

Navigating Conflict

Learning Objectives

- Identifying issues early
 - Encouraging ownership and accountability
 - The power of listening and empathy
 - Difficult dynamics
 - Intervening in others' conflict - facilitating communication
-

Kristine Paranica, J.D., is the NDSU Ombudsperson. She served as the Director of the UND Conflict Resolution Center for 15 years prior to coming to NDSU. The Ombud's Office provides consultation, coaching, mediation, group facilitation, and training to faculty, departments and colleges. The principles of Ombudsmanship are independence, confidentiality, neutrality and informality. Most people who visit the office are in need of informal conflict resolution ideas to achieve a positive change in their situation.

NDSU Ombud's Office

Web: <http://NDSU.edu/ombud>

701.213-5114 -- Kristine.paranica@ndsu.edu

Identifying conflicts early

What types of conflict do you encounter at work?

What is most difficult about these conflicts for you?

When do you feel comfortable engaging in conflict conversation?

What roles do you play when you engage or intervene in a conflict situation? Supervisor Colleague Trusted Friend Facilitator
Mediator Advisor (circle all that apply)

What pitfalls have you encountered in your own conflicts at work?

What pitfalls have you encountered when intervening in others' conflicts at work?

Encouraging ownership and accountability:

Who owns conflict?

Conflict belongs with the individual(s), and those who assist or intervene must remember not to take away that ownership.

Have you ever given up (or wanted to) control of your conflict to someone else? What did that look like? How did it shape the outcome?

In the conflict situations involving others, did the parties take ownership of their conflict, or did they “given” it to you or others to resolve? What was the result?

How might you encourage problem solving with the individual you are in conflict with, as well as with situations involving others? (vs. solving it for them.)

How we individually and collectively benefit from owning and being accountable for resolving our own conflicts?

When to engage or intervene? Assessing the situation honestly

Some of us are eager to engage or intervene and resolve the issues for or with people. Others avoid these situations hoping they will go away. Here is a light guide:

- ✓ If the situation is impacting others' ability to function
- ✓ If the relationships are being harmed (collaboration/cooperation are inhibited)
- ✓ If others are being drawn in unnecessarily
- ✓ If the climate is impacted in a negative way
- ✓ If ignoring the situation has done more harm than good
- ✓ If the players or others are asking you for help
- ✓ If the behaviors are violating policy or preventing fair processes

Stages of Intervention:

The One-on-One Conversation:

- At 10:00 a.m.: “You won’t believe what Jon did...”
- At 3:15 p.m.: “You won’t believe what Carol said



1. The power of listening and empathy

When someone first comes to you, listening is your most powerful tool. It helps the person to know that you are interested and moves them out of fight or flight mode. If you listen with *empathy* (not sympathy), you show them you care without agreeing with them, taking sides, patronizing, or judging. It can also bring out their own creativity for solving problems.

Sympathy is: “What a terrible situation, at least the day is almost over!”

Empathy is: “I know get how hard this is, and I’m here with you.”

If you are going to listen, set aside everything else, and really listen – as if you are hanging on every word. This isn’t “agreeing”, it’s listening to understand. Ask questions only after you’ve listened, and be sure they are open-ended questions.

When listening:

- Lead from the heart – with empathy, caring and consideration.
- Treat those involved as equal humans, not standing in judgment.
- Intervene without fancy footwork, keeping your intervention very honest and real.
- Don't hurry straight to problem-solving – listening is more important.
- Don't make it about yourself and what you have to offer.

Benefits of Empathy and Listening:

- They feel heard and valued
- They calm down and can think more clearly
- They feel supported, not judged, and can more easily accept responsibility
- They feel able to be vulnerable because they trust you not to blame/judge
- They grow in their ability to trust, face problems, and engage with others
- You hear less of their conflict – it's resolved early and often

2. Avoiding entanglements

Neutrality: Before stepping into conflict that is unfolding among colleagues, carefully consider if you have a strong bias toward or against one of the players, since having one should make you cautious. It's helpful to step back and consider who you like most and why, and who you like least and why. This tells you something about yourself and the strengths of all.

Power: Do you have more power than many people in your workplace, or less? You cannot, and should not, down play your power. It's part of the structure and is obvious to all. Consider the way your power impacts the situation and use it to help in transparent ways.

Consider any power differential between the parties in conflict. Does one have more seniority or more education, more allies, etc.? Is one feeling vulnerable due to the power imbalance? Is one misusing power over the other? Be sure this power imbalance is made transparent and part of the conversation, and not ignored. You cannot balance the power, but the parties can shift power once they understand the power dynamics.

In the one-on-one conversation, your goals should be to:

- Listen to understand
- Support *their* ability to resolve the matter with the other person
- Offer your support, but only after they try on their own (they OWN it)

Intervening in others' conflict and mediating communication

There are two ways to intervene:

- 1) Maintaining communication with each person involved without bringing them together and facilitating a solution through coaching. In this scenario, you continue the steps, above, of listening and encouraging, sometimes suggesting ideas but avoiding imposing solutions unless absolutely necessary. Advising them about policies, using other resources, etc., can be helpful.

- 2) Facilitating or mediating their communication around a common table. In this role, it's important to be as neutral as possible and if you are not, to reveal your bias openly. Comfort with conflict is essential.

If you are in a role of authority, you may find that you are the ultimate decision maker. In those cases, you may wish to advise that, if they can't find a reasonable solution, you will have to impose a solution. However, in many cases, you can facilitate the conversation making imposition unnecessary. Remember that revealing your likely strategy/decision should they fail to resolve the issues can leave one or both feeling like you were biased or had a pre-determined outcome.

Goals of resolving conflict:

- ✓ Work toward mutual understanding before focusing on a preconceived outcome. If we can see each other's perspectives, there will be longer term benefits. Do not over focus on pushing solutions – allow ideas to be voiced and considered. Remember that *people support what they help create!*

- ✓ Support the work at the table by:
 - Reflecting back (paraphrasing) what you hear to the person speaking (do not deliver messages, e.g., “~~Sam, did you hear Donna say...~~” – it feels shaming and shuts them down)
 - Naming the emotions (eg., “Susan, you seem hurt by my/Tom’s accusation that you intentionally left him out.”)
 - Summarizing the themes and what is important to both
 - Allowing co-creation of the agenda, and change it as the conversation unfolds
 - If you are the facilitator, seeing yourself as holding space for the conversation, and not “running the meeting”

- ✓ Ensuring there is follow-up
 - These conversations usually require follow-up to check in with one another a few days after, which sets the state for healthy dialogue and improved interactions moving forward
 - Be open to additional sessions if the first one didn’t get to the heart of the issues or there wasn’t enough time (schedule at least 2 hours of time for these difficult conversations and leave early if it ends early).

Six Essential Skills for Managing Conflict, by Dr. George Kohlrieser

- 1) Create and Maintain a bond, even with a perceived adversary. Find a common goal and treat them as a potential ally. Focus on mutual respect, positive regard, and cooperation.
- 2) Establish dialogue and negotiate. Keep the conversation relevant to your common goals and be flexible if possible.
- 3) Put the fish on the table. In other words, raise difficult issues and deal with them vs. under the table where they will fester and rot. This idea also speaks to the best timing to do so – when people have time to put full attention into the conversation.
- 4) Understand what causes conflict. Is it about different needs and goals, or more about values or cultural differences? Are communication styles getting in the way? How are power, status, insecurity, resistance, confusion, lack of shared information, etc. affecting the situation?
- 5) Use the law of reciprocity. This is the foundation of cooperation and collaboration. We are hard-wired to follow patterns of reciprocity in our mirror neurons. Once you demonstrate empathy, it's likely to come back to you.
- 6) Build a positive relationship, and nurture it. Work to understand others' point of view, assume good intentions of others, and stay curious and open. Toxic patterns of conflict can ruin an office culture and climate, and so the time it takes to strengthen collegial bonds is well spent.

-Chris P. Neck, Charles C. Manz, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (1986-1998). Chichester: Dec 1992. Vol. 13, Iss 7
-George Kohlrieser, *Hostage at the Table: How Leaders can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006)

Thank you for your time, attention and participation!

Resources & Recommended Reading

Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler (2011). Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High. McGraw-Hill; 2 edition (Website is excellent, and offer e-newsletters)

Pearson & Porath (2009). The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About It. Portfolio Publishing.

Crookston (2012). Working with Problem Faculty: A 6-step guide. Jossey Bass.

Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (1999). Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most. New York: Penguin Books.

Ellis, A. & Lange, A. (1994). How to keep people from pushing your buttons. Carol Publishing Group.

Gerzon, M. (2006). Leading Through Conflict. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional intelligence. New York: Bantam Books.

Goleman, D. (1998). Working with emotional intelligence. New York: Bantam Books.

Lenski, Tammy, <http://lenski.com/>, Articles and blog. Accessed March 14, 2016. (sign up for email)

Rosen, M.I. (1998). Thank you for being such a pain. New York: Harmony Books.

Bush, R.A.B. & Folger, J.P. (2005). The promise of mediation: The transformative approach to conflict (Rev. ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bush, R.A.B. & Folger, J.P. (Eds.). (2001). Designing mediation: Approaches to training and practice — a transformative framework. New York: Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation.