ENGAGING YOUR COMMUNITY

The Discussion Leader's Guide to Public Issue Dispute Resolution and Participatory Decision-Making

Conflicts over public issues follow a predictable path of escalation. The "spiral of conflict" described below will help you better understand how to intervene and provide a positive response to conflict in your community:

1. **An event causes people to feel threatened, thwarted, treated unfairly -** This may be a change in government policy, a change in land use, or a proposed construction project.

2. **People with similar interests converge to fend off the threat -** People attempt to increase their power over the situation by forming alliances. Counter-alliances form in response.

3. **The issues proliferate -** The issues become more numerous and complex as more people respond and alliances enlarge.

4. **Information becomes distorted -** People begin to withhold information from "the other side", communication breaks down, and full understanding is missing.

5. **Positions harden and become further polarized -** People become strongly wed to the views of their allies and extremely negative toward their adversaries. Emotions run high when adversaries confront one another.

6. **Advocates attempt to persuade decision-makers to support their positions -** Elected officials are pulled into the dispute as adversaries identify authorities sympathetic to their views.

7. **In order to win, the other must lose -** Adversaries view one another as enemies that must be defeated. Values, norms, and constraints that normally govern people's behavior are often suspended in the fight to win

Positive Aspects of Public Conflict

While dying communities and organizations avoid conflict or work on it in ways that destroy relationships, successful communities and organizations anticipate conflict and work on it in ways that keep relationships intact. Positive outcomes that can result from public conflict include:

- Communities face their problems and take action
- People establish better long-term relationships
- People and ideas come together to stimulate creativity
- People undergo personal and professional growth
- Citizens participate more actively in public decision-making
- Communities change for the "common good"
- Leaders emerge
- Communities and organizations grow

Sources of Conflict

This fact sheet describes five common conflict sources and methods of working through them[1]. When working with groups in conflict, you can use this information as a reference to think through the sources of the conflict that they may be experiencing (keep in mind they may be experiencing more than one source of conflict at a time). Conflicts pertaining to data, interests and relationships are more likely to be amenable to resolution than those pertaining to values and structure.

---

[1] Moore, Christopher W., The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986.

1. Data Conflicts

Causes:

- Lack of information
- Misinformation
- Different views on what is important
- Different interpretations of data
- Different assessment procedures

Interventions:

- Reach agreement on the data that are important
- Agree on a process to collect data
- Develop common criteria to assess data
- Use third-party experts to gain an outside opinion or to break deadlocks

2. Relationship Conflicts

Causes:

- Strong emotions
- Misperceptions or stereotypes
- Poor communication or miscommunication
- Repetitive negative behavior

Interventions:

- Control expression of emotions through procedures and ground rules
- Promote expression of emotions by legitimizing feelings and providing a process
- Clarify perceptions and build positive perceptions
- Improve quality and quantity of communication
- Block negative repetitive behavior by changing structure
- Encourage positive problem-solving attitudes

3. Structure Conflicts

Causes:

- Destructive patterns of interaction behavior
- Unequal control, ownership or distribution of resources and information
- Geographic, physical or environmental factors that hinder operation
- Time constraints
- Unequal power and authority

Interventions:

- Clearly define and agree upon roles
- Control destructive behavior patterns through procedures and ground rules
- Establish a fair and mutually acceptable decision-making process
- Exchange information to equalize knowledge base
- Change negotiation process from positional to interest-based bargaining
- Modify means of influence used by parties (less coercion, more persuasion)
- Modify external pressures on parties

4. Value Conflicts

Causes:

- Different criteria for evaluating ideas or behavior
- Different goals based on different values
- Different ways of life, ideology and religion

Interventions:

- Avoid defining issue in terms of values
- Allow parties to agree and to disagree
- Search for a goal that all parties share
- Acknowledge and validate value differences and move on

5. Interest-Based Conflicts

Causes:

- Substantive interests
- Perceived or actual competition
- Procedural interests
- Psychological interests

Interventions:

- Focus on interests, not positions
- Look for objective criteria independent of all parties
- Develop integrative solutions that address the needs of all parties
- Search for ways to expand options or resources
- Develop trade-offs to satisfy interests of different strengths

In a complex public dispute, the parties may be experiencing all five types of conflict at once. An effective resolution strategy is to translate value, relationship, data and structure conflicts to the interest "wedge" as illustrated in Figure 1.
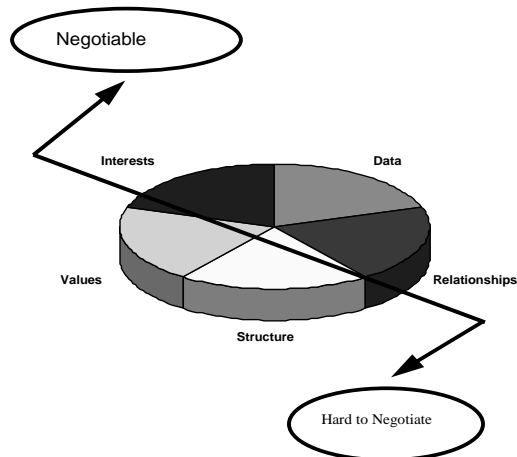

Figure 1. Sources of Conflict

APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

How well people respond to conflict determines how well they satisfy their own interests, how well they get along with one another and how effective they are as leaders and group members.

People tend to respond to conflict in one of several ways – avoiding, competing, accommodating, compromising, or collaborating[2] Each approach has its own uses and limitations and can be used as a strategy for resolving conflict.

Five basic strategies for responding to conflict, along with their uses and limitations, are presented here and illustrated in Figure 2.

Avoid

A response to conflict characterized by a low concern for one's own interests coupled with a low concern for the interests of other parties.

Uses:

- When the issue is trivial or of passing importance
- When other, more important issues are pressing
- When one perceives oneself to have very little power
- When confrontation has high potential for damage
- To allow time for cooler heads to prevail
- When others can resolve the conflict more effectively

Limitations:

- Coordination with other people suffers
- One's own input is never considered in decisions
- Important decisions made by default creates an over-cautious environment

Compete

A response to conflict characterized by a high concern for one's own interests combined with a low concern for the interests of other parties.

Uses:

- To set a precedent
- When basic rights are at stake

Limitations:

- Parties are closed off from information
- Strategy will cause conflict to escalate
- Losers likely will want to retaliate

Accommodate

A response to conflict characterized by a low concern for one's own interests combined with a high concern for the interests of other parties.

Uses:

- When the issue is more important to others than to you
- When preservation of the relationship outweighs other interests
- To allow for legitimate exceptions to rules when you are outmatched and losing to a competitor

Limitations:

- One's own ideas and concerns don't get attention and interests are not satisfied
- Loss of respect, influence or recognition may occur

Compromise

A response to conflict characterized by an intermediate concern for one's own interests, coupled with an intermediate concern for the interests of the other parties.

Uses:

- When goals are only moderately important
- To achieve temporary settlements
- For expedient solutions under time pressure
- To avoid destructive power struggles

Limitations:

- Can lose sight of values or objectives
- Can create a cynical climate
- Can distract from the merits of the issues
- Can miss opportunities for mutual gain

Collaborate

A response to conflict characterized by a high concern for one's own interests, paired with a high concern for the interests of other parties. To collaborate is to view each other as problem solvers, to engage in integrative bargaining and to negotiate.

Uses:

- When concerns cannot be compromised
- To learn, test assumptions, see others' views
- To merge different people's perspectives
- To gain commitment
- To work through hard feelings

Limitations:

- Takes time and energy
- Exploratory overture may easily be disregarded
- Demonstrated trust and openness can be abused

[2] Thomas, Kenneth. "Conflict and Conflict Management" in The Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Marvin Dunnette, ed. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1976.

The Solution Possibilities Frontier

When working to resolve public disputes, the objective is to approach the problem with a collaborative strategy. If we focus only on our existing solution possibilities frontier, the best solution we can achieve is a compromise where both sides lose something in order to reach agreement.

In collaborating, however, the issue is treated as a problem that can be solved by both parties. Here, information is freely exchanged so that creative solutions can be devised. This enables the parties to "expand the pie" and shift the solution possibilities frontier outward toward a win-win outcome as shown in Figure 2 below.
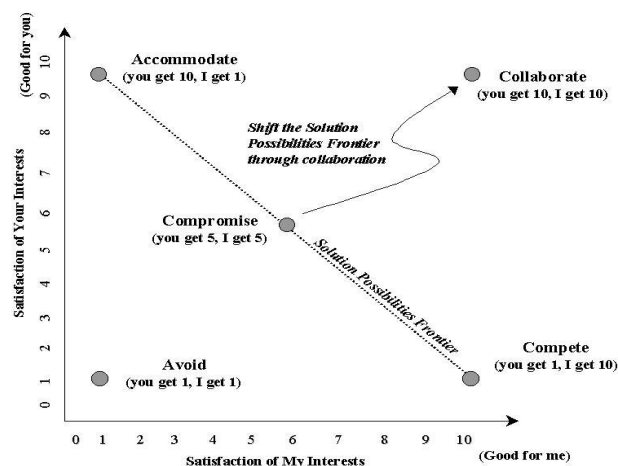

Figure 2. Shifting the Solution Possibilities Frontier

Prepared by
L. Steven Smutko
Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics
Simon Garber
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC 27695

North Carolina Cooperative Extension partners with communities to deliver education and technology that enrich the lives, land and economy of North Carolinians.