

Dealing with Conflict

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Conflict is a reality of life. Be it with students, parents, administrators, or colleagues, it is unavoidable. Improving our understanding of conflict can help us deal with it more effectively. The three most useful tools to resolve conflict are intellect, maturity, and confidence. The three most destructive tools to deal with conflict are unsubstantiated information, emotion, and defensiveness.

To deal with conflict constructively one must:

- rationalize and internalize a commitment to the issue and to resolving it;
- be ready to educate the other party; and
- acknowledge that resolving conflict is often a necessary process to achieve positive or desired outcomes.

Working within the context of these three criteria, increases the likelihood of a successful resolution to conflict.

Similarly, if the destructive tools identified above are employed in an attempt to bully, control, or to “get one’s own way”, it is appropriate to identify them as unproductive approaches, request that such tactics not be part of the discussion, and redirect the conversation to a more productive level. Members do an excellent job in such circumstances when working with students. It is important to employ the same strategies and patience in all situations.

Once the conditions to constructively address conflict are established, several strategies can be employed to reach a resolution.

Avoidance is a Viable Option When

- the issue is insignificant;
- you need to gather more information to deal with the issue; or
- time is needed to avoid emotion becoming a barrier to a solution.

Accommodation

- should not be used for major issues.
- is appropriate for immediately addressing issues where re-evaluation of the situation may be required later.
- can be an interim step towards building trust and a resolution through collaboration.
- accommodation/smoothing can lead to escalation of a conflict if used inappropriately or if it is seen as an easy alternative to avoidance.

Compromising

- an acknowledgement that a resolution addressing both parties' issues is essential;
- works where both parties are willing to accept a middle position and modify some expectations.

Competition

- will have someone win and someone lose;
- requires one person to have the authority to follow through and be prepared to have little or no co-operation from the other party; and
- should only be used after you evaluate whether such a resolution is ultimately beneficial to both parties.

Collaboration

- generally provides the most sustainable resolution supported by all parties;
- requires trust and co-operation, but not necessarily compromise; and
- focuses on information and consideration of alternatives.

Using these options can be very helpful in facilitating a balanced outcome to conflict when supported by effective communication skills. There are two primary factors - **assertiveness and co-operation** - inherent in these strategies. Your assessment of the issue itself and the response of the party with whom you are dealing will determine the proportion of assertiveness and co-operation that you choose to use in addressing the issue. Again, you want to be involved in an intellectual – not an emotional resolution.

There are no magical solutions when you are dealing with conflict. However, having the skills and a good understanding of the nature of conflict will help you to deal with it confidently. As professionals our role is to bring the best knowledge and strategies to issues to address them in a productive, respectful, and positive matter.

For more information, contact Professional Relations Staff at 416-962-3836 or 1-888-838-3836 at the provincial office.

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