# Tools For Schools ™

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## CONFLICT RESOLUTION

# Common goals override individual interests

### By Joan Richardson

The school improvement team is tussling – again – over the issue of how to create more time for teachers to meet together. One of the teachers on the team is hunkered down in one corner, quietly ignoring the discussion; other teachers are arguing for a variety of options. A parent on the team complains loudly – again – that students are being deprived of instructional time. The principal argues that one meeting day every three months is plenty of time for teachers.

How would you resolve these conflicts?

Although physical violence makes newspaper headlines, most of the conflicts in schools involve neither guns nor other weapons. Instead, the conflicts tend to swirl around values and beliefs, perceptions of who's in charge, and disagreements over how to reach decisions. Sometimes, the battles between adults are teacher versus teacher, or teachers versus principals, or educators versus the community.

What is conflict? Conflict is any disagreement between two or more parties in which one party

> **Conflict is any disagreement between two or more parties in which one party believes his, her, or their rights are deprived.**

believes his, her, or their rights are deprived, suggests Joellen Killion, a staff developer with the Adams Twelve Five Star district in Northglenn, Colorado, who frequently teaches conflict resolution workshops.

Conflict occurs when "two or more parties discover that what each wants is incompatible with what the other wants. A want that is incompatible with another is one that interferes with or in some manner hinders the achievement of, the second," writes Thomas Kayser in *Building Team Power*.

The first step in effectively resolving disputes is recognizing that conflict is a natural part of the change process, say experts in the subject. It is neither good nor bad, they say.

"Conflict is an ordinary occurrence in life. That's the number one thing that people don't understand. They think that if they're having conflicts that something is wrong. Conflict is actually a pretty good way to grow," says Judith Warner, a trainer with Aiki Works.

Kayser agrees. "If all members' approaches, perspectives, and values were the same, there would

*Conflict Resolution*

# Common goals override individual interests

be little need for group decisions at all," he writes.

Since all groups can be expected to experience conflict at one time or another, developing a strategy for dealing with disputes can guide a group through the rough patches, say the experts.

The following process is adapted from the work of Thomas Kayser, Joellen Killion, and Cindy Harrison.

### Identify the situation/question/problem as a group.

When the group defines the problem, there is a greater likelihood the entire group will understand the problem thoroughly.

With the facilitator writing on a flip chart, write down the issue. In the example above, the issue might be explained as "Establishing weekly time for teachers to meet together without sacrificing instructional time."

If the group is large, break into smaller groups and report back.

### List interests of the individuals involved.

"Interests define the problem. The basic problem lies not in conflicting positions, but in the conflict between each side's needs, desires, concerns, and fears…Such desires and needs are interests. Interests motivate people; they are the silent movers behind the hubbub of positions. Your interests are what caused you to so decide," write Roger Fisher and William Ury in *Getting to Yes*.

In the example above, what are the interests of the various parties? Assume that the teachers who are searching for more time to meet together are doing so because they're eager to discover new ways to teach. The quiet teacher may feel inadequate, even fearful, about talking with colleagues about his teaching. The parent could be concerned that increasing time for teachers to meet will mean that children will have a shorter

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school day and her schedule at home will be disrupted. The principal may fear loss of influence if teachers are allowed to meet more often.

Use the tool on Page 6 to help with this.

### Define the common interests and the common areas of difference.

Look for the interests that are in common and circle them. Ask those whose interests are not in agreement with anyone else to explain the reason for their interests. Sometimes, by talking through the interests, it's possible to identify other interests behind the stated ones and find interests that align with others that have already been identified.

### Generate possible resolutions to the problems/questions/situation.

Use a flip chart to generate a list of resolutions that will address the common interests of this group. Or have the group list each possible resolution on a strip of paper.

Identifying possible resolutions should be a creative process and can be done in smaller groups. Individuals should be encouraged to think "outside the box." At this stage, no solutions should be rejected. Report out to the larger group if small groups are used.

### Combine or collapse items that overlap or connect in obvious ways.

When the full group is assembled, the list of ideas or the strips with ideas should be posted at the front of the room.

Then, the facilitator should read through each suggested resolution and ensure that all participants understand what is being proposed.

If the strips of paper are used, participants should then group together the strips with overlapping ideas. If the flip chart is used, the facilitator should guide the discussion and create a new, shorter list of potential resolutions.

### Test the acceptability of resolutions.

Rate the items generated using a criteria matrix of the interests that are in common with others. Each individual should rate the resolutions individually then, as a small group and, finally, as a large group. The facilitator can take all responses and calculate a grand total to identify resolutions that merit further consideration.

It's best not to take the single best resolution at this point without some discussion. Typically, a new resolution – one that is a modified version of one previously identified or a combination of several – will emerge from the discussion which is given far more value by the entire group.

Resolving conflicts is really about how to get people to recognize that their interest alone is not good for the whole school, says Killion. "What makes a school a wonderful, democratic environment is that you have people who bring their individual interests and can work collaboratively to reflect what the whole community wants. It's really about self-interest versus the good of the community," she said.

Warner agrees. "Conflict resolution is not about two people walking into the sunset holding hands. It's about de-escalating the problems and having everyone feel respected and honored for their contributions."

# How I act in conflicts

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** This activity will help team members identify the attitudes they bring to team discussions. Use it in the early stages of your team development. It is not intended to be used when the team is actively engaged in trying to work through an issue.

**TIME:** 45 minutes.

**SUPPLIES:** Make one copy of this page and the scoring page for each team member.

## Directions

Proverbs state traditional wisdom. The proverbs listed below can be thought of as descriptions of some of the different strategies for resolving conflicts. Read each proverb carefully. Using the scale given below, indicate how typical each proverb is of your actions in a conflict.

5=Very typical 4=Frequently typical 3=Sometimes typical 2=Seldom typical 1= Never typical

_____ 1. It is easier to refrain than to retreat from a quarrel.

_____ 2. If you cannot make a person think as you do, make him or her do as you think.

_____ 3. Soft words win hard hearts.

_____ 4. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

_____ 5. Come now and let us reason together.

_____ 6. When two quarrel, the person who keeps silent first is the most praiseworthy.

_____ 7. Might overcomes right.

_____ 8. Smooth words make smooth ways.

_____ 9. Better half a loaf than no bread at all.

_____ 10. Truth lies in knowledge, not in majority opinion.

_____ 11. He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day.

_____ 12. He hath conquered well that hath made his enemies flee.

_____ 13. Kill your enemies with kindness.

_____ 14. A fair exchange brings no quarrel.

_____ 15. No person has the final answer but every person has a piece to contribute.

_____ 16. Stay away from people who disagree with you.

_____ 17. Fields are won by those who believe in winning.

_____ 18. Kind words are worth much more and cost little.

_____ 19. Tit for tat is fair play.

_____ 20. Only the person who is willing to give up his or her monopoly on truth can ever profit from the truths that others hold.

_____ 21. Avoid quarrelsome people as they will only make your life miserable.

_____ 22. A person who will not flee will make others flee.

_____ 23. Soft words ensure harmony.

_____ 24. One gift for another makes good friends

_____ 25. Bring your conflicts into the open and face them directly; only then will the best solution be discovered.

_____ 26. The best way of handling conflicts is to avoid them.

_____ 27. Put your foot down where you mean to stand.

_____ 28. Gentleness will triumph over anger.

_____ 29. Getting part of what you want is better than not getting anything at all.

_____ 30. Frankness, honesty, and trust will move mountains.

_____ 31. There is nothing so important you have to fight for it.

_____ 32. There are two kinds of people in the world: the winners and the losers.

_____ 33. When one hits you with a stone, hit him or her with a piece of cotton.

_____ 34. When both people give in halfway, a fair settlement is achieved.

_____ 35. By digging and digging, the truth is discovered.

## Tools For Schools

# Conflict resolution styles

Each individual has his or her own way of responding to conflict. Recognizing your personal style of confronting conflict can help you – and your group – become more effective in resolving disputes.

### WITHDRAWING

Unassertive and uncooperative. Retreats from discussion. Indifferent to the needs of others. Does not address the conflict or even acknowledge it. Usually uncomfortable with the issue or uninterested in resolution.

### FORCING

Assertive and uncooperative. Pursues his or her own goals at the expense of others.

### SMOOTHING

Unassertive and uncooperative. Opposite of competing. Minimizes differences. Neglects his or her own needs in favor of the needs of others.

### COMPROMISING

Moderately assertive and cooperative. Negotiates. Recognizes that all parties are making inflated requests and must give a little to get a little.

### PROBLEM SOLVING

Both assertive and cooperative. Confronts issues directly. Employs creative problem solving. Recognizes that the conflict is not resolved until all parties are comfortable with solution and their needs satisfied.

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# "How I act in conflicts" scoreboard

## Directions

Write your scores from Page 3 in the correct blanks. Total your scores for each column. Your natural style for dealing with conflict will be the column with the highest score.

| _____ 1. | _____ 2. | _____ 3. | _____ 4. | _____ 5. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| _____ 6. | _____ 7. | _____ 8. | _____ 9. | _____ 10. |
| _____ 11. | _____ 12. | _____ 13. | _____ 14. | _____ 15. |
| _____ 16. | _____ 17. | _____ 18. | _____ 19. | _____ 20. |
| _____ 21. | _____ 22. | _____ 23. | _____ 24. | _____ 25. |
| _____ 26. | _____ 27. | _____ 28. | _____ 29. | _____ 30. |
| _____ 31. | _____ 32. | _____ 33. | _____ 34. | _____ 35. |
| **Total** | **Total** | **Total** | **Total** | **Total** |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| **WITHDRAWING** | **FORCING** | **SMOOTHING** | **COMPROMISING** | **PROBLEM SOLVING** |

*Source: **Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills,** Sixth Edition by David W. Johnson and Frank P. Johnson. Copyright 1997, Allyn & Bacon. Reprinted with permission.*

# Checklist for resolving conflicts

## Directions

This tool can be used to aid individual team members in identifying how they can prepare for meetings. Make and distribute one copy of this page for each team member.

**Before meeting with** _____.

1. Identify my needs in this situation.
2. Determine the degree of importance I place on this situation and the relationship I have with the other party to assess my willingness to resolve this conflict.
3. Clarify the conflict situation for myself and include:
   _____ The other person's/party's needs.
   _____ A mutual perspective recognizing that the problem is a shared one.
   _____ A specific, limited focus that can be addressed.
   _____ My feelings about the other party's actions using clear "I messages."

**In meeting with the other party, I:**

4. State my willingness to work collaboratively to resolve the conflict.
5. State my needs and interests and ask the other party for his/her/their interests.
6. Am honest with my feelings and reactions.
7. Avoid blaming, accusing, or finding fault.
8. Listen carefully and with openness to understanding the other party's perspective as well as my own.
9. Ask questions to clarify and paraphrase and summarize frequently.
10. After clarifying and agreeing to the specific issue or problems in this conflict situation and listing interests of both parties, jointly generate possible resolutions that would meet the needs of both parties.
11. Work to reach agreement on the selection of the resolution.
12. After reaching agreement, restate my understanding of the resolution and express my appreciation to the other party for working collaboratively to resolve the conflict.

_Source: **Conflict Resolution** by Cindy Harrison and Joellen Killion. ASCD, 1994._

*E*ffective communication between the parties is all but impossible if each plays to the gallery.

*— Roger Fisher and William Ury,*

**Getting to Yes**

# Positions and interests chart

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** This tool can be used to illustrate the positions and interests of each team member. Use this during discussion, not during decision making.

**TIME:** 30 minutes.

**SUPPLIES:** Flip chart or poster paper and markers or an overhead projector with transparencies and markers.

**PREPARATION:** Draw the chart below on a large sheet of poster paper or a flip chart or create transparencies. You may also want team members to create their own charts as you create one for the group to view.

| POSITIONS<br>What we want | INTERESTS<br>Why we want it |
|---|---|
| A) | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4. |
| B) | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4. |
| C) | 1.<br>2.<br>3.<br>4. |

# Learning about conflict resolution

☐ **Building Team Power: How to Unleash the Collaborative Genius of Work Teams** by Thomas Kayser. Burr Ridge, IL: Irwin Professional Publishing Co., 1994. Comprehensive guide to team developing, including a chapter on conflict resolution. ISBN 0-7863-0302-6. Price: $25. Phone (800) 634-3966.

☐ **Conflict Resolution** by Cindy Harrison and Joellen Killion. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1994. Audio recording of a workshop offers practical suggestions for resolving conflicts in schools. Six cassette tapes plus a workbook. ASCD Stock #612-93151. Price: $89, ASCD members; $107, non-members. Phone (800) 933-2723, (703) 549-9110, fax (703) 549-3891.

☐ **Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In** by Roger Fisher and William Ury. New York: Penguin Books, 1991. Offers a concise, step-by-step strategy for coming to mutually acceptable agreements. Based on the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project. ISBN 0-14-015735-2. Check your local library or bookstore.

☐ **Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills** by David W. Johnson and Frank P. Johnson. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1997. Introduces readers to theory and research findings to understand how to make groups work effectively. Describes skills required to apply that knowledge in practical situations. Includes numerous exercises. ISBN 0-205-19750-7. Price: $51. Order through your local bookstore or by calling (800) 278-3525.

☐ **The Magic of Conflict** and **The Magic of Conflict Workbook** both by Thomas Crum. Practical guidebook for resolving conflicts successfully. Applicable to both personal and professional arenas. Based in part on Aikido, a martial art and mind-body discipline. Price: $14 book and $10 workbook. Order directly from Aiki Works, P.O. Box 251, Victor, NY 14564, phone (716) 924-7302, or fax (716) 924-2799.

*Loyalty to a petrified opinion never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul.*

*— Mark Twain*

## Tools For Schools

# Communication key in easing conflicts

## Ask Dr. Developer

**Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)**

**Q** *The hottest conflicts in my district have occurred because parents don't like what's going on in their child's school. These usually are very loud and come up very quickly. How can you possibly resolve a conflict with someone who yells rather than talks to you?*

**A** This is probably one of the toughest situations schools face these days. With the increased interest and involvement of parents, there is likely to be emotion and passion for certain issues.

In your school and district, create a "preventive conflict resolution plan." Be objective about the work you are doing and new programs being proposed. Consider the potential reactions of various interest groups. Prepare yourself to respond to their concerns even before they raise them.

Operate with a "no surprises" attitude. Look for opportunities to communicate with parents about your work and changes you're considering. Send information home to parents. Include your local newspaper in your plan for sharing news with the community.

Be sure communication goes both ways. Solicit opinions instead of waiting to hear from them. Have an open-door policy at each school and throughout the district. Ensure that parents know who to call, when, and what phone numbers to call. Consider having a regular "meet the principal" coffee or identifying office hours when parents and others can drop in and chat with the principal or with teachers.

If an angry parent does confront you, react calmly and urge your staff to react calmly. Resist the urge to yell back even if he or she is yelling at you. Acknowledge the parent's concern and acknowledge that he or she is reacting out of concern for a child. Question them to understand their concern more deeply. Angry parents may be reacting to something much different than the situation at hand. Thank parents for coming to you with their concern and for allowing you the opportunity to respond.

More than anything, respect their right to have their opinion and express it. And leave the door open for them to continue to share their concerns with you.

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