

Navigating Stormy Waters: Ten Tips for Resolving Conflict **by Kate Dempsey, PhD.**

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Disagreements can happen in any group. Conflict is what we call it when the disagreements become entrenched, bitter, personal and destructive. Conflict is a frightening topic to discuss. It is worse to be embroiled in it, but it needn't be a terminal condition. The trick is to work with conflict rather than to try to avoid it, pretend it isn't there or bury it. When people ask me to help in a situation of conflict, they most often ask to be rid of it. Being in the middle of conflict feels very uncomfortable for everyone involved, but it is not realistic to wish it away. It is also not accurate to blame one person for it. Sometimes one person expresses the anxiety or confusion of the group on behalf of the group. But unconsciously all are involved.

There are two main reasons for conflict in groups

1. Lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities and boundaries,
2. People bring all of themselves to a group situation. This includes past hurts, prejudices, or triumphs, whether they are conscious of it or not.

My top tip is really to look at conflict and not push it away or pretend it isn't there. So even reading this article may feel difficult because there is no easy solution and it asks you to engage again with the memories of past slights, fears and vulnerabilities.

The tips in this article start with getting clarity around roles and procedures. Boards can put plans in place to minimise the chances of conflict arising, but having an understanding of why conflict arises and why it is so uncomfortable can also help with handling it if and when it does arise. So my aim in this article is to give you some tips for minimising the chance of conflict arising, and some insights into why conflict is so difficult to be part of or to watch.

Tip #1 Have polices for Board operation on place

My number one tip for handling conflict is to have procedures and policies in place. You need a Board charter or some agreed practice, meeting procedures, rules of debate and the like; you need an induction process for new members. You need codes of conduct and codes of ethics for Board members. These are all essential basics to ensure smooth operation of the Board. My experience is that in the absence of structures personalities dominate.

If you do have these in place, you may feel the problem is still not solved. If you don't have them, then think about why it can feel so difficult to look at these matters.

Tip #2 Know where you have come from and where you are going

It is important to have a strategic plan in place. If there is one in place then the roles of Board and management will be clear; the Board's role is to monitor and support, and management's is to implement. The forward plan needs to be built on the foundation of the past. Know the history of the organisation and honour it. All Board members should be aware of the past: why and how the organisation started, in order to be clear on how each can contribute to its evolving story. My experience shows that conflict can arise when the history is disregarded or not appreciated.

Tip #3 Monitor progress

It is also important to have procedures in place to reduce the anxiety of Board members as to whether the organisation is on track. Boards can get side tracked worrying about nitty-gritty details when reporting procedures are inadequate. So have robust financial reporting practices, effective reporting of staff activities against the strategic plan, occupational health and safety audits, privacy policies, risk assessments and the like in place. These do not of themselves eliminate conflict, but they provide a sense of security for Boards to focus on the vision setting, which is where they should be focusing.

Tip #4 Focus on the vision

Be clear on your vision for the organisation. Remember as a Board you embody the vision of your organisation. You must articulate the vision; it must be evident in how you conduct yourselves both within Board meetings and when you interact with staff, clients and other stakeholders. The Board represents all that is good in the organisation. It's a hard job, but you must 'walk the talk'. You are the leaders of the organisation and you set the tone for everyone else to follow. Be aware of this expectation that you have of yourselves and that others have of you too.

Tip #5 Get a bit of training

It is a tall order to have a disparate group of individuals working collectively on setting a vision, communicating the vision and embodying the vision. My experience both of being on Boards and working with them is that it is hard to separate 'myself' from 'myself-as-Board-member'. Awareness of how my needs interact with those of the Board as a whole is difficult to achieve, but helpful in reducing conflict. The Board is a collective body; its members have authority only when they articulate the decisions of the Board as a whole. It is not appropriate (for example) for individual Board members to give direction to staff. So some understanding of role, communication and embodying leadership would certainly be helpful for Board members. The Board carries the tension and ambiguity of individuals trying to act as a collective. The Board needs to sort itself out and not put the CEO in the position of intervening between different views of how things should be done. The Chief Executive Officer has a responsibility to implement and support the *collective* position of the board not the un-stated position of a dominant faction.

Tip #6 Trust

Now that the Board has operating procedures, a plan in place, assessment, evaluation and monitoring procedures and has a grip on the vision, it is time to let the staff get on with it! Trust them to do it. Don't interfere in how they choose to implement your plan. Facilitate an environment of trust within the board and between the board and everyone else. This is easier said than done. In order to trust we must also carry mis-trust with us: having trust means also coping with the constant ambiguity of wanting to trust, but also fearing disappointment.

Well that all seems clear and straightforward. So no conflict shall ever arise if these tips are in place, right?

WRONG!

Of course conflict will still arise, so this brings me to a fundamental fact about conflict. Working in groups is complex and anxiety provoking. It is the nature of humanity that communication will sometimes fail, people will be irritated by the way something was said or done, offence will be taken where none was intended and our own personal agendas can get the better of us.

Conflict arouses very deep-seated emotions. People in the midst of conflict seem so angry, so unable to see another view. They denigrate the opposing view (and often the person expressing it). There can be rage, exaggerated sense of risk or fear of failure, and talk of retribution and revenge. Because of this intensity, when we are engaged in conflict, we want to put our point first, not listen to the other person and we assume it is an either/or situation (we both can't be winners). We tend to see 'all good' in our own views and 'all bad' in the views of others.

Tip #7 Understand what is beneath conflict

But if we think about it carefully, conflict is really about something more profound. It is really about vulnerability and loss – loss of power, status, respect, control and sense of self worth (I want to see myself as fair, why can't you). It also masks the fear of being wrong or ridiculed. It is a sign of the loneliness of not being understood. We are vulnerable when in conflict (so we often to put our guard up) making things worse.

This is the key to thinking about conflict. It is really about vulnerability and loss. The best way to deal with conflict is to be aware of this fact. When I join a Board I want to feel a sense of connectedness and purpose, if things go wrong and I lose this sense, then I may find myself in a situation of conflict. I find it hard then to separate what I want and need, from what is required of me in my role on the Board and what is achievable for the organisation. Sometimes the self-esteem of Board members can be tied unconsciously to the amount of good works the organisation is seen to be involved in. These are powerful motivators (not often spoken of) and they impact on the quality of relationships on the Board. Conflict arises in my view, in the arena of relationships between people; from a sense of loss of connectedness and self esteem. Where connectedness in relationships brings harmony, loss of connectedness brings vulnerability and loneliness. These disturbing feelings are hidden in conflict.

Tip #8 Practise active listening

Now, here are a few practical tips for dealing with a situation of conflict. If I am in conflict with someone I try to remember that the other person wants to be respected and understood and feels vulnerable (even while she is attacking!). I can listen more carefully to what she says. I can acknowledge her view without agreeing with it (I can say, 'I guess we see the issue from two different perspectives'). I can show respect, and I can focus on a solution that accommodates us both. I try to accept that there is a part of me that wants to listen and a part that really does not want to listen. Both are available to me.

I try to think about what I want to achieve in the end, rather than what I don't like about the other person's idea. I try to hold off telling the person what is wrong with her idea or why I KNOW it won't work. I listen and paraphrase what the other person has said (to show I am listening). This allows a space to emerge and the situation can be contained. I can say, 'let me hear first how you see it, then I can share how I see it'. Providing space can allow a new perspective to emerge.

Tip #9 Be prepared to apologise

Acknowledging that you may have acted hastily, or that you may have misunderstood or were perhaps unfair, go a long way to mending conflict. Often all people want is acknowledgement; the sense that they may have had a valid point to make. An apology is generally welcomed as long as it is an apology without a 'but' at the end. Small acts of restitution can be helpful. Sometimes the truth is hard to see and hard to hear. Simple gestures (even if oblique) using metaphors, stories, parables can help to heal wounds.

Tip #10 Get help, don't let it fester

Finally I leave you with the advice that it is the worst thing (and the most common) to simply avoid the issue altogether. It is very hard to face conflict and very hard to solve intractable issues without assistance. But don't let that stop you. Get help! Get a neutral third party (preferably a professional mediator) to help guide you through the conflict. Perhaps a good start would be to discuss the points made in this article and take the opportunity to have a look at the quality of your procedures and your relationships now. Good luck.