



New County Extension Directors Fact Sheet
Managing Difficult Situations and Conflict

Introduction

Your effectiveness as a County Extension Director is often based on your ability to develop positive, collaborative relationships with co-workers and clientele. In every relationship, the differences that make us unique are also sources of potential conflict.

People differ in values, self-interests, work styles, priorities, and many other ways. The greater the differences, the heavier the burden on your ability to manage and appreciate those differences.

As County Extension Director, you may be faced with difficult situations and even be called upon to manage conflict in your office unit. Conflict can be threatening, yet it is inevitable in office relationships. Managing conflict is important so we may enjoy its benefits and prevent its potential destructiveness. Unmanaged conflict diminishes productivity and effectiveness, decreases trust and respect, and can often “mushroom” into negativity that affects others.

Blips, Clashes, and Crises...

Learn to distinguish between “blips”, “clashes”, and “crises”.

“Blips” are the minor annoyances that occur in all relationships. However, blips can accumulate and tension often increases if they are not handled appropriately.

“Clashes” are the “blips” that have accumulated. They may be repeated arguments about the same issues, increased arguments, less cooperativeness, diminished trust, and questions about the value of the relationship.

Most of us recognize “crises”. Indications may involve open and hostile communication, refusal to work cooperatively, gossip and sabotage of individuals outside the office environment, or signs of power plays, hidden agendas and self interests.

Knowing Yourself...

A very important part of conflict management is knowing yourself. What patterns have you developed in your life in dealing with conflict? Would you rather avoid conflict at any cost? Are you autocratic in your approach to conflict? Have you learned the skill of collaborative conflict management? There may be appropriate times to avoid or accommodate as well as collaborate and compromise during conflict.

Consider the following conflict management skills:

- Find a time to talk and listen. It is often helpful to get away from the office or select a neutral location.
- Express appreciation for the opportunity to talk together.
- Express optimism about finding a solution that can be beneficial to all parties involved.
- Learn to describe behavior rather than to accuse or assume what's driving a situation or a person's motives. Determine what the real issue is by asking questions and allowing each person to state how they see the situation.
- Remember that the purpose is to identify the problem, explore alternatives to address it and agree on a plan of action. It is not about blaming, intimidating or destroying an individual's self esteem. Stay focused on the problem at hand.
- It's always a good idea to set some ground rules before beginning the discussion. Respect for each other, no interrupting, and allowing everyone opportunity to speak are a few that managers often use.
- Listen carefully during times of difficulty and conflict. Listening can provide needed information about the situation and the individuals who are involved. **LISTEN FOR UNDERSTANDING AND NOT NECESSARILY AGREEMENT.**
- Think about what it is like to be the other person.
- Try to understand the other person's meaning and experience with what is happening.
- Separate the **PERSON** from the **PROBLEM** as much as possible.
- Focus on similar interests. Look for areas of agreement.
- Search for **OPTIONS** where all individuals mutually gain.
- Before the end of the conversation, decide what the next steps are. Define action steps and individual's responsibility. Ask each person to restate what they will do as a result of the discussion.
- Agree on a follow-up date for assessing how the plan is working.
- Demonstrate appreciation for employees as professionals in working together to resolve issues.

Asking for Help

Managing conflict is hard work. Don't hesitate to ask for guidance, support or just a few good ideas on how to approach the situation. There are several people that can be helpful resources.

1. Your Program Unit Director may have suggestions on how best to approach a situation since he/she often has information about the office environment and how it worked before you arrived.
2. The University also provides an employee assistance program where counselors can discuss the situation and offer personal assistance.
3. Other County Extension Directors may have faced similar situations. Talk with them, but be sure to ask for confidentiality. Your integrity and trust are at stake if individuals in your office become topics of conversation among the "grapevine".

Conflict that is not identified, understood and managed effectively can lead to inefficient use of organizational resources, place stress on individuals, and misdirect energy. Conflict that is effectively managed can result in increased creativity and innovation, a rethinking of goals and practices, and strengthened relationships.

Adapted from OSU Extension Human Resources, County Director Orientation Guide sheet # 10. Dr. Gail Gunderson, primary author.