



Conflict resolution

Conflict within your group, or between other groups and individuals, can waste a lot of time and energy that could be better utilised.

Resolving conflict can make individuals and the group stronger and more effective, through better understanding of problems and an improved ability to resolve issues.

What is it?

Conflict is a struggle between parties because of a real or perceived difference in their needs or values. Conflict within your group is inevitable. Most people think conflict is always bad and try to avoid it but, properly managed, conflict can lead to productive outcomes.

Conflict can encourage careful examination of issues, increase understanding of problems from someone else's view and open the door to new ideas and solutions.

However, if it's not positively managed, conflict can become a real problem. Conflict resolution uses several processes to bring about a positive end to 'hostilities' so everyone can move onto more constructive activities.

In most situations, conflicts can be resolved informally through good communication, negotiation and good will – but sometimes you may need a skilled mediator to help resolve a deadlock.

How to do it

Conflict can be dealt with in many ways. The nature of the conflict, the level of seriousness, the number of people or organisations involved, any implications and the way people conflict, all have a bearing on the resolution process and the outcomes.

Conflict resolution

The essential ingredients to resolving conflict effectively include putting aside some dedicated time towards resolution. It is best done in a neutral venue using a process where those involved want to solve the issue.

The process involves being willing to listen and hear what is being said, explore a range of options, accept a solution even if it does not meet all the needs expressed and to accept, and apologise for any inappropriate behaviour.

Effective conflict resolution does require certain skills. Some people seem to have them naturally but they can also be learned.

Conflict prevention

Reducing the risk of conflict can minimise tensions in your group. You can minimise conflict through:

- Clearly explaining to anyone who may be affected what you intend to do and why. A phone call puts others 'in the picture' and actions don't come as a surprise
- Carrying out activities legally and according to accepted standards
- Treating people the way you like to be treated
- Celebrating successes with those involved
- Agreement on who should do the work for your group, such as using local contractors and suppliers rather than someone from outside the area
- Ensuring you follow the rules established by your group for decision making
- Asking for ideas before deciding on actions
- Seeking cooperation.

Personal styles to deal with conflict

Most people have a style for dealing with conflict. These styles may work in some situations, but not others. It is important to



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understand the likely approaches of those involved. The styles include:

- **Avoiding** – being passive and withdrawing from conflict situations. This can be useful if issues are trivial, there's no chance you will get your way, potential harm outweighs the benefits and you need time to let people cool down.
- **Accommodating** - trying to put yourself in the other person's place. The mood is often co-operative and conciliatory. An accommodating style may help build goodwill or harmony.
- **Competing** - trying to straighten out the other person, to argue who is right and defend your ideas. This style may be effective in emergencies, applying discipline, enforcement of unpopular rules and when doing unpopular things that must be done.
- **Collaborating** - working with people to find a solution that satisfies both sides. You are willing to work towards a mutually agreeable solution through negotiation. This style is helpful when both sides views' are important, learning something new is important, and when you have time to talk it through.
- **Compromising** – working to seek a middle-ground solution. The solution may only provide partial satisfaction to each party but is agreed by both parties. This style is most helpful when the power balance is equal and there's a deadline for finding a solution.

Finding a way forward

Here are some useful strategies you can try to have the best chance of achieving a 'win win' solution (also see Landcare Note 6.1: Effective Communication in Your Group):

- **Understand others' needs and concerns**- listen to what's said and don't interrupt, ask questions to make sure you

understand, summarise and list needs and concerns.

- **Communicate your own needs and concerns** - don't blame the other person, or look for solutions.
- **Keep your emotions in check** – stay relaxed, talk calmly and avoid blaming anyone. Find out what's upsetting others and acknowledge how they feel and why they feel that way. Take a break if you need to and set a time to continue the discussion.
- **Brainstorm creative options** - with both lists in front of you, think up all the ways to meet these needs, write them down (even the crazy ones), but don't judge or criticise them. Then discuss the results.
- **Consider your alternatives** - plan ahead on what you'll do if you don't reach agreement. If you're still having trouble, ask someone to mediate.
- **Build win-win situations** - look for options that meet as many needs as possible and combine the best options.

Finding help

The Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria can assist groups with difficulties to meet and discuss the issues. The service is free, confidential and easy to use.

The Centre can provide independent mediators/facilitators who will provide a structure for the meeting, help identify the issues, encourage exploration of everyone's needs and promote discussions of possible options and solutions.

Mediation is a cooperative problem-solving process which can help you reach your own agreements. In mediation you have control over the dispute and take responsibility for the outcome.



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Further references

Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria has a range of brochures on dispute resolution for organisations and individuals. Contact them via phone: (03) 9603 8370 or 1800 658 528, or via email: dscv@justice.vic.gov.au (<http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/disputes>)

Related Landcare Notes

This Landcare Note is one of a series. These notes provide an excellent guide for the ongoing operation of your group.

Landcare Note 6.1: Effective Communication in Your Group

Acknowledgements

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