree of involvement in the group's decisions, and a high degree of commitment to those decisions. In groups that are effective in solution-building/problem-solving, conflict retains its substantive quality without degenerating into a power-struggle or an "us-them" / "I'm right, you're wrong" kind of dynamic. (DHS Diversity Training: “Improving Our Business Practices”, 1997)

David Johnson, the author of several books and articles on group theory and skills says, “It is not the presence of conflict which causes chaos and disaster, but the harmful and ineffective way in which it was managed.”

When considering this notion of managing conflict, timing is crucial. The best time to manage a conflict is **before** it occurs. It is extremely difficult to manage a conflict, particularly in a respectful manner, when the people engaged in the conflict are in the heat of the moment. It is much better to discuss the management when people are calm, clear headed, and rational.

One of the most effective tools in managing conflict is establishing a set of “Group Norms”, which are sometimes known as “Ground Rules”. The reason for setting the ground rules is

to establish an environment that is comfortable, “safe” and respectful of people’s differences so that they can most effectively work together. When people have discussed and agreed on how they will “be” with each other in a group, and specifically, how they will deal with conflict when it occurs, they are much more apt to work together more effectively and respectfully.

Some general guidelines for establishing group norms include:

- “When” to engage in the conflict must be chosen and agreed upon by group members.
- Goal: produce a successful and productive solution – it is NOT about winners and losers.
- Everyone’s contributions are received respectfully and valued equally.
- Members are critical of ideas, not of people who express them.
- All views are brought out and explored before new, creative solutions are sought.
- As much as possible, situational power must be balanced to promote free and honest exchange of ideas.
- Incentives for finding a creative resolution must be defined.

(Johnson & Johnson, 1991)

When establishing ground rules with a group, there are three key questions you will want to explore together:

- How will we, as a group, communicate with each other?
- How will we, as a group, relate to each other?
- How will we, as a group, manage disagreement and conflict?

Notice the phrase “as a group” is used in each question. This is to help people in the group understand that *the group*, and each individual in the group, has a responsibility to establish the ground rules, and then enforce and follow them. There is a level of accountability that occurs when you develop and agree upon these rules as an entire body. It is also understood that it is not the lone responsibility of the board chair, or the president, to enforce these rules – everyone has a shared responsibility to make sure the group as a whole maintains the tone that is set with the ground rules.

Once the group has established the ground rules, it is important that the group agrees to support and follow them. Do not assume that silence is agreement. It is very important to ask the group questions like “Are these ground rules acceptable to you?” or “In this group, can you live with these ground rules?”

Once the rules are established, each time the group convenes, the first order of business should be to revisit them. Not only does this serve as a good reminder, but it also allows for

people to modify, change, add or delete rules. This is especially important as the group works together over a period of time and begins to develop as a team. When each meeting begins, read the list of ground rules aloud. When finished, ask the group “Are there any additions or changes needed for these rules? If not, are they acceptable to you? Can you live with these?” Everyone needs to be able to answer “yes” before moving on.

The key to effectively using ground rules as a tool for conflict management is in the revisiting of the rules each time the group convenes. If a person is absent, or a new person is added to the group, it becomes a new group. Because of this, it is crucial that the rules be reviewed together on a regular basis.

The list of ground rules for a group should not be lengthy. Address issues in a succinct fashion by listing phrases or short sentences. Some examples that might be helpful to get you started include:

How will we, as a group, communicate with each other?

- Take turns
- Raise hands
- Sign or speak, or both? (work with the interpreter?)
- Take responsibility for our comments by making “I” statements
- Search for meaning
- Search for clarity
- Paraphrase, repeat for understanding
- Open, honest, accurate and complete communication is expected

How will we, as a group, relate to each other?

- Keep side comments to a minimum
- Pagers off; cell phones off
- Respectful listening
- Laugh, have fun
- Reality check**
- Everyone participates
- Future focus
- We are all accountable for this process and our team’s outcome
- We will expect mistakes; that’s okay

How will we, as a group, manage disagreement and conflict?

- Challenge the issue, not the person
- Agree to disagree
- Consensus seeking – “I may not like this, but can I live with it?”
- Identify our needs for time and space
- Identify a time and space for discussing a resolution

- Ask for help if we cannot resolve the issue ourselves (mediator)

** The reality check has proven to be a useful ground rule if you suspect keeping the discussion focused on one topic at a time might be difficult. The concept behind this is that in a discussion, anyone in the group can call a “reality check” if they do not see the relevance of the discussion to the topic at hand. Once “reality check” is stated, the group must stop the discussion and clarify how the discussion is related to the original topic. If it cannot be explained clearly, the group must hold that discussion for a later time, and get back to the original issue. This ground rule was a lifesaver for a board of directors that had a tendency to talk “off point”, which resulted in all-day board meetings. The meeting times were cut in half, due in part, to the “reality check.”

If you establish ground rules and don’t believe they are working, here are some questions to ask:

- Are we revisiting them each time we meet?
- Is there “buy in” from everybody?
- Do they need to be modified? Additions made?
- Do people understand that they are “group” norms and that each member in the group has responsibility in making these work?

Conflict is inevitable. It will happen, and if managed well, it can be the source of energy and creativity for many ideas and great activities. Ground rules, as one tool for that, can also establish a safe and welcoming environment for people of different backgrounds and experiences. While they take time to establish and maintain, you will find, in the long run, the time is well spent.

References:

Basal & Associates Business Management Supersite, Work Conflict, Work Violence and Difficult People & Customers Help Center, *Conflict management*. Retrieved April 30, 2003 from www.work911.com/conflict/index.htm

Business Fundamentals, Inc. *About business fundamentals*. Retrieved April 30, 2003 from www.businessfundamentals.com/aboutus.htm

Gish, S. (1990). *Ethics and decision making for interpreters in health care settings*. St. Paul, MN: College of St. Catherine.

Johnson, D. W. & Johnson F. P. (2002) *Joining together: Group theory and group skills*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon/Longman.

McAdam, H. & Davey, M. (1997). *Women and leadership*. Traralgon Neighbourhood Learning House and The Creative Skill Consultants. Traralgon Hall, NJ. Retrieved April 30, 2003 from www.traralgon-city.com/tnlh/women.htm

Minnesota Department of Human Services (1997). *Introduction to diversity Curriculum in Improving Our Business Practices*. St. Paul, MN; Author.