

## **AVOIDING AND RESOLVING CONFLICT WITHIN GROUPS**

School Associations and other community groups active in the life of a school start with several advantages: members generally already know one another pretty well or quickly form productive relationships; they share the same objective of supporting the educational program of their school's students; they are volunteers who have positively chosen to participate in the group's work and are therefore presumably committed to its success.

These are advantages because they make it likely that the group will start with a foundation of goodwill, mutual respect and trust between those who have chosen to work together. These qualities should ensure that conflict within the group or with the wider community that the group serves is almost unheard of or at least does not get out of hand.

The foundation of goodwill, respect and trust does not mean, however, that there will be no disagreements between members. Indeed, disagreements are both inevitable and desirable:

- *inevitable* because any group is made up of a diversity of members who will develop their opinions on the basis of a wide range of backgrounds, values, beliefs and knowledge and will express those opinions in a variety of ways according to their different personalities;
- *desirable* because every group benefits from a wide range of opinion, information and advice as it seeks to come to a consensus or majority decision which all parties can live with.

The real trick is to welcome and accept the disagreements but to handle them in such a way that passions do not erupt, that the final decision is not taken by any member as a personal defeat or affront if it differs from their preferred position, and that after due process the whole group accepts responsibility for the final position.

This article does not aim to deal with the topic in any comprehensive way. It is a personal point of view, offering brief comments on:

- avoiding conflict in the first place;
- minimising conflict if it does arise; and
- resolving conflict if it has broken out.

There are numerous sources of advice about conflict resolution ranging from publications to web resources to training courses.

### **1. AVOIDING CONFLICT**

#### **Knowing one another**

The chairperson has numerous responsibilities but an important one is setting the tone of personal relationships within the group. This should not be left to chance but should be facilitated by certain deliberate actions. Especially when the group has been newly formed but also on a continuing basis, it is desirable for some social occasions to be arranged in order that members may get to know each other better or for the first time. It is not

suggested that the chairperson should deliberately set out to turn the group into a cosy little social club but it is important for the effective working of the group to size up something of each other's background, way of speaking, body language, personal situation and individual interests and priorities.

***Goodwill, respect and trust are more likely to occur between friends than between strangers.***

***People who know each other more than merely superficially are likely to be tolerant and understanding when someone in the group makes mistakes, is occasionally pig-headed or bad-tempered, or temporarily goes off the rails (and everyone does this from time to time, often for external reasons that have little or nothing to do with the work of the group in which an outburst actually occurs).***

### **Communicating with each other**

Much conflict arises because of poor communication. Some people feel excluded if they do not receive the same information as other people, suspecting (sometimes rightly) that a small clique is trying to run the group. Some conflict can be caused by misunderstandings when key information has not been clearly or adequately communicated.

A group will use many ways of communicating, some by word of mouth, some written, some within the group as a whole, and others to each member individually. It is one of the chief tasks of a secretary, working closely with the chairperson and the principal, to decide what needs to be communicated and how this should best be done and to see that it is done.

***People who are 'in the picture' are better prepared to contribute creatively and constructively to decision-making and feel positive about their membership of the group.***

Clarification of roles, tasks, issues and options is a key element in good communication. For example, members of a School Association who do not clearly understand where the School Association's responsibilities start and finish are likely to encroach on the territory of the professional teachers.

***People who feel their territory is being invaded are most likely to flare up in protective conflict.***

A group which muddles through an agenda item and experiences conflict as frustrations mount, could often have avoided tension by making sure that the task to be done was clearly and fully defined and understood by all members from the start.

***People who take time to clarify their task often find that solutions or options are not hard to see and thus are not tempted by confusion into conflict-generating behaviour.***

Communication to parents and other members of the school community is crucial to avoid conflict. People become suspicious and resentful if they feel excluded from affairs which concern them. These feelings can erupt into conflict with the group and lead to divided loyalties and a focus on interpersonal problems rather than on the proper issues of the group.

Communication is not merely a matter of telling things to people; it is also a matter of listening carefully to others and providing opportunities for views to be aired and genuinely heard.

***People really appreciate being listened to; if they feel their voice is valued***

*(even if everyone does not agree with what they say), they generally are supportive of the group that represents them and are reluctant to cause conflict.*

### **Working to known routines and procedures**

The use of the conventions of the preparation, planning, conduct and follow-up of meetings is not only valuable for the sake of efficiency: these conventions ensure that equal participation of all members is possible and that all have controlled opportunities to express contrary views or dissatisfactions without rancour or undue heat.

*People (especially those who are required to attend a great many other meetings) appreciate an open and efficient meeting where business is dealt with quickly and expeditiously while ensuring that no-one feels excluded or unduly rushed and where decisions, however difficult, are seen to be rationally and soundly based. People who are disgruntled about the management of meetings are often the most likely to be the ones who generate conflict (often with considerable justification).*

A major source of conflict is the group that does little more than talk and never actually gets anything much of value done.

Of course, a good chairperson will know when it is wise and productive to relax formal proceedings and will also know that the success of most meetings—especially potentially contentious ones—depends on a good deal of prior effort. It is worth remembering that

*People who are consulted, praised and thanked are rarely sources of conflict within or from outside the group.*

### **Keep people busy**

Most groups have at least one fairly prickly member, likely at times to ignite tempers if not downright conflict. Such people often see themselves as the unofficial conscience of the group and seek to keep their colleagues 'honest'; if they have a sense of humour, they tend at times to 'stir the possum' to keep their colleagues on their toes. Such contributions to the life of the group, sometimes extremely irritating, can be very beneficial.

However, the member who is determined to be disagreeable ('in the best interests of the group') and either deliberately or inadvertently through some quirk of personality sets up situations of conflict, is quite often a member with too much time on his or her hands and too much opportunity to plot and connive. It can be helpful to engage this often able member in gainful tasks.

Give him or her a job—preferably requiring painstaking research, hard and sensitive work, and certainly of real importance—with a fairly tight timetable. Three potential advantages emerge beyond even the value of the task itself: firstly, if he or she undertakes the task, there is less time for plotting or for conducting offensive missions against the group; secondly, if he or she is praised before, during and after the completion of the task, this will promote feelings of pride and a sense of being indispensable to the group (even if this is not true); thirdly, as long as the task is incomplete (and especially if behind the agreed schedule), the chairperson (with obvious sympathy for the difficulties of the task) can keep him or her humble and task-focussed and therefore unwilling to throw stones at colleagues when possibly open to the same treatment.

*Group loyalty is generated if everyone has meaningful responsibilities between and at meetings because they have a positive task to focus on and a stake in the continuing success of the group.*

## **2. MINIMISING CONFLICT**

In spite of all efforts to avoid it in the first place, conflict (of varying levels of seriousness and longevity) usually crops up in any group.

An occasional flare-up can generally be defused and settled by a calm and measured approach, especially if those involved are normally cooperative colleagues. Conflict which emerges from a long-standing feeling of resentment, hostility or dissatisfaction is a symptom of a deeper malaise in the affairs of the group and may need to be resolved by drastic reconstruction of the group itself.

The key to minimising an outburst of conflict and its corrosive, disruptive and potentially prolonged effects is to contain it and deal with it effectively and quickly. The following pointers may be found useful:

### **Get the facts**

In most disputes, each person involved will seek or should be given a chance to tell their version of the story without interruption. The opportunity to vocalise their concern—even if they use it to portray themselves in the most favourable light—is in itself a step on the road to resolving the conflict. The frustration for the arbitrator or mediator is that stories will vary. At least some of the facts will correspond; all parties to a conflict should at least agree on these facts. Other witnesses may be able to shed light on disputed events or remarks. No resolution can be hoped for without an attempt to clarify the relevant sequence of events or the facts of the matter. In some cases, it may come down to a matter of judgement about whose version is to be trusted.

### **Take a breather**

Sometimes an immediate comment or a quick action can defuse a potentially angry confrontation. Where an unwise comment or action by one individual upsets another, the Chairperson can quickly secure an acknowledgment of fault from the offending member or an apology to the offended one.

In the middle of a meeting, it is sometimes wise to call for a brief adjournment when some calming and clarifying action can be taken by the Chairman or a peacemaker. If the incident is resolved quickly, it is wise for the Chairperson to mention it openly but briefly, express thanks that it has been settled, gently point out any general lesson that may be derived from the episode, and consign the whole thing into limbo.

However, there are times when the conflict is more serious or when action on it simply cannot be taken then and there. It is generally productive to sleep on such matters. The issue which seemed earth-shatteringly important last night often takes on a less significant perspective this morning both for the party that felt aggrieved and for those whose duty it is to try to settle the matter. The conflict probably erupted when people were physically tired after a heavy meeting or when weighed down by outside concerns; the sleep not only gives a breathing space to permit a refocus on the matter but actually allows all concerned to review the matter when more relaxed.

### **Don't defer action too long**

There is sometimes a temptation to hope that if it is left alone, the problem will go away. Mostly it gets worse and even becomes contagious. After due checking of facts and allowing time to calm down, the problem should be promptly addressed to forestall festering.

### **Bring opponents together**

If a conflict is between two or a few members of the group, it is helpful to attempt resolution away from the whole membership. If two or three members of the group become vocally aggressive in a full meeting, there is a tendency for others to take sides and to extend the dispute. At the very least, this interferes with the meeting's agenda and, at worst, can lead to an all-in conflict.

The Chairperson—or, where the Chairperson is personally involved, someone with good peace-making skills—should seek a quiet and private word with each of those in conflict, mainly to establish the facts of the matter. It is then often productive to bring the parties together when the mediator can give a calm overview of the matter and give the antagonistic members an opportunity to see the other person's perspective. With a little prompting and a few judiciously-chosen words designed to give everyone a chance to save a little face, the mediator can often bring about an apology (perhaps grudging) or at least a willingness to 'agree to differ'. When the full group convenes again, it is usually wise for the Chairperson to acknowledge that the conflict occurred and to praise the disputing parties for their willingness to be reconciled and for their over-riding concern for the welfare of the group as a whole.

### **Avoid making decisions too soon or putting things in writing too soon**

While it is desirable to resolve conflicts quickly and not to delay action on them, there is a temptation sometimes when tempers are high to make quick judgments about a particular member's words or actions or to try to take immediate remedial action. Until the essential facts have been determined and until a cooling-off period has been allowed and until some mediation has been attempted, it is generally unproductive to come to firm and, especially, public conclusions. It is difficult for a Chairperson to back off from a public judgement if, after examination, it turns out that there were some subtle twists to the tale as first perceived; it is especially difficult if the Chairperson has rushed into a hasty written communication only to find, when the words are recorded for all time, that all the facts were not as certain as first thought, or that by some quiet efforts the whole thing could have been defused. A Chairperson's skill is evident in selecting when and how to act.

## **3. RESOLVING CONFLICT**

All of the comments in the preceding section are relevant to resolving conflict and should generally see matters satisfactorily sorted out. However, if all feasible steps to minimise and contain a conflict have failed to resolve the matter, other courses of action may be appropriate.

### **Throw the problem to the whole group to solve**

If the Chairperson has been unable to make headway with conflicting members, it is sometimes effective to confess the failure to the whole group, to say that the conflict is striking at the heart of the group's viability, and to ask the group quite frankly what it thinks should be done about it. When the whole group feels threatened by the situation and takes corporate responsibility for settling it, all have a vested interest in finding a way out of the difficulties, sometimes even those who started the whole thing in the first place. At the very least, such an exercise can have the benefit of building group solidarity. Such a move can also isolate determined saboteurs of an effective group and leave them little option but to withdraw either by apology or by resignation.

### **Bring in a disinterested mediator**

When internal action has not brought results, especially when everyone in the group is caught up in the conflict, an objective review of the matter by a helpful and expert outsider

can sometimes put the matter in perspective and help find ways to proceed. In such cases, as far as School Associations are concerned, the Operational Director has the responsibility to appoint a mediator.

### **Discipline or departure**

It is generally wise for an organisation to include in its Constitution or by-laws some provision for the discipline of members. Such a provision should rarely be invoked but, if used, should be acted on with appropriate consideration of the principles of natural justice, including due hearing of evidence and due process of appeal against disciplinary decisions.

If persistent or serious conflict is generated by the behaviour of one or more members and efforts to contain, minimise or eliminate that behaviour have been unsuccessful, the only option for a group may be to seek to have the offending member resign or to invoke the expulsion penalty. This will of course have implications for the group's constituency if the member in question has gained membership by election and will, inevitably, in any case, be a subject of widespread and lively conversation. It is important for the group to be scrupulous in the way they deal with such unfortunate matters because failure to follow appropriate procedures and failure to be 'squeaky clean' can sometimes lead to litigation and widespread community furore. Careful and factual documentation of major conflicts is essential.

In passing, it might be mentioned that the Chairperson or other executive office-bearers of the group can sometimes become so distressed by conflict—especially if it is persistent and frequent—that they are tempted to 'throw in the towel' and resign. This is sometimes just too easy an option (however understandable) and is an abdication from the responsibilities of leadership. A threat to resign is sometimes offered in the hope of forcing the group to back the leadership: this may be effective in some cases but does not really address the real cause of the conflict; there have been some instances where, to the dismay of the Chairperson or other officebearer, the offer of resignation is promptly though unexpectedly accepted.

If in the judgement of all or most of the group—and especially its office-bearers—the group has become virtually unworkable or unacceptably unpleasant, there may be no option but for all to resign and allow those whom the group serves to reconstitute it, generally with a new membership.

### **IN SUMMARY:**

- *Conflict avoidance strategies are a good investment for the long-term effectiveness of a group and need to be practised more or less constantly.*
- *Occasional conflicts, heated disagreements and public personal antipathies should be contained and dealt with quietly, quickly and early.*
- *Serious and persistent conflict generally means that the group is badly flawed but may be salvaged by skilled intervention.*