

How to Resolve Conflict in Your Chapter

Woulda, shoulda, coulda -- is that what your chapter says as you look back over the past year? Now you are facing a new millennium, a new college term and new members coming on board -- the opportunity for a fresh start. Often when we look back at the past, we see things we wish we had handled differently, especially when it comes to chapter conflicts.

"Conflict can destroy a good working relationship, as issues give way to personalities, parties become polarized and problems get fuzzy," explains consultant Thomas L. Quick, author of *The Persuasive Manager*. Marilyn Machlowitz elaborates on this quote in her article, "Managing Conflict." Long after chapter members have forgotten what the initial dispute was about, some may still persist in opposing their former adversary as a means of justifying their original stance. Failure to deal with conflict before it gets out of hand can destroy fellowship between chapter officers and members.

Machlowitz points out that there are two basic approaches to dealing with conflict. The first is to stick to procedures by defining responsibilities, clarifying job descriptions and following regulations. The second is to negotiate the dispute yourself or call in a third party to mediate.

Just the Facts

"With either approach, the first step is to gather all the facts," states Machlowitz. By defining the problem, underlying issues can be clarified. Otherwise, even illusory conflicts can become reality. Sometimes a chapter officer or member feels that he or she has been wronged or left out of the information loop. Whether an action was intentional or not, the problem is very real to the person who is upset. Some of the parties involved may not have even realized there is a problem.

Scan the Options

After the facts have been gathered, the second step should be to scan your options. Before someone reaches an explosion point, draw up a list of options for dealing with the problem. Chapter officers will want to meet with their advisor to discuss the best approach. Ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

Choose and Use a Strategy

According to Machlowitz, once options have been decided upon, you must choose and use a strategy. A plan of action may be obvious, or choices may be complex. Chapter officers should weigh each course of action's possible outcomes and costs. For example, if a chapter officer is not doing his or her job, other officers may begin to feel resentful. Sometimes they rush into believing removal of that officer from the executive board is the best solution. A better option might be to talk with the officer and give that person a chance to understand how the other officers feel about the situation. Maybe the person is experiencing a personal challenge of which the chapter may not be aware.

Mediate

If a dispute threatens to disrupt the operation of the organization, a mediator may be necessary, states Machlowitz. A neutral party, such as the college's dean of students, might be more successful at recommending concessions to keep opposing parties from feeling like they are losing face. Rather than dictating solutions, the mediator might encourage the parties to reach a solution themselves. Each side typically possesses different perspectives of the facts. A neutral party may be able to provide clarification.

If you are serving as a mediator, keep discussions on track. The mediator should ensure that the parties involved are as specific as possible about the grievance. Sometimes people get so caught up in the argument that they stop listening and start blaming.

Stay Focused

Help the parties involved stay focused on performance, not personalities. Sometimes the real issues become clouded by resentments directed toward certain individuals rather than the actual problem. Personalities can clash, but that is just part of daily life. You have to work through the rough spots. No two people are exactly alike -- that's what keeps life exciting!

"Realize that conflict can be beneficial," states Machlowitz. The process may be evolutionary rather than disruptive. New ideas may emerge. Everyone will not always agree on which activities the chapter should organize or what programs the chapter should sponsor. The chapter team must learn to work together to organize programs that meet the objectives of the chapter, while not forgetting the individuals that make up the team.

Don't Give Up

Some problems cannot be resolved overnight. You may have to go back to square one several times to gather new facts. Take a step back and try new tactics. "Running away from conflict can only hurt you," states Machlowitz. "Airing conflicts, on the other hand, can lead to creative, cost-effective solutions to problems. Uncomfortable as conflicts can be, confronting and resolving them is more effective in the long run than silently trying to sail along."

[Monika Byrd, September 2006]

Questions or Comments about Phi Theta Kappa Leadership Briefs may be directed to Monika Byrd, Director of Leadership Development Programs.

Two Models for Guiding Through Conflict

Conflict is ever-present when people are generating ideas, choosing among options, deciding direction, setting goals -- in short, anytime there are people working together there will likely be conflict. A leader's role is to keep the conflict functional and on a cognitive, intellectual level, rather than letting it begin at, or descend to, a dysfunctional, personal, and emotional level.

Two models for handling conflict can help leaders better see what is happening in their group and determine an approach that will help the group reap the benefits of conflict -- yes, benefits. Effectively guiding a group through conflict has such benefits as increasing the willingness of members to present new ideas, increasing group cohesion and mutual respect, and creating an environment that pushes everyone to closely examine the details of a proposal and any underlying assumptions about it that will improve decisions and enhance effectiveness.

Thomas-Killman Conflict Modes

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Killman identified five modes, or styles with which people handle conflict, that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. Each style is useful in different conflict situations and has a positive side and a negative side. Most people have a preferred style, however, and are not aware of the benefits of understanding and using the other styles. The five styles are:

- **Competitive** -- This style is firm, assertive, and not cooperative. It is often based on a position of power, rank, expertise, or strong persuasive abilities that lead a person to always want to "win." It is a useful style in emergency or urgent situations, or when the best or right decision is likely to be unpopular. If it is not used in these kinds of situations, it can leave people feeling resentful or disrespected -- even abused.
- **Collaborative** -- This style is inclusive and is both assertive and cooperative; people who handle conflict in a collaborative way work very hard to ensure that everyone is involved in making the best decision or choice. It is a useful style to bring many viewpoints to the table, to bring remnants of earlier conflicts to the surface, and to expand options. It is not as useful in situations where there are significant time or resource constraints.
- **Compromising** -- This style seeks to develop a solution that at least partially satisfies everyone; it is less assertive than the collaborative style, but still somewhat assertive, and it is cooperative. The person using this style expects everyone, including themselves, to give up something. This style can be useful when the situation seems like a deadlock or things are at a standstill and a deadline is looming. It can create movement where there was none.
- **Accommodating** -- This style shows a willingness to meet the needs of others in a conflict at the expense of the Accommodator's own needs. The Accommodator knows when to give in to keep a conflict from spiraling out of control. The downside is that an Accommodator can sometimes be easily persuaded to surrender a position or an idea that is a good one because this style is not assertive but instead highly cooperative. It is appropriate when keeping peace is very valuable or when the issues matter a great deal to others, but this style rarely provides the best outcomes.

- Avoiding -- This style is evasive; it is neither assertive nor cooperative. The person using this style seeks to avoid conflict altogether, perhaps by delegating controversial decisions outside of the group to avoid a situation where disagreement may occur, or not allowing for consideration of alternatives -- "going with the default configuration." This style is appropriate when it is true that someone else may be in a better position to solve a problem or make a decision or when the situation is a trivial one.

In this model, once you understand your own usual style and the alternative styles, you can pay attention to which style would be most appropriate for a particular situation.

Interest-Based Relational Approach

In this model, there are guidelines to help a group respect individual differences and simultaneously work to keep members from becoming too entrenched with their respective positions. The guidelines are:

Good relationships must remain the top priority. Be courteous, calm, and constructive.

People are not problems. Usually, no one is seeking to be difficult for the sake of being difficult - there are real and valid differences among positions.

Pay attention to the details. Listening actively and carefully is always important to develop an understanding of others' positions.

Listen first, talk second. Understand others' positions before talking about or defending your own.

Always get the relevant facts. Agree on an objective and dialogue about the environment, resources, constraints, and anything else that will have an impact on the decision.

Emphasize exploration. When people explore, they are open to new discoveries -- to the idea that new or different ideas and positions may exist and that the group can discover these options and determine the best one jointly.

[Monika Byrd, September 2006]

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Managing Conflict

One of the most important skills of effective leaders is the ability to manage conflict. Conflict is an integral part of the interactions between people and it needs to be managed so it will be a positive communication tool and not a destructive force. Many times when two sides work together to solve a problem, they often arrive at a better solution than if each side worked separately. When conflict is managed in a respectful way, both sides will develop a deeper understanding of the other point of view and a stronger relationship may be forged.

When in a situation where there is conflict, it is important to watch out for communication blocks such as arguing, withdrawing, blaming, accusing, or not listening to the other party. These traits will lead the other party to become defensive and break down all forms of communication. Also try to avoid jumping to conclusions, thinking you can read the other person's mind, or having unrealistic expectations (such as, the person is going to agree with you totally).

Sometimes when the conflict is escalating, it's important to take some time to cool down and collect yourself. You can do this by taking four or five deep breaths or mentally change your thoughts into a non-hostile focus. If you need to buy some time, you can say, "I need to think about this for a while, let's continue this discussion later." Calm down by going for a walk, listening to music, relaxing or exercising. Make sure that you don't dwell on your own solution to the problem and how wrong the other person is. The goal is to clear your mind for a creative solution that both sides can accept.

Two important rules for managing conflict are to avoid inflammatory language and to treat all opponents with respect. Inflammatory language just increases hostility and defensiveness -- it seldom convinces people the speaker is right. In fact, it usually does just the opposite. Although inflammatory remarks can arouse people's interest in a conflict and generate support for one's own side, that often comes with the cost of general conflict escalation.

All opponents should be treated with respect. Treating people disrespectfully just makes them angry and less likely to see your point of view. If you treat other people with respect and dignity, communication will be much more successful, and the conflict will be more easily managed. This means that personal attacks and insults should be avoided, as should verbal or nonverbal clues that one is disdainful of the other side.

Managing conflict is a skill that can be learned with practice. When a situation arises, the first step is to clarify the problem that is to be solved. Sometimes when two sides are at odds over a problem, upon closer scrutiny, it turns out that they were interpreting the problem in two different ways. Therefore, it is important that the problem is clearly defined and a plan for solving the problem is developed. This plan can include a timeline and ground rules for coming up with a solution.

The second step in conflict management is to practice good communication skills. Many people have difficulty communicating effectively in conflict situations. Roger Fisher and William Ury suggest active listening as an important communication skill to develop. The goal of active listening is to understand your opponent's points of view as well as you understand your own. Pay close attention to what the other side is saying. Ask the opponent to clarify or repeat

anything that is unclear or seems unreasonable. During this time, listen with an open mind and do not think about your own solution. Attempt to repeat their case, as they have presented it, back to them. This shows that you are listening and that you understand what they have said. It does not indicate that you agree with what they said - nor do you have to. You just need to indicate that you do understand them.

The third skill to develop is how to speak from your point of view, not your opponent's. Describe the situation based on your own feelings and perceptions, rather than focusing on your opponent's motives, misdeeds, or failing. By saying, "I felt let down," rather than "You broke your promise," you will convey the same information. But you will do so in a way that does not provoke a defensive or hostile reaction from your opponent. This is often referred to as using "I-statements" or "I-messages," rather than "you messages."

"You messages" suggest blame, and encourage the recipient to become defensive by denying wrongdoing or blaming back. "I messages" simply state a problem, without blaming anyone for it. This makes it easier for both sides to focus on solving the problem, without having to determine who was wrong.

Fisher and Ury label the fourth skill as "speak for a purpose." You need to learn to be clear and concise. Too much communication after you have made your point can be counter-productive. Before you make a significant statement, pause and consider what you want to communicate, why you want to communicate that, and how you can do it in the clearest possible way.

As a leader, you need to effectively manage conflict, not eliminate or avoid it. Developing the skills to successfully manage conflict can make your team more productive, open stronger lines of communication, develop greater respect between individuals, and make you a better leader.

Fisher, Roger, William Ury. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. New York: Penguin Books, 1983.

[Barb Murray, September 2005]

Questions or comments about Phi Theta Kappa Leading Leaders articles may be directed to Monika Byrd, Director of Leadership Development Programs.

Managing a Breakdown in Leadership

Phi Theta Kappa chapter officers usually exemplify the Society's ideals and serve their chapters with distinction. But our officers' leadership skills are still developing. Personalities, misunderstandings, and misdirected energies can sometimes disrupt officer teams. What happens when things break down, and what should an advisor do?

Before you blow the whistle and assume the role of referee, or scramble for your chapter's by-laws to review the procedures for impeachment or recall, step back for a moment to examine your options. What is the best way to help the officer team overcome their challenges? How can you assist the officers to perform in a manner that reflects the values of Phi Theta Kappa's Leadership Hallmark?

The Five Star Chapter Development program can help set the course as you manage a breakdown of the officer team. Hopefully, your officer team has taken the time at the beginning of the program year to set the chapter's Five Star goal, with the participation and support of the chapter members. Once established, the chapter's Five Star goal can reorient the officer team and put them back on track.

At an officer team meeting, or perhaps over sandwiches or pizza, help the officers to remember what they had hoped to accomplish as a two-star, three-star, four-star, or five-star chapter. You can guide them to compare that goal with their present situation and progress, and ask whether they think the current dynamics of the officer team are leading them toward their goal. Focus especially on Phi Theta Kappa's Leadership Hallmark and invite the officers to consider how their chapter members perceive their leadership of the chapter and the progress toward the goal. What evidence can the officers find that might indicate how the chapter views their leadership? Invite the officers to brainstorm strategies they would expect from their own leadership role models when faced with a similar challenge.

With a little time, patience, and care, your officer team will likely settle back into their shared objectives. Hopefully, they will see how they went wrong and identify a few strategies to avoid a future breakdown. They may even become closer friends, more deeply committed to their chapter because they have transcended their differences. In any event, the chapter will have a stronger foundation to move forward.

Paying attention to their Five Star goal gives the officers a new source of energy without blame games or personal attacks. This approach gives your officers a way to escape the sometimes self-perpetuating dynamics of a breakdown in leadership. By redirecting the officers' focus, you will honor their shared vision, encoded in their Five Star goal and their plan for the current program year.

[Margaret E. Lee, Advisor, Omega Alpha Chapter, Tulsa Community College]
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Busting the Generation Gap Myth

The Center for Creative Leadership recently completed seven years of research into generational issues in the workplace. In organizations with as many as five generations represented, including many Phi Theta Kappa chapters, it is easy to assume that classic generation gap issues would be key causes of conflict and dysfunction. The study indicates otherwise and calls on us to get over the stereotypes that exist about the differences among the generations and focus on these ten truths:

1. All generations have similar values. Family is at the top of everyone's list.
2. Everyone wants respect.
3. Trust matters.
4. People want leaders who are credible and trustworthy. Age doesn't matter much.
5. Organizational politics is a problem -- no matter how old or young you are.
6. No one really likes change, not even young people.
7. Loyalty depends on the context, not on the generation. Younger generations are not more likely to job-hop than older generations were at the same age.
8. It's as easy to retain a young person as it is to retain an older one -- if you do the right things.
9. Everyone wants to learn -- more than just about anything else.
10. Almost everyone wants a coach.

To read more, go to <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/newsletter/2007/JANissue.aspx>

Source: Deal, Jennifer. "Retiring the Generation Gap: 10 Principles for Working Across Generations." *Leading Effectively e-Newsletter*, January, 2007.

[Monika Byrd, January 2007]

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