

Resolving Conflict

Build Your Organization's Effectiveness

Conflict can happen in families, with farm employees, where you volunteer your time or within your organization. The results can fall anywhere on the conflict continuum. The worst outcomes can be devastating — good board members leave, senior staff may be fired, the public and membership hear rumblings and your credibility as an organization is damaged. This in turn can affect your ability to recruit new members.

Think about both your personal response to conflict and how your organization handles conflict. Are issues swept under the rug? Is communication open among board members and staff? Have discussions been held as to how conflict will be managed when it arises?

Establishing conflict norms before conflict becomes an issue in your organization can make it easier to deal with when it does happen. It can take away the personal element that is often a part of difficult situations.

Sources of Conflict

What are potential sources of conflict for your organization?

- **Authority, control, power** – Does the board or executive director have the final say in a situation? How does the chair exercise power? Are all voices around the table considered?
- **Personalities that clash** – Sometimes we make assumptions about people. There may be stereotypes about certain types of producers or those who come from a particular region of the province. Past disagreements and negative interactions may be brought into the current situation.
- **Value systems** – Do you value risk-taking while your fellow board member is cautious and thinks the organization should operate status-quo? Have you mistaken your board chair's response to a crisis as authoritative when it's actually a reflection of insecurity in handling the situation? Don't mistake the behaviour for a value.
- **Lack of resources or an abundance of resources** – What should the organization do with its financial, human and other resources? Outside factors can influence how resources are allocated and board members will have different personal approaches to financial management.
- **Do different members in your organization have different interests?** Do they represent different commodity groups? Does one speak for producers while another represents consumers? It may be perceived that there are competing interests at play even if that is not the reality.

- **Misinformation or lack of information can create conflict.** Opposing views about priorities can also create differences. How can the organization ensure everyone is at the same level and has current and correct information?
- **Goals** – Has everyone agreed on the goals for the organization? Has the organization planned outcomes for the year? Without consensus on the mission, vision and goals, the organization and its members will experience conflict in their day-to-day operations.

Conflict management styles

The ability to cope successfully with conflict is an important skill for all board members to have. There is no perfect way to handle all conflicts but there are several methods or styles that work well. Which one is appropriate or successful will depend on the situation and the people involved.

There are five styles for handling conflict.

Avoidance

You avoid working through the conflict and as a result both parties lose out.

Accommodation

You are quick to allow the other person to satisfy their own needs but neglect to address your own concerns. You end up losing and the other person is the winner.

Competition

Your concerns are for your own situation only. You are driven to get your needs met without any regard for the other person. This is a win-lose situation.

Compromise

Your concern is for both your needs and the other person's needs. Neither of you will receive exactly what you want. This can be described as a no win, no lose situation.

Collaboration

It is important to you that both your needs and the other person's needs will be met. You are willing to work together until you can solve the problem in a way that allows both of you to win.

Remember that different situations will require different approaches. One way of handling conflict is not necessarily better than the other. In general, however, collaboration and compromise approaches are seen as having the best results.

Definitions of conflict

Conflict continuum

The range of conflict within an organization spanning from no conflict to extreme conflict. The absence of conflict can be a sign of issues not being discussed, while excessive conflict can potentially paralyze an organization. At the mid-point, the conflict may switch from constructive to destructive.

Conflict norm

The agreed upon written or unwritten rules of how an organization deals with conflict. In a conflict situation, this can assist individuals to focus on the issue rather than how to deal with the conflict as that has already been established.



Conflict management strategies

Specific strategies can be used to help arrive at win-win solutions to conflicts. Try the following:

Establish shared goals

To create a climate of collaboration, people need to focus on what they share in common. For example, two board members arguing over specific production methods for test plots could start by agreeing that they both share the goal of increasing productivity.

Separate the people from the problem

Focus on the problem to be solved, not on the personality traits of the people involved. Telling people an idea is stupid may be tactless, but it is less damaging than telling the people they are stupid.

Focus on interests, not positions

Positions are demands the negotiator makes, while interests are what generate the positions. Interests are a person's needs, wants, fears and concerns. For example, a dispute may arise between two board members about which one should head up the recruitment committee for the new executive director. One is a newer, younger member who would like the experience, while the other has some human

resources experience and feels they are best suited to the role. They are concerned that others may not be aware of what the current employment standards are. The main interest for both is to hire the best person for the job.

Invent options for mutual gains

Be as creative as possible. Once everyone understands each other's interests, try brainstorming to generate as many solutions as possible.

Use objective criteria

If the people in a dispute can shift their thinking from what they want to what makes the most sense, the merits of each possible solution will be easier to judge.

Define success in terms of gains, not losses

Your satisfaction with the outcome of any dispute will be influenced by the standards you use to judge it. The question to ask is whether the settlement constitutes an improvement over the starting point.

Always strive to achieve win-win solutions. Even when a win-win solution doesn't seem to exist, one can usually be found if there is determination to do so.

Positives about conflict

In working through the challenges that come with resolving conflict, it is helpful to acknowledge the positive things that can come from the process.

- Confrontation can lead to change. Change can lead to positive results.
- Awareness of conflict can increase motivation to do well and get along better.
- Conflict can increase our awareness of problems that need to be solved.
- Conflict can make life more interesting.
- Disagreement can often cause a decision to be thought through more carefully.
- Conflict can help you understand what you are like under pressure.
- Smaller conflicts can defuse potentially larger ones.
- Conflict can be fun if it is not taken too seriously.

Conflict can result in better solutions, moving an organization forward in new ways. Effectively resolving conflict means stronger relationships among board members and staff that result in stronger organizations.



For more information

- Go to manitoba.ca/agriculture and click on Industry Leadership
- Email us at leadership@gov.mb.ca
- Visit your local Manitoba Agriculture Office