

PRINCIPLES OF CONFLICT
(Using Conflict as an Opportunity for Constructive Change)

About conflict in general

- 1) **People are good.** Assume that others have good intentions. Clarify your own intentions
- 2) Conflict comes out of **legitimate differences in interest.**
- 3) Everyone involved in a shared project **shares some interests.**
- 4) Dealing with conflict has the potential to **make life better** for everyone involved.
- 5) Conflict usually combines interpersonal transactions with dynamics of **power** that are organizational.

About conflict behavior

- 6) **Conflict evokes emotion.** Intense feeling is both a sign of conflict and a means of expression.
- 7) Most ways of expressing emotion also convey **judgments.** Judgments lead to injury and argument, and away from helpful change.
- 8) People feeling strongly about something need and seek support. **Talking with others** can aid resolution, but it can also be divisive.
- 9) When feeling angry, hurt, or otherwise alienated, many people are inclined not to talk with the person with whom they are in conflict. **Silence** is the soil in which seeds of conflict grow into messy weeds.
- 10) When in distress, people try to feel better by using whatever means are at hand. In the absence of other agreements, those means often involve some form of **coercion.**

About multicultural conflict in particular

- 11) Working in diverse groups means **learning as we go.** None of us is expert in multiculturalism.
- 12) **Differences of culture can lead to communication problems,** although communication problems are not unique to people with obvious cultural differences.
- 13) When multiculturalism is a problem, the problem is not difference but **domination.**
- 14) Where **racism** exists (and there is nowhere in modern America it does not), there is conflict, whether openly expressed or not. That conflict is usually apparent to people of color, often invisible to white people.

Approaches to addressing conflict constructively

- 15) State clearly your **shared goals**. Being aware of common reasons for working together helps motivate one to do the hard work of resolving conflict.
- 16) Assume **equal rights** – that is, everyone has the same right to satisfaction.
- 17) Make clear agreements about **fundamental working principles** (for instance, about decision-making, information-sharing, distribution of work loads, etc.)
- 18) Know that you don't know other people's interests, cultures, feelings, perceptions, and **believe them when they tell you**.
- 19) Work out an explicit **conflict resolution policy** in advance of the need to use it.

Sample Conflict Resolution Policy

- Act on the assumption that conflict is dignified and that you share with all others in your organization a will to work it through constructively.
- When a conflict arises, speak to the person or people involved at the earliest opportunity.
- Ask for a time (preferably soon) to talk through the conflict. Speaking up won't help if the person you're speaking to isn't ready to hear you.
- Express emotions honestly and respectfully.
- Listen to emotions without defensiveness or argument.
- Clear up intuitions, assumptions, and indirect communication.
- State interests without arguing their merits.
- Identify the roots of emotion in dynamics of power.
- Sort out interpersonal, cultural, and organizational aspects of those dynamics.
- Express the solution you each would most like to see.
- Problem-solve changes that take care of everyone involved.
- If you get stuck, ask for help: first from colleagues in the organization, then if needed from an outside intervener (preferably someone agreed upon in advance.)

Approaches to dealing with conflict need to be tailored to the composition and needs of each group. Expect to try policies on for size, to revise and refine them as you learn about yourselves.

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