Conflict Resolution
Module 2

Good Conflict vs. Bad Conflict

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Self-Help Network is a Wichita State University center that helps strengthen communities and organizations by providing facilitation, research, and information. SHN supports a variety of community efforts, creating and sustaining positive community change by ensuring that all Kansans have a voice and share their talents and experiences to create thriving, supportive communities.

Good Conflict vs. Bad Conflict

OBJECTIVES

At the end of this instruction, you will be able to:

- **List types of conflict**
- **Identify the ways groups deal with conflict resulting in "bad conflict"**
- **Identify ways to deal with conflict that result in "good conflict"**
- **Identify ways to listen effectively**
- **Be aware of "body language"**

TYPES OF CONFLICT

It is common for organizations to view conflict, a disagreement between two or more parties, as a source of emotion, frustration, and negativity. Much of the time, we see conflict as something that is so harmful it should be avoided at all costs. Despite these views of conflict, some disagreements within an organization can be an opportunity for creative thinking, problem-solving, learning, and growth.

Conflict is healthy and natural. We all have different personalities, ideas, and points of view. We are not always going to agree on issues and actions…and that's a good thing. Since we all bring different experiences and ideas to the table, we can open each others' eyes to new ideas and new ways of approaching issues.

There are several types of conflict that can occur in a group. Any combination of these conflict types can happen at any given time.

- **Personality conflicts**

  Sometimes people simply don't get along with each other. We all have different personalities and the way we approach tasks and the way we interact interpersonally may, at times, be disagreeable to others.

- **Behavioral conflicts**

  A conflict may arise out of an action taken by a member of a group. The action's outcome could be positive or negative but, if a group disagrees with how someone acted, conflict could arise.

- **Situational conflict**

  Some conflicts arise out of an event that happens. Each member of a group may disagree on or have a differing point of view about a situation which can lead to conflict.

- **Organizational conflicts**

Conflict can also arise out of the way an organization is structured. Group members may disagree with certain members having authority and/or may disagree with the way those members use their authority.

- **Communication conflicts**

  Some conflicts are the result of one person not listening closely to another person. Careful listening not only includes listening to each word a person says, but also to asking questions to make sure you understand the person's full meaning.

BAD CONFLICT

Conflict in and of itself is neither good nor bad. The difference between the two is really the difference in how conflict is managed. Certain actions can turn any conflict into a bad situation:

- **Avoidance**

  When a group is afraid of conflict its members may avoid conflicts all together. The downside of avoidance is that even if certain members disagree with others, their opinions are never voiced. This gives power to only some members of the group, creating less of a team atmosphere and more of a hierarchy. Other people's opinions are important because the more brainstorming and idea generating that happens, the more opportunities a group has for new ideas.

- **Self-protection**

  In times of conflict, rather than addressing the issue with the parties involved, each person goes into a self-protection mode. Self-protection means those involved say, "Keep me out of this," or take a side that will ensure their good-standing within the group. Self-protection may also lead to keeping secrets from others which ultimately can create more division and more conflict.

- **Complaining Rather Than Managing Conflict**

  Rather than managing the conflict, some parties simply complain. Constant complaining about a conflict is not productive because it does not contribute to a solution. Rather, complaining adds to negative feelings and negative points of view. In these situations, complaining often happens in private and can make conflicts more complicated and severe.

- **Acceptance**

  Sometimes, when a conflict has existed for a long time, those involved begin to accept that the conflict will always be there. They might say, "There's no point in trying to figure this out. We've never agreed and never will." Those who accept conflict are agreeing to live with the bad feelings and hurt relationships which can make each day in the life of a group difficult and painful. Acceptance is more common in long-running conflicts that have spanned several years.

- **Discipline**

  When conflict occurs, those in a position of power within a group may decide to punish those involved. This approach is also not necessarily constructive because it does not address the reason the conflict exists and does not seek to find a positive solution. Further, addressing

conflict with discipline divides a group further and causes others in the group to take sides and/or look for ways to protect themselves from being punished.

GOOD CONFLICT

By addressing conflict constructively, you can turn a potentially bad conflict into a good one. You can learn from conflict and, as a result, modify your dream world rules. There are several ways to positively address conflict:

- **Agree to learn from all conflicts**

  All conflicts are an opportunity to learn more about your group. Even conflicts that arise due to differing personalities can tell you something about your organization and how it works. Paying attention to these conflicts can help you figure out how to structure a group that works together well and is productive.

- **Be creative**

  When you put the focus on creativity, you encourage new ideas.

- **Be flexible**

  Many groups have a structure. There are times when situations and opportunities arise that require some level of flexibility. Being flexible means a group sees more than one way of operating which opens up more possibilities and chances to grow.

- **Be responsive**

  Your group members can address conflict proactively, before it even starts, by agreeing to respond to any and all conflicts as soon as they occur.

- **Make your group a safe place to share ideas**

  Foster a safe place for people to share ideas by setting ground rules like: All ideas are welcome; every person has a voice; we will listen without judging. Rules like these encourage brainstorming, building on each others' ideas, and arriving at decisions as a team.

- **Look for win-win situations**

  Often times, when conflicts are resolved, the outcome is that one side loses and one side wins. In other cases, both parties feel they have lost. Your goal in resolving conflict positively is to look for the win-win situations where both sides feel they have gained something. Win-win solutions are not always possible, but trying your best to find them may result in creative solutions that turn bad conflict into good conflict.

- **Listen**

  Some conflicts arise from miscommunication so it is important to listen carefully to what other group members have to say. Make sure that you are silent when others' speak and ask questions to make certain you fully understand their meaning. Remember, sometimes people have a difficult time finding the right words to express how they feel or what they think. If someone's words are confusing, patiently asking questions may help you better understand

and help them better express his or her true feelings. There are many ways to listen effectively:

- **Use thoughtful body language**

  Remember that your body language tells others whether you are listening. You can show someone you are giving them your full attention by:

  - Keeping eye contact
  - Leaning closer
  - Nodding your head when you understand
  - Ignoring distractions

- **Summarize**

  Summarizing is a technique that helps you know what someone has said and how they are feeling. When a person is finished expressing a thought, summarize the facts and emotions behind what they have said. Ask them if your summary is right. Summarizing also helps you understand a situation through another's eyes because you are actively working to understand their feelings along with their words.

- **Clarify**

  You can better understand someone's meaning by asking question to clarify different parts of the problem to so you can understand the other person's point-of-view.

- **Use good speaking skills**

  Try to send a clear message when you speak by using "I" statements. Be respectful of those who are listening and try your best to clearly explain how you are affected by a conflict.

- **Avoid communication distractions**

  You can also listen carefully by avoiding certain communication distractions like interrupting, criticizing, laughing at the speaker, offering advice, and changing the subject.

  You can further avoid distractions by choosing quiet places for important group conversations.

ACTIVITY

We're all different!

Different people bring different feelings and experiences to every activity and meeting your CRO holds. To demonstrate this point, give each participant a marker and a large index card. Ask each participant to think of one word that describes how he or she is feeling at that moment. Then, ask the participants to write that one word on the index card in large letters. Go around the room, asking participants to hold up their cards and look at each others' responses. Follow up with these questions to start discussion:

1. How do our different feelings and experiences change how we might act in a group?
2. How can these feelings and experiences contribute to conflict?
3. How can we use our different experiences and feelings to make our group's conflicts positive?

Going for the "win-win" solution!

Read the following scenario and answer the discussion questions below.

You are on the board of a CRO. The local Mental Health Center has been generally supportive of your program providing a van for transportation and even a small grant to support the CRO. However, you and your director note that the MHC tends to schedule psychosocial activities during the same time as the CRO. You have moved your schedule around to avoid conflicts. Recently, the MHC has scheduled outings that are similar or the same as activities your CRO has announced. CRO members who attend psychosocial report being "pressured" by MHC staff and other consumers to participate in MHC activities instead of those offered by your CRO. The MHC offers free food, plans and runs programs for consumers, and handles any problems that come up during the activities. Consumers report that they like everything being done for them. You don't feel your CRO can compete with the MHC for the same consumers.

1. What happened?
2. How would each party feel about the situation?
3. What does each party want to get out of the situation?
4. How could this conflict be bad, doing damage too the group?
5. How could this conflict be good, benefiting the group?
6. What would be a lose-lose solution to this situation?
7. What would be a win-lose solution to this situation?
8. What would be a win-win solution to this situation?