Managing Conflict
Workshop Guide

Objectives
Participants will be able to
1. Understand what conflict is and how it can escalate;
2. Identify their own responses to conflict;
3. Learn constructive responses to a conflict situation;
4. Apply what they learn to personal conflict situations.

Materials Needed
• Flipchart & markers
• Copies of the following materials for each participant:
  — “How I Deal with Conflict”
  — “Reflection & Application”

Workshop Outline

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Icebreaker – 10 Minutes – “Attitudes Toward Conflict”

This activity works best if people are seated in a circle. Tell participants that you are going to read several statements about conflict. If they agree with the statement, ask them to stand. After you read one of the statements, ask the people standing why they agree with the statement. Allow time for several responses. Then call upon the people who are seated, and ask them why they do not agree with the statement. Feel free to add your own statements.

• It is best to avoid conflict with anyone.
• Conflict damages relationships with people.
• It is important that people see things the same way that I see them.
• People have differences, and it is not worth worrying about them.
• It is best to give in to the other person.
• Getting a job done is more important than worrying about people's feelings.
• It is important to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.
• Conflict can bring about important changes in a person's life.

After about 10 minutes, summarize some of the similarities and differences in their attitudes about conflict.

Introduction – 10 Minutes

Conflict is something you know. You have probably experienced conflict firsthand and have witnessed others in conflict. In fact, conflict is a natural part of life—it is part of being human because each person is different. People come from different places, have different life experiences, and think and believe differently about things. As you will learn in this workshop, part of dealing with conflict is learning to accept others for who they are and recognizing your own ego involvement and defense mechanisms. During this workshop, you will learn about what conflict is and how easily it can escalate in intensity, about your own responses to conflict, and about how to enhance your interpersonal skills to deal more effectively with conflict.

Topic Discussion – 15 Minutes

Definition of Conflict

When you hear the word “conflict,” what words comes to mind?

Allow a few minutes for participants to respond. Write their thoughts on the flipchart.

Look over the words, and summarize whether most of the words are positive or negative. They will likely be negative words such as “stress,” “hurt,” “anger.”

Conflict can cause a lot of stress in people's lives. It can hurt and damage relationships with others. However, conflict can also be positive. Can you identify when conflict is positive?

Allow a few minutes for participants to respond. They may say that conflict can bring about positive change and create new opportunities. Conflict also enables people to learn more about themselves and to grow and develop. If the group does not point out these positive aspects of conflict, then share them with the group.

First, let's talk about what conflict is. How do you define “conflict”?

Allow a few minutes for participants to respond. Write their definitions on the flipchart.
One definition is that conflict is a dynamic process reflecting the interaction of two or more interdependent parties who have some level of difference or incompatibility between them. This definition suggests that there are four important aspects of conflict.

1. There is some level of interdependence between the people. In other words, people are dependent upon one another to meet their needs, goals, or interests.
2. There is a significant relationship between the people, such as family, friend, co-worker, or teammate.
3. There is some kind of threat or struggle between them that is either real or perceived.
4. Negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, or fear, are ignited.

**Levels of Conflict Intensity**

There are different levels of conflict intensity. By understanding the possible escalation of conflict, it is possible to keep a conflict from moving to a higher level through interpersonal communication skills (Runde & Flanagan, 2007, pgs. 66-80).

**Level One – Differences:** People have different views about things, such as the views that were discussed in the Icebreaker activity.

**Level Two – Misunderstandings:** People often misunderstand each other. People make assumptions, and “filter” what others say through their own experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. This is a critical stage of conflict and one in which the situation can escalate into conflict, depending upon how people respond.

**Level Three – Disagreements:** “Disagreements are basically differences with an attitude” (Runde & Flanagan, 2007, p. 73). It is okay to disagree with someone. People can explore their disagreements, and they can even debate issues to learn from each other. The danger lies in letting emotions get out of control. While some level of emotion is okay, when people become too impassioned, they can lose their reasoning and say or do things they later regret. It is important to be aware of rising emotional levels and to keep the discussion focused on the issue.

**Level Four – Discord:** Conflict at this level “is characterized by generally deteriorating relationship between the conflict partners” (Runde & Flanagan, 2007, p. 86). The discomfort is apparent not only in discussing the issue, but also in dealing with the person. Emotions tend to run high at this point. There is an inverse relationship between emotions and reasoning. As emotions rise, reasoning declines, and a person can easily lose control over his or her behavior. Consequently, a person will likely try to avoid the other person, avert eye contact, or say things that are hurtful. One way to tell when conflict is at this level is when people find themselves “having difficulties in the relationship even when they are not dealing with the original conflict” (Runde & Flanagan, 2007, p. 76).

**Level Five – Polarization:** This is the nasty stage of conflict that is damaging to relationships. People often recruit others to join their cause; make themselves “right” and others “wrong”; expend a lot of energy to defend their position and demean the other person; and refuse to work toward resolving the conflict. At this stage, a person is so emotionally vested in the conflict that it turns to “winning” the fight at any cost and “doing in” the other side. Consequently, the issue goes unresolved, and the relationship continues to deteriorate.

The good news is that people can make conscious choices about their responses to conflict and take responsibility for their behavior. While a person cannot control the behavior of others, a person can control his or her own actions—or at least try, which is, admittedly, very hard to do.

How do you deal with conflict? Have you thought about how you respond in a difficult situation?
Activity – 25 Minutes – How I Deal with Conflict

Distribute the activity sheet “How I Deal with Conflict” to each participant. Allow about 5 minutes for participants to identify a recent conflict situation and how well they dealt with it. Ask participants to partner with someone with whom they feel comfortable discussing this topic and share their experiences and thoughts. Allow about 10 minutes for discussion. Bring the total group back together, and ask them what they have learned in their discussions. Allow about 10 minutes for discussion. Develop a list of what they learned.

Topic Discussion – 15 Minutes

You will have many differences with people throughout your lifetime; differences are part of our humanity. How you respond to these differences and deal with conflict is a choice you can make. Let’s focus on specific things you can do.

Write the responses to differences and conflict on a flipchart as you discuss them. Encourage contributions from the group, and refer back to the earlier discussion for constructive behaviors that they have identified.

1. Be aware of your emotions. When your emotions rise, it is hard to think clearly. You can become defensive, argumentative, and escalate your own emotions as well as those of the other person. Take a deep breath, and think about what you do next. Think about how you respond and whether or not it is a good idea to continue the conversation. If it is important to resolve the issue and emotions are getting too high, either yours or theirs, it is okay to say something like, “I know this is important, but I feel it would be better if we could talk at a later time when we’ve had time to think about it.” Then be sure that you follow up.

How do you know when your emotions are rising? What signals does your body give you?

Allow a few minutes for responses. Responses might include body feels hot, ears turn red, veins in neck stand out, or the tummy does a flip-flop.

A technique for dealing with emotions in difficult situations is “Go to the Balcony,” a concept coined by William Ury (1991). It means taking a detached and distanced view of the person or situation—as if you were in the balcony watching a performance on stage. It does not mean being cold, unfeeling, or non-understanding. Instead, it means not taking the other person’s actions personally, even if the person is being personal. The intent is to try to disconnect the automatic link between emotions and actions. Here are some things you can try.

• Step back, collect your wits, and try to see the situation objectively.
• Don’t respond immediately. Take some time to think about how to respond appropriately.
• Disconnect the automatic link between your emotions and how you respond. You can’t (and shouldn’t) eliminate your feelings, but you can stop them from governing your behavior.
• Pay attention to your frame of mind. Think of difficult situations or people as “teachers.” They are giving you a gift of learning about yourself and an opportunity to grow and develop. Assume, until there is irrefutable evidence, that the other person is not malicious.

2. Listen to understand the other person. Watch his or her body language. Ask questions to clarify his or her message. Be sensitive to your assumptions, and do not jump to conclusions too quickly. Don’t argue. Instead, make sure you fully understand what the other person is conveying to you, both the content of the message and his or her feelings.

Be sensitive to possible misunderstandings. Ask the other person to state the problem from his or her point of view. Restate what you heard; then state the problem from your perspective. This should help clarify any misunderstandings, faulty assumptions, or hastily made judgments. Remember, it is okay to agree to disagree.
3. When you speak, think carefully about what you say and how you say it.
   • What is your message? What is your point?
   • Why are you saying it? What is your intention? Is it to provide information, or to hurt? If your intention is to hurt, don’t say it. You’re going to escalate the conflict.
   • Think carefully about the words you use. Do not exaggerate the situation, but try to be honest and direct. Don’t say more than necessary.
   • Stay focused on the issue; don’t bring other issues into the conversation.
   • Stay in the present or future. It is not useful to bring up things from the past that can’t be changed.
   • Separate the issue from the person. If it is another person’s behavior that is causing the conflict, be specific about the behavior as it affects you. Don’t make generalizations or attack the person.
4. Ask questions to move toward resolving the issue, such as: “What do you see as the next step?” “What would you like to have happen?” “What do you expect from me?”
5. Look for areas of agreement, and point them out by saying something like, “We seem to agree on . . .”
6. Brainstorm and work together to develop strategies that resolve your differences.

Reflection & Application – 10 Minutes
Distribute the “Reflection & Application” activity sheet, and ask participants to think about what they learned about conflict in today’s workshop and how they can apply it in various situations. Specifically ask them to reflect on why it is important for leaders to deal with conflict effectively.

Summary
Conflict is a part of your life, and you will find it at home, school, and work. It can cause great stress and often damages important relationships. Conflict can also bring about needed changes and opportunities. It can take relationships to more meaningful levels. Perhaps most important, conflict can help you grow and develop as you learn more about yourself in difficult situations. You can become more aware of your responses to conflict and work to develop more effective skills. This requires you to not only understand yourself, your ego, and your defense mechanisms, but also to recognize that you have choices in how you respond to conflict situations. Leaders who have mastered effective conflict skills are not only respected, they are the ones that others want to follow.

References
How I Deal with Conflict

Think about the questions below, and write your responses in the boxes.

1. Identify a conflict situation you have experienced. It can be at home, work, or school.
   Who was involved, and what was it about?

2. How did you deal with it? Do you feel you handled it well? Why or why not? Was the issue resolved?
   Was the relationship damaged?

3. What did you learn from this experience? Will you do anything differently in future conflict situations?

4. In general, what are your “hot buttons”—the sensitive words or topics that cause your emotions to rise?

5. What do you do to control your emotions?

6. In general, would you say that you:
   A. Avoid conflict situations?
   B. Accommodate, or give in, to others?
   C. Compromise, give a little and expect others to give a little?
   D. Compete, try to “win”?
   E. Collaborate, work with another person to make sure you both get what you want?
Reflection & Application

1. What did you learn today about conflict?

2. Reflect back on the conflict situation you identified earlier. Could you have done anything differently in this situation? If so, what?

3. Can you apply what you learned today to conflict situations at home, work, or school, or with friends? If so, what can you do?

4. Why are conflict management skills important for today’s leaders?
About Leadership in Action

Leadership in Action is a multi-state leadership development program for college-age students. It was funded in part by an USDA/CSREES HEP Challenge Grant, 2005-2009 to the University of Illinois, Purdue University, and the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Undergraduate students from those universities participated in a 21-month program during which the workshop modules were developed, used during the two cohort programs, reviewed, and revised.

We intend that students who have been trained in conducting effective workshops use these materials for leadership workshops with various student organizations. The materials can be used separately for individual workshop sessions, in any combination for a short-term program, or in their entirety for a long-term program.

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