

Conflict management

The practice of identifying and handling conflicts in a sensible, fair and efficient manner that prevents them from escalating out of control and becoming unmanageable is called conflict management. The challenge of conflict management is not the elimination of conflict, but how to anticipate conflict and effectively address it when it arises. Possible advantages, such as opportunities to understand differing views, expand livelihood options or create change and development, should be maintained while disadvantages, such as extreme disruption, lack of development, and even violence, should be reduced or mitigated.

The aims of conflict management are to:

- Identify latent conflict and address it constructively.
- Prevent existing conflict from escalating.
- Make use of conflict in promoting positive social change.

Different skills and approaches for managing conflicts

There are many approaches to managing conflicts. Negotiation and mediation are introduced here because they are perceived the most relevant for collaborative planning situations. First, however, a tool or a skill important for every situation where people interact with each other is introduced.

ACTIVE LISTENING

In collaborative planning, it is important to truly listen what people have to say and give them indications that their opinions have been understood properly. Active listening involves more than simply hearing the words spoken, it also requires active involvement; understanding, acknowledging, and responding. Often when people talk to each other, they don't listen attentively. They can be distracted and half thinking about something else. When people are engaged in a conflict, rather than paying attention, they are often busy formulating a response to what is being said in order to win the argument.

Active listening is a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker. The listener must take care to fully attend to the speaker, and then repeat what he or she thinks the speaker has said. The listener doesn't have to agree with the speaker, just repeat what was said. This enables the speaker to find out whether the listener really understood. If the listener did not, the speaker can do some further explaining.

Active listening has several benefits: it forces people to listen attentively to others and misunderstandings can be avoided, as people have to confirm that they do really understand what has been said. It also tends to encourage people to open up.

In the following conversation, Steven is practicing active listening:

David: *I'm sick and tired that the park near my house is filthy! There is rubbish everywhere! And the swings for children are broken!*

Steven: *Seems like you are upset with the quality of the green areas in your neighbourhood. > **understanding***

David: *That's exactly what I mean. I want to know how much money is reserved for maintenance of parks and other green areas in my community and how this money is spent.*

Steven: *I understand what you're saying and this seems to be a very important issue to you. So essentially you want to know how the collected tax money is spent? > **acknowledging***

David: *Yes. Can we find that out somehow?*

Steven: *What if we send a request to the city council with a copy of this meeting's meeting minutes. Does that sound agreeable to you? > **responding***

David: *Yes, that sounds reasonable. I am content with that.*

NEGOTIATION

Negotiation is a form of decision-making by which two or more parties talk with one another in an effort to resolve their opposing interests. Negotiations are voluntary and require that all parties are willing to consider the interests and needs of the other parties involved.

There are different approaches to negotiation. The relatively cooperative, **mutual gains approach** seeks a solution that is mutually beneficial. The **distributive negotiation approach** is more like confrontational bargaining, when each side seeks to prevail over the other. Out of these two approaches, the mutual gains approach is more suited to collaborative planning situations.

Here are four key ideas of the mutual gains approach¹ to guide behaviour during a conflict.

1. Focus on the substance of the problem while keeping an eye on relationships. Be 'hard on the problem; soft on the people'.
 - a) try to understand the other party, analyse the problem from their point of view
 - b) avoid defining the substantive problem as a people problem
 - c) deal with emotions and people problems first

¹ Fisher, Roger and Brown, Scott (1988): *Getting Together: Building Relationships as We Negotiate*. Penguin, New York.

- d) negotiate how to negotiate
- 2. Separate interests (needs) from positions (demands or wants).
 - a) look for the need underlying the position
 - b) elicit and give information
- 3. Develop options where both can profit
 - a) examine solutions to ensure an idea really can be implemented
 - b) put more than one item on the table at a time so trades can be made
 - c) give up items which are of little interest to you but valuable to the other person
- 4. Evaluate many possible solutions
 - a) refuse to accept the easy solution

MEDIATION

If negotiations are hard to start or have reached a deadlock, the conflicting parties may need assistance from a third party, a mediator. In mediation process this acceptable third party, who has limited or no authoritative decision-making power, assists the principle parties in a conflict. Mediator works with the conflicting parties to help them improve their communication and their analysis of the conflict situation, so that they can themselves identify and choose an option for resolving the conflict that meets the interests or needs of all of the parties. As with negotiation, mediation leaves the decision-making power primarily in the hands of the conflicting parties. They enter into a voluntary agreement, which they themselves, and not the mediator, implement.

Arbitration and **adjudication** are approaches that come in when parties are not able to solve their problems themselves and they seek for help from a higher authority. Collaborative planning is a planning method that will always try to avoid these situations. When a higher authority or a judge has to be called in to solve disputes, then the collaborative process has failed earlier.