

Helping Others with Their Problems

"It's ideal to say that people should come to the table who want to work together and are open to engaging with others whose views are very different than their own. Sometimes this is possible. Sometimes, due to history, an intense attachment to the issues, and concerns about what might happen if 'the other side wins,' people are closed, angry, distrustful, and a collaborative break-through solution is far from anyone's capacity to envision." [www.workplaceconnections.com]

1. Enter into the situation having left your expectations behind. Instead, take with you...

a. your sense of yourself as a "helper"

clarity of your role; ability to explain it

compassion, pain, empathy; courtesy and fairness, even in the absence of respect

"bracketing": the ability to "set aside" one's opinion, biases, perspectives, affiliations

knowledge of communication in emotionally charged situations

your ability to sit in the fire [courage + communication skills]

how much "face-saving" is possible?

"do no harm"

remember who owns the problem

resolution of the issues vs. the significance of the relationships involved

Are you building the capacity of the community to be able to talk about anything that is essential in the future?

b. necessary boundaries

how you will proceed "speaking structures" and other ground rules

role clarity [e.g., my job, your job]: your need to understand does not mean you are taking sides

“do not harm others”

you must protect the “less vocal/opinionated” [but this doesn’t mean taking their side]

the universal need to be heard, particularly before leaving

how both sides will and will not collude/impact others

confidentiality issues

c. key skills

listen reverently, between the lines, for what “isn’t said”

“framing”: naming the kind of issue/problem:

disagreement, dispute [polarized?]: need for differentiation or unity? often from unmet expectations

feud [declared or not]

injury [intent vs. impact]

need for restoration

facts, values, strategies

clarifying...

areas of agreement

areas of disagreement

“positions” and “goals” for both sides

stakeholders involved and impacted

that each party understands the position of the other

self-control

inside and out

controlling your face, tone, eye contact

closure, summarizing

what you've learned

areas where you can help

what you "cannot do" or are "unwilling to do"

naming issues/situations you can't help

when to run like hell...

leave people with next steps/assignments

escalation

concrete closure if possible

timing ["hot"?], deadlines

ground rules [e.g., confidentiality]

Working informally with interpersonal conflict before it harms the group [www.resolvegb.com]

Intervening in the “conflict growth pattern”:

1. Conflict collisions: usually over trivial matters, usually involves unmet expectations. Sometimes, “words” are exchanged, maybe side remarks. Frustration is very implicit at this point.
2. No discussion of undiscussables: Sitting down to discuss what happened, to make the implicit explicit, seems too trivial. People see no compelling reason to sit down and talk; there’s nothing at stake—just clash of personalities.
3. Fertile festering: the conflict goes underground, and begins to impact others [effectiveness, productivity, well-being, interdependence]
4. Best time to intervene [surface issues, extinguish flames]
 - a. pull both parties aside and speak to them together
 - b. share your observations [with data; no inferences]
 - c. share the impact it’s having on others [specific examples]
 - d. share your expectation that the issue is resolved in a positive way
 - e. ask both if they believe your expectations are unreasonable
 - f. schedule a meeting [by the next day] that you will facilitate and give instructions about how to prepare for it
5. If no intervention, conflict will go underground
 - a. major players will form “beach heads” and strengthen their positions by creating alliances
 - b. Peripheral people get dragged in and pressured
 - c. Escalating stress; eventually see group-level outcomes
 - d. Resentments build as some people begin to carry the workload of others

Different professional helping roles [Mass. Dept. of Public Collaboration]

Conflict assessment: helps parties determine whether an issue or dispute is appropriate for dispute resolution or consensus-building. Provides opportunities to clarify the issues; choose or design a process [e.g., dispute resolution or collaborative problem-solving process]; decide who should participate in the process; and determine the costs involved. The assessment is conducted by a skilled, neutral party.

Consensus-building/Collaborative problem-solving: includes a variety of processes based on collaboration in which a facilitator assists a group with diverse and often competing interests to collaboratively problem-solve and reach agreement. Consensus usually results in policies with wide support, a reduced likelihood for divisive community war, or legal battles. A skilled neutral facilitator assists in defining the stakeholders; getting parties to the table; designing the ground rules and meeting structure; facilitating the process; providing meeting summary notes; and assisting in the writing of resulting agreement documents.

Facilitation: Facilitated processes assist groups with diverse interests or opinions to work together. A facilitator is an impartial person who assists with structuring and managing meetings, hearings, workshops, or conferences. Facilitators may assist groups to resolve problems and reach agreement or simply facilitate planning, information sharing, public involvement, or the gathering of stakeholder input. A facilitator helps the participants convene the process/meeting; establish ground rules; design and follow an agenda; set up the meeting place; and make other arrangements.

Mediation: a form of assisted negotiation in which a neutral third-party professional helps the disputing parties create a voluntary settlement to their dispute. The mediator meets jointly and separately with the parties to review the issues and explore possible proposals for resolution. The goal is to arrive at a mutually agreeable settlement as quickly and amicably as possible, thereby avoiding the time, expense and uncertainties of protracted litigation. Participation in mediation is voluntary and confidential. Agreements reached as a result of mediation are binding by mutual consent of the parties.

Deliberative dialogue.

Dispute systems design.

Evaluation [for data collection].

Joint fact-finding

Regulatory negotiation [“reg-neg”]

Training.

Organizational climate assessment.

Arbitration