

Conflict Resolution **Guide**

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Strategies for Conflict Prevention and Management

Summarizing and Reflecting Back What You Hear

After hearing one party share her/his perspective, it is important to briefly summarize what you've heard before moving to the other person. Summarizing not only allows the speaker to know what you've heard and understood what he has to say, but it also gives the other person the opportunity to hear the concerns from a new source (you) and with new ears.

Reflecting Emotions

Conflicts create strong feelings. It's important to recognize emotions and speak to them in others, so as the mediator of the conversation you need to spend some time understanding how to reflect another person's feelings. Reflecting isn't just repeating what you hear. It goes way beyond that by putting a voice to the emotions that you see or hear and it creates an openness and curiosity about the emotions you may not observe.

To reflect effectively, start by identifying what you think the speaker's emotion might be. When you relay your understanding of her emotions back in a way that allows her to know she's been heard, you're halfway to understanding why this conflict has had an impact on her. Here are some examples:

Statement: "I can't believe she botched another presentation!"

Reflected: "You're concerned that the presentation didn't go well."

Statement: "She places too much demand on us. We can't do everything she asks."

Reflected: "You're feeling frustrated about the demanding workload."

Reframing Statements

Parties involved in mediations have a tendency to talk about the things they don't like or disapprove of in other than what's personally important to them. Reframing is a way to capture what's important to the speaker while leaving out what's supposedly wrong with the other person. It is also a way of highlighting and drawing out interests or values, which is a tremendous asset to you as a facilitator. Highlighting the values shifts the conversation away from negative descriptions and toward describing what's important to each party; and that allows your participants to talk about the same thing without requiring them to see it the same way.

Statement: "He never shares any information. I don't understand why he just can't provide me with the numbers."

Reframed: "It's important for you to work cooperatively."

Statement: "She's so dismissive of everyone's proposals. She always says no to everything and insults us when"

Reframed: "What I'm hearing is that it's important to you for teams to encourage each other and provide positive feedback."

Neutralizing Perspectives

While summarizing statements and providing feedback, neutralize difficult language to take the sting out of the words without taking away from the message. You can capture the spirit of a message without minimizing or downplaying the meaning.

Statement: “The meeting is a total catastrophe!”

Neutralized: “The meeting didn’t go as you had hoped.”

Statement: “The project has hit a total dead end. It’s done for.”

Neutralized: “The project is facing some obstacles.”

Developing Solutions and Agreements

A good way to resolve and manage conflict is to develop a written solution or agreement. A written-down agreement will help everyone stay on the same page, and you can use your usual meeting procedures to help keep the discussion fair and cordial.

Recognizing the Non-negotiable Elements of a Agreement

Doable – Agreements have to actually fit with reality. Don’t be surprised when the parties begin to agree to things that aren’t doable because they are on a roll or they are ready to agree on anything. Agreeing to something because it feels right in the moment can cause additional problems. You know your organization, so you should be able to gauge what you consider doable.

Specific – Clearly outline what each party is agreeing to do. Additionally, ensure that agreements describe the steps that each person will have to take in order to accomplish tasks and deadlines for taking them in a way that leaves no ambiguity as to the expectations each has of the other.

Durable – Although some agreements may be intended to be short-term or one-time actions, the outcomes that are to be achieved by having an agreement should have a reasonably long shelf life. The more questions you ask, and have answered, the more durable the agreement becomes.

Balanced – Balanced agreements are not necessarily ones in which the parties split their resources 50/50, or agree to do exactly half the work assigned. Balanced agreements show that both parties are all willing to give something or, where needed, to compromise. Even when one party has decided to do the lion’s share of the responsibility for resolving the problem at hand, look for ways to include the other person. It goes hand in hand with durability.

Complete – Check that everything of important to the conflict is addressed by the agreement. If something was important to either party, address it in the agreement, even if the arrangement is to discuss it at a later date. Cover all agenda items. If you don’t make it through the list, note that in the agreement as well. This will be a good starting point in follow-up meetings.

Fair – Fair can be a tricky idea, as it doesn’t mean the same thing to everyone. Define what ‘fair’ is for this agreement early in the process, and make sure that everyone is both satisfied with that definition and satisfied with how the agreement incorporates fairness.

Troubleshooting Problem Areas

Vague Language – Although using open-ended language is a good idea, when it's time to write up the agreements, be as specific as you can be. Avoid language that can be interpreted by both parties differently such as: *As soon as possible, If necessary, Wherever appropriate, When reasonable, More or less.* Use more specific language such as: *By (date and time), No later than, Completed on.*

Settlement by Attrition – Sometimes people make agreements that they don't necessarily intend to live up to. They may feel as if their important issues haven't been addressed, or they feel as if they lack the power or the authority to make a change. When you hear language like "I don't care – write down whatever you want" or "Let's get this over with so we can move on" don't just move on. Explore what's happening for them when you hear this kind of language.

Fatigue – If the parties are tired or worn down, they may be more likely to settle for an agreement that's incomplete or unrealistic, which places the likelihood of lasting satisfaction in jeopardy. Watch for signs that the participants are settling because they're exhausted and just want to come to an end. Take a break if necessary, but make sure to take the time to craft your agreements thoroughly.

A party never intended to come to an agreement – It's not unusual for a party to come to a meeting because they think they have to, or with the assumption that they're right and everyone else is wrong. They went through the motions, did what they suspected you wanted them to, but didn't really negotiate in good faith. Try to call a private meeting to discuss the issue frankly and honestly.

A party's needs have not been met – In one way or another; the agreement isn't meeting his needs or delivering what's most important to him. Ask open-ended questions and see whether you can identify what's missing. Create an atmosphere in which he feels comfortable telling the truth.

Another plan is in play – Sometimes, one of the parties has something else in the works and isn't ready to spill the beans just yet. You may not be able to find out what's going on, but asking for a private meeting could help.

Incomplete Contingency Plans – Even the best plans fall apart if you don't address the "what if" questions. Pay attention to all the possible areas that may cause an agreement to become invalid or would cause it to be renegotiated.

Writing it Down

Use Plain Language – Avoid using unnecessarily complex or legalistic-sounding jargon. Complex language complicates your document and contributes to misunderstanding about content and context.

Address who, what, when, where, and how – Make sure that everyone involved can identify exactly what they're responsible for, and understands what everyone else is responsible for as well.

Remember Confidentiality – This whole process only works if everything that happens in the room to stay in the room. Make sure that, as part of the agreement, you have a strategy for dealing with what happens if other people inquire for information. Encourage everyone involved to keep things confidential. Nothing ruins a good conflict resolution agreement faster than gossip.

The Conflict Resolution Framework

1 Develop a Plan and Prepare for a Meeting

1. Request the meeting; don't demand it.
2. Describe the positive future you hope for as a result of the confrontation. In this case, you might say something like, *"I'd like us to have a better relationship and feel more comfortable working together."*
3. Other practices involve: Reassuring confidentiality, allowing enough time, facilitating a comfortable and neutral environment.

2 Describe the problem specifically and state why this behavior is a problem

You could say something like *"Three times in your last group meeting, you rolled your eyes as I spoke and you described my idea about the conversion as naïve."*

Adding to the previous statement you can say, *"When you do this, I feel insulted and belittled. We seem to spend too much of our energy fighting each other instead on working on the project."*

3 Offer-Listen-Compromise

1. Offer a solution. Solutions do not include blame statements. They focus on the outcomes needed to move forward.
2. Listen to the feedback you receive. If needed, summarize and reflect it back to the speaker to help facilitate respectful dialogue and mutual understanding. active listening, clarifying and summarizing, rephrasing to focus on values and discovering what is important, narrowing possible solutions, and avoiding assumptive, leading and why questions.
3. Incorporate what you've heard into a solution that works for everyone involved. To make this happen, both sides are going to need to take responsibility for their actions to date and may need to give some ground. If one side gets to be right and gets to dictate the terms of the agreement, the conflict is not going to be resolved.
4. Repeat this cycle as many times as is necessary to come to an agreement that works for everyone. If possible (ie if this is in your exec) **write it down**.

NOTE: University administrators will not be comfortable writing down a conflict resolution agreement. They will feel like they are being coerced into giving you preferential treatment, and will be concerned about the legal risk. If you are resolving a conflict with a University administrator, proceed to step 4(b).

4 End on a Positive Note

1. To close the meeting, thank everyone present for their time. Summarize 2 or 3 positive developments that stood out.
2. If the agreement was not written down, send an email after the meeting that thanks all parties, highlights the same things you highlighted in your closing comments at the meeting, and briefly summarizes anything you intend to do differently going forward. Do not assume to describe what you think other people took from the meeting.

5 Monitor Agreements and Progress

Keep communication channels open, and check-in periodically to ensure that everyone involved continues to feel comfortable and supported. It may be worthwhile to schedule regular check-ins.

Resources for When Conflict Crosses the Line

Ombuds Service

The OmbudService is a confidential service that strives to ensure that university processes related to students operate as fairly as possible. We offer information, advice, and support to students, faculty, and staff as they deal with academic, discipline, interpersonal, and financial issues related to student programs. Ombudspersons are not advocates. We are neutral third parties in any dispute. When we act as advisor to one party in a problem, our goal is to find the best possible resolution within the rules of the University of Alberta.

Contact Information

Website: <https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students/ombuds>

Email: ombuds@ualberta.ca

Phone: (780) 492-4689

Location: 2-702 Students' Union Building

Monday to Friday, 10AM to 4PM

Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights

The Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights (OSDHR) is available to students and staff of the University of Alberta who have concerns or questions regarding how University policies, procedures or ethical standards are being applied.

Individuals who access the OSDHR can expect a safe, neutral and confidential experience, with a focus on issues resolution.

The Office is also responsible for Human Rights awareness and reporting for the University of Alberta. The OSDHR is committed to honoring the principles of confidentiality, due process and adherence to applicable privacy legislation. Upon contacting the OSDHR an advisor will review this commitment with you.

Contact Information

Website: <https://www.ualberta.ca/vice-president-finance/audit-and-analysis/about-audit-and-analysis/office-of-safe-disclosure-and-human-rights>

Email: osdhr@ualberta.ca

Phone: 780-492-7478

Location:

300 Campus Tower

8625-112 Street

Edmonton AB T6G 1K8

