Introduction

Anyone who has been involved in a collaborative process knows that a conflict within the group typically involves multiple participants, can be complex, and can intensify dramatically, if left unresolved. Everyone involved has their own thoughts and feelings about what is happening as well as perceptions about the thoughts and feelings of others. As conflict increases, reasonable people may demonstrate irrational or unwarranted behaviors. Natural reactions to these behaviors may be to strike back, give in, or break off. Objectivity--the faculty needed most to navigate conflict effectively--is sacrificed.

Knowing how to manage or resolve conflict is a big part of succeeding at collaboration and maintaining respectful relationships. In fact, managing conflict productively is a skill that requires constant practice. Perhaps the first and most basic step is to recognize that conflict is neither good nor bad and that, handled properly, it can serve as a catalyst for positive change. Using this perspective and some of the basic skills and information discussed in this fact sheet, stakeholders can begin to understand what they can do to turn a seemingly negative situation into a positive one--one that allows the collaborative to move forward toward its common goals.

Self-Awareness

The most difficult part of conflict management is the self-evaluation that must be done for collaboration to occur. To prepare to play a productive part in managing conflict, every member of a collaborative group must:

- Increase their self-awareness about their behaviors and attitudes, and evaluate how their behaviors and attitudes may be perceived by others. Regardless of the impression you would like others to have, your inner attitude is likely to show through.
- Check-in with yourself and others about how you are communicating. Ask these questions: *Am I communicating properly for the situation? Are my expectations and behaviors flexible enough to adapt to changing circumstances and situations?*
- Be honest with yourself about how your inner attitude may affect others and the collaborative process.

Self-reflection enables awareness of what you can control and how it might be useful to modify your reaction in a given circumstance to achieve better results. It is necessary to continuously evaluate whether your personal goals and objectives remain aligned with others involved in the collaborative process.

Sources of Conflict

Conflict can derive from the way we interact with one another. The dynamics we establish in the way we communicate influence perceptions and assumptions of each other and each other's intentions. Recognizing behavior in ourselves and among others is the first step in managing conflict. Acknowledging the effects of those behaviors is a critical second step. Listed below are some general categories and examples of the most common behaviors that become sources of conflict.

Competition occurs when two or more people vie with one another to attain a position of power or control over resources. For example, people in a collaborative setting will sometimes debate an issue as though they are seeking approval for their own views or attempting to score points against another person's views. This type of debate is not only unproductive, it frequently turns the focus toward personal offenses made during the discourse, diverts attention from common interests, and undermines resolving the actual issue. Whether you are one of the debaters or the facilitator, you can separate the people from the problem. Keep the focus on the issue and common interests, not the people, to get everyone on the same side working together to solve the problem.

Domination takes place when one person or party attempts to control others in ways the "controlled" individuals feel are unacceptable. For instance, if a person is speaking in a belligerent way, others may not respond for fear of escalating the unwanted behavior. They also may not feel secure that the rest of the group will support them if they intervene. In this situation, carefully consider if "domination" is being perceived by the rest of the group. When addressing an individual about his or her unacceptable behavior, remember that you're stepping in on behalf of the entire group. Assuming the group has established ground rules, a simple, respectful reminder can be effective. This may empower the group to collectively respond to the person or group seeking control and bring composure to the situation.

Misunderstandings occur when someone fails to understand or interpret someone or some idea correctly. At another level, a misunderstanding may take place when someone believes they have something to fight about and/or defend. For example, some stakeholders may come to a collaborative process with the mindset and tools that have made them successful in non-collaborative situations and continue to employ them no matter whether they are appropriate or not. Other stakeholders may represent positions that they or their organizations hold—positions that, unfortunately in some cases, cause misunderstandings or significant disagreements with other stakeholders. It is important for all stakeholders to understand these situations do occur.

Miscommunication occurs between individuals in any group. Three types of miscommunication are misunderstanding, non-understanding, and misinterpretation.

- <u>Misunderstanding</u> takes place when someone believes they understand an idea, when, in reality, they have misconstrued another individual's intended meaning or point.
- <u>Non-understanding</u> happens when a group member either cannot interpret what someone is saying, or they have more than one interpretation with no way to choose the appropriate one.
- <u>Misinterpretation</u> occurs when the interpretation of a group member's statement suggests that his/her values and beliefs are different from the other group members' values and beliefs.

Each of these forms of miscommunication can be avoided by practicing active listening. This requires listening attentively to the other person, then restating or asking questions to clarify and confirm his or her stated interests. Each member should realize that *interests* are the underlying reasons behind a position; interests focus on the needs, concerns, and desires about the issue. A *position*, on the other hand, is a firm stance or set of demands that only offer to solve a problem one way from one perspective. By learning to differentiate between and identify interests and positions, multiple solutions can be analyzed and reconciled to create a common solution. To identify someone's interests, ask them questions, such as "*Why?*" "*Why is that important to you?*" These will help you and the rest of the group understand the interests behind each person's position. Be clear that there is no need to defend a position in a collaborative process, and that stating concerns and interests will help focus each participant's understanding and enhance their creative problem-solving. By doing so, a more positive framework for communication will be established so that others are inclined to actively listen as well.

Injury occurs when the source of conflict is mismanaged. In this case, conflict becomes an act that damages, hurts or violates a person by undermining the value of their input or credibility. If you feel that you have been injured, speak one-on-one with the offending party about the situation. Refrain from making personal accusations, ignoring a person or shutting them down. If you feel that you have been injured by the group, it is fair to state that you are angry or hurt. State clearly what occurred to cause you to feel injured. Then state what you would like to see happen to correct the injury. Most importantly, refrain from belligerent attacks. Trust and mutual respect among stakeholders should be foremost in every collaborative effort.

Conclusion

Unmanaged conflict can escalate in intensity over time, resulting in counterproductive behaviors. When multiple parties are involved, the complexity of the problem increases dramatically and may minimize desired outcomes by redirecting group and individual focus from the intended goal. Conflict-causing behavior can be managed by dealing successfully with underlying motivations. Fear, distrust, or a lack of awareness of other options for open communication and problem-solving may lie behind rigid positions. The first step is to neutralize potential conflict by recognizing the behavior that is causing it and acknowledging how your behavior can contribute to the overall outcome. This distinction can alleviate your own emotional susceptibility and prevent misinterpretations of the reasons behind a person's behavior. When conflict is strategically managed, the results can be beneficial and lead to cohesive decision-making and positive social interactions as well as increased morale and greater innovation toward achieving the overall common goals.

Further Reading

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This fact sheet is the first in a series designed to support collaborative processes and stakeholder groups.
For more information, contact Windy Greer, Ecological Restoration Institute, 928/523-8129, Windy.Greer@nau.edu.