**Managing Conflict**

 

**What is Conflict** – Conflict is a difference of opinion between two or more people where there is a perceived threat to their needs, interests or concerns. It’s part of everyday life and we all have different experiences of different levels of conflict.

For parent forums conflict can be within the planning groups of forums, with the wider networks of parents or between the forum and representatives from local authorities or voluntary organisations.

**Common areas of conflict for forums can include:**

* How money is spent
* How to handle situations with local authorities
* Who does what – people expecting the chair to do everything
* One person wanting to do things their way whether it’s the chair or another dominating forum member
* Prioritising areas of work
* Who holds key positions in the forum
* How local authorities involve and treat parents in decision making groups
* What services are commissioned
* Which services are to be cut
* Organisations agendas and individual agendas
* Party Politics can cause conflict particularly at election times as forums may not be aware of how to work with different political parties at this time. Party politics can be an area of conflict both within forums as parents support different parties and between forums and local authorities.

**For forums managing conflict well is key –** Poor conflict management can lead to poor relationships both within the forum and with partner agencies – parents will get fed up of giving their time to work in such negativity and some may leave. For some forums conflict can be devastating – so managing it well with help everyone feel better about differences of opinion and help people focus on finding solutions that work for everyone.

**We learn how to deal with conflict** and challenges through our childhood – parents, teachers, friends, family and the communities we live in. We have all learnt different ways of managing conflict – some will be more helpful than others.

**Conflict can be a time of high emotions** with people feeling angry, threatened, hurt and emotional. So do you escalate conflict and make the situation worse using sarcasm, talking over people, shouting, name calling, blaming? Or do you de-escalate conflict by really listening to what people say, and helping them to reflect on solutions?

**Managing Conflict Effectively**

For Chairs good facilitation skills are essential, helping everyone to feel included and involved in key decisions and acknowledging differences so that they are used creatively to build a stronger forum. Be clear that your role as chair is not to dominate and get everyone to think the same as you – your role is to facilitate good decision making in the forum.

No matter what the situation some basic principles apply and can help anyone effectively resolve conflict situations – so here are the key rules:

1. **Your own emotional state** is key. If you’re not feeling in the right state then things are more likely to go badly. So being able to switch into a positive, calm and resourceful state is essential. If you’re tired or emotional yourself it’s fine for you to look after you and say that you can’t deal with it now but you recognise that it’s important and can you arrange a time to talk about it – or if in a meeting, you can go for a break or ask if it can be put on the next meetings agenda. Look after you!

To get into the right emotional state – first think about the key personal qualities you will need to be able to deal with the situation – is it calm, relaxed, interested, focussed, clear headed, flexible, energetic? Then use those personal qualities to handle the situation – you can choose the most appropriate emotional state for the situation.

1. **What’s your positive intention.** What’s your purpose in dealing with this situation – is it to win the argument, to get your own way, to make them look or feel stupid? If you don’t have a positive intention things will go badly. So perhaps you could have a positive intention for you and the other party or parties. It could be to clarify the areas of conflict and enable the parties to reach a mutually beneficial solution, or to understand each other’s perspective.

Being clear about your intention and ensuring that it is mutually positive will lead to a better outcome and greater trust and openness.

1. **Unravel the situation** Taking time to understand perspectives can be like unravelling a ball of wool that’s been played with by a couple of cats! You need patience and a bag full of open questions to really understand what someone is saying and what they want from the situation. At this stage good listening is key. When you listen – don’t speak! It may sound obvious but it is very easy to start answering immediately, put across your own perspective and interrupt their train of thought. Stop and listen some more – focus your attention on what they’re saying – if they pause for a moment – don’t fill the space let them think their thoughts and then continue – so listen, listen and more listening!
2. **Clarify key issues.** What’s important to them in the situation, What happened? Who said or did what? You need to unravel people’s emotions, separate facts from perception – what was said or done? What did they think about it? What other facts might be key? In participation this could be rules, service agreements, policies and procedures - eligibility criteria, community care law – because what people said or did may breach these in some way.

What’s the nub of the matter – what’s the conflict really about – take it up a level from the detail – is it about values – clashes over what’s important, beliefs – what people believe to be true about a situation – you’ll recognise this from people using “should” “ought” “must” – is this real or is this perception. Help people to be clear about what are feelings, facts and perception.

1. **Re-focus attention** When enough time has been given to listening and unravelling then you can refocus attention. Find out what they want in this situation – re-focus attention away from the negativity of the conflict, what they don’t want and onto what they do want – what’s the real outcome – does this pass the positive intention test?

1. **Agree Action** – or agree to disagree and agree what can be done as a next step. Some people may need to have time away before they can do this or any other stage – so make sure people are asked if they feel they can do each step.

**Some tips for forums to reduce conflict:**

* Accept that there will be differences and learn to facilitate good decision making to include a wide range of views.
* Develop your facilitation skills and use of questions – they are key to resolving conflict.
* If you spot conflict going on – it’s ok to draw it out by clarifying the different perspectives. You can write up different opinions on flipchart and asking other members of the group if they have other ideas or views.
* Agree how you will work together – have a group agreement which could include one person speaking at a time, mutual respect, confidentiality and bring people gently back to it if they breach it.
* Use flip chart to help people see that their views are being acknowledged and heard.
* Flip chart is also a useful way of keeping people on track and focussing attention.
* Split people into smaller working groups to focus on different aspects of a topic or to generate a wide range of options over an issue.
* Clarify roles and responsibilities – remember the chair is there to facilitate decision making and not make all the decisions.
* Develop a learning culture by not blaming people when things go wrong – look for solutions and don’t focus too much time on thinking about the problems.
* Be clear about what you want from each agenda item – is it ideas, options, different approaches, decisions or feedback? If people are clear about what you want from them then it will be easier for them to contribute effectively.
* Focus on de-escalating conflict and be clear in your purpose when handling conflict.
* Become very good at asking questions to empower people to find solutions.
* As well as having representatives on planning groups it’s good for forums to set up regular informal meetings with commissioners, managers etc to develop a better relationship with key people and make it easier to address areas of difference!
* Draw up an agreement between the forum and other organisations about how you will work together to clarify expectations and manage different opinions.
* Be aware that if you’re working with political parties it’s good practice to build good relationships with them all – at times of election it is even more important that you are even handed and non party political. If you ask questions of one party you should ask all political parties including Independents and print all responses fairly and accurately. There may be times when political leadership changes in local authorities so you need to have good relationships with them all.



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