

Conflict



Question

Before you read on, i want you to take a moment to notice how you feel about the word "CONFLICT".

Grab a bit of paper and write those feelings down.

Next write down as many words as you can, that you associate with conflict.

Now, take note of how many of these feelings and associated words have a positive emotional state or negative emotional state. Are there more positive or negative?

If there is a clear winner, this might give you some insights on how you feel about conflict. For some people who are comfortable with conflict, they will understand it is a necessary part of most relationships. and not see conflict as a problem. However for others, conflict is seen as a negative: something to be avoided or something that instills a fight response.

This section of the course will explore conflict and offer strategies in dealing positively with this inescapable part of advocacy.

What is conflict?...

Conflict, in an uncomplicated explanation, simply describes a disagreement between two or more people. It results because those two people have opposing ideas, principles or views.

In advocacy, it is not unusual for different people to have different ideas about what should happen and what option is best for the person. Whilst we don't go looking for conflict, advocates will often be involved when the person wants something different than what is being offered.

...and is it good for us?

There is no truth in the assertion that conflict has to be bad. In fact, having different and opposing ideas is precisely what leads to developments and innovations in how the world works.

The challenge with conflict is that we often *feel* it is a bad thing - we can associate feelings such as rejection, fear, sadness and anxiety. But the good news is that we can develop positive strategies and skills in dealing with conflict.....

...and people who have great skills in conflict resolution tend to have better quality of relationships and more influence.

Where and when?

Within advocacy, there are many sources of potential conflict... take a look at this list which captures common areas where conflict (or differences) can appear.

Funders

- Different priorities
- Not understanding advocacy
- Measuring different outcomes
- Putting pressure on you to deviate from advocacy
- Withdrawing funding
- Blocking complaints

Your Advocacy Partner

- Making unwise choices
- Making dangerous choices
- Not looking at all options
- Not wanting to discuss consequences
- Sabotaging outcomes

Family/Carers

- Taking over relationship
- Putting pressure on advocate to share info
- Trying to direct relationship
- Pushing their agenda rather than the person's

Your Team

- Different priorities
- Waiting list
- Managing personal and professional relationships
- Different levels of commitment or approaches

Other Professionals

- Not listening
- Oppressive attitudes
- Stonewalling
- Using power inappropriately
- Blocking access
- Not making referrals
- Not inviting you to meetings

What stops us from resolving conflict?

There are many emotional anchors, values and attitudes that prevent people from addressing conflict and moving forward. See which ones (if any!) you naturally adopt.

Avoiding conflict

Avoiding conflict is something we can all do - especially when we have an underpinning belief that conflict = bad. Conflict avoidance is a type of people pleasing behaviour which arises from a deep need to people please and fit in. It can develop in response to being surrounded by people who are critical, dismissive or emotionally unavailable. It is also a very natural and human response which meets a fundamental human need to fit in to be liked by our peers. After all, these tendencies serve us well. Without groups made up of people who fit in and are happy to compromise, society would have a hard time functioning!

No-one really wants to be the trouble maker or attract the label of trouble maker, especially in a professional setting. So a lot of us actively avoid conflict for fear of being labelled.

The danger with avoiding conflict is that it denies us the opportunity to express our feelings, opinions and needs, and seek out solutions that are win win.

"I must be right" or "I must win"

Sometimes the desire to be right, or to win the argument supercedes the ability to seek out resolutions. People who value this often spend time collecting evidence to prove they are correct . They constantly look for mistakes in the other person's point of view, things they have said or implied or problems in the other perspective. They are able to focus on the smallest of points and will often make the same arguments repeatedly.

If you are a collector of evidence you tend not to seek out win-win solutions... instead you are more interested in being the winner, in being right, in proving a point.

The problem with this, is that by focusing on collecting evidence, we are not spending time listening to the other party and will never understand the other perspective or need they are meeting.

In advocacy, this can be problematic as it cuts us off from seeking resolution or reaching a compromise that is acceptable to your partner.

Talking to the 'wrong' person

When we are faced with conflict, we may spend our time unwisely on speaking to the wrong people. This could include seeking out approval or support of our problem from allies (instead of the person we are in conflict with) or in persuading people who don't actually have any power in resolving the conflict or influencing the outcome.

Advocates need to be clever and focused in their efforts if they are to avoid wasting their time and energy on the 'wrong people'.

Inflexibility

Being entrenched in a particular viewpoint similarly does not lead to conflict resolution as you operate from a 'I win: you lose' standpoint. Whilst this may be an appropriate strategy if you are representing a person who does not want to consider any other options than the one you are advocating for, this will not resolve any conflict.

Letting them have it

Some people are very skilled in letting people know exactly what they have done wrong. Whilst they may be right, there is definitely a wrong way to do this! Letting them have it between the eyes describes what happens when a person rips the other person apart – through words, accusations and a general relish for tearing the person down. This often happens when the person is seeking power or feels they need to dominate the other person and does this by enforcing their views and opinions onto them.

Letting the person have it between the eyes rarely results in good conflict resolution as the person is left bruised, defensive or attacks you in an attempt to let you have it between the eyes.

Labelling

Another negative approach to conflict resolution is when we label the other person. This may include a derogatory and unhelpful labelling such as believing them to be stupid, unkind, uncaring, bossy etc

Labelling the other person tends to serve our own needs of being right or morally superior – and gives us an excuse or way out of engaging with and listening to the other perspective.

Negative strategies

You have just read some unhelpful attitudes to resolving conflict. Below are strategies, some of which can lead from these attitudes and get in the way of conflict resolution

Fait accompli strategy

The fait accompli strategy is a risky one. Basically, one side does whatever it wants and expects the other side to accept the terms and the outcome.

Standard practice strategy

The "standard practice" claim infers that what is being suggested is acceptable because it is "standard practice." This strategy is another reason why doing your homework is important. If you are negotiating in an area that may be unfamiliar to you, be sure you research any "standard practice" claims before agreeing to them.

Deadline strategy

Time can be a powerful weapon in a negotiation. If the other side knows your deadlines, they may delay giving you a draft (and possibly throw in a few changes) until the last minute to gain the advantage. The closer you are to your deadlines, the more concessions you're likely to make. Therefore, it is important to set a deadline which you are happy with.

Decoy strategy

The decoy issue is often used by politicians. This strategy involves inflating the importance of a minor issue to mask the importance of a larger issue or a hidden agenda. If the other side concedes what they have made you believe is a major issue, but what is for them a minor one, they will then expect you to concede on one of your truly important issues.

Faking withdrawal strategy

Faking withdrawal from the deal in favour of a competitor is another strategy of which to be wary. Its purpose is to gain a concession, usually a significant one, by pretending to entertain another offer such as one from your competition. If you catch the other party in this strategy, it's probably best to call their bluff and end the negotiations in favor of going elsewhere, perhaps to their competition.

Salami strategy

The salami technique is used to gain concessions piece by piece. The basic premise is this: Instead of trying to grab the whole salami, cut off thin slices over time. The result is gaining the whole or a good portion of the salami without the other side realising it.

Good guy/bad guy strategy

This approach is easy to spot. A common scenario may go something like this: One of the negotiators on the other side is hardcore (definitely not win-win minded) in his/her approach. This strategy may even involve the "bad guy" throwing a temper tantrum. Then, when the bad guy steps out for a few minutes, the good guy half of the negotiating team makes an offer in a less threatening manner. If the other side has resorted to this strategy, it may be best to call them on it or consider terminating the negotiations.

Limited authority strategy

The limited authority strategy involves the other side trying to make concessions by claiming they don't have the authority to make concessions on their own. If the other side claims that they do not have the authority to lower the price, but instead need to call a manager, you should halt negotiations with that person and only resume talks with a representative who has the authority to truly negotiate.

Advocacy and Conflict

As an advocate, you must remember that you are not there to necessarily resolve conflict. Your actions and behaviours can definitely make things better (or worse), but your role is to fundamentally support your partner to achieve their goal and make sure their voice is heard.

There are dangers in taking on the role of mediator or conflict 'resolver': it can cross the boundaries where you stop walking alongside your partner and become aligned with 'other' professionals or decision makers.

When you are faced with conflict, try to keep focused on supporting and representing your partners outcomes and views.

On the following pages you can learn some positive strategies that will help you to avoid the negative strategies. You can use these to put forward the best argument you can to influence the decision so the decision is ultimately aligned to what your partner wants and needs.

Positive Strategies

By asking yourself key questions about your responses in conflict situations, you can learn more about your style of dealing with negative interpersonal situations. When you do this, you'll begin to identify your own patterns in conflict situations.

1. Do you tend to avoid conflict, hoping to "keep the peace"?
2. Do you accommodate?
3. Do you compete?
4. Do you compromise?
5. Do you actively collaborate?

On the next few pages you can learn more about positive strategies and approaches when you come across potential or actual sources of conflict.

Stay in control

Being in control of your own emotions is where you begin when you're working out a concern with another person. Venting your frustration, spewing your anger, or throwing sarcastic barbs only shows that you're out of control and prevents you from inviting the cooperation of others

Stay in control

Being in control of your own emotions is where you begin when you're working out a concern with another person. Venting your frustration, spewing your anger, or throwing sarcastic barbs only shows that you're out of control and prevents you from inviting the cooperation of others. Staying in control means you need to be self aware of what 'pushes your buttons' and responding to these stimuli through breathing techniques, adjusting your focus and managing your feelings (especially you fight or flights response).

Be direct, factual, and sincere

You have to express your concern or problem clearly and constructively so that others understand where you're coming from. Getting to the point, stating the facts as you know them, speaking with candor and respect are the best ways of getting to a point constructively and increasing the likelihood that you'll be heard the way you want to be heard.

Go to the source

A conflict is best resolved by addressing it face-to-face with the other party. Telling a third party or communicating by e-mail cannot replace the person-to-person conversation that's required for conflict resolution to work. Despite the discomfort you may feel with this direct method, a good old-fashioned talk still is the tried-and-true method for resolving conflicts.

Get into problem solving

So you have a conflict with another team member. Big deal! And you've worked out a solution with the other team member? Oh, now, that *is* the big deal. The whole idea is not the fact a difference or disagreement exists between two or more people, but rather that actions are taken to hammer out a solution. When you're able to work out solutions with other team members, now that's the big deal that teams need to have for resolving conflicts.

Actively listen

Active listening is all about showing that you care and working to understand what someone else is saying and what that person truly means. Understanding that efforts to actively listen are greatly needed during conflict situations isn't difficult. Those efforts are greatly needed so that the parties can work out their concerns.

Keep people and problems separate

Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just "being difficult" – real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships.

**CONFLICT IS NEITHER GOOD
NOR BAD. PROPERLY MANAGED,
IT IS ABSOLUTELY VITAL.**

KENNETH KAYE

Thank you for reading.
Please return to the
e-learning for the next
section of learning

