

RESOLVING CONFLICT

Conflict is a natural part of human existence. In a structured environment, where mutual trust and respect prevail, it can be a positive force. It can encourage people to find creative solutions, clarify an issue, increase the involvement of members, encourage growth, and strengthen relationships. However, conflict also has an ugly side. Left uncontrolled, it can divert energy from the group, destroy morale, polarize individuals, deepen differences, obstruct progress, and create suspicion and distrust.

To a large degree, conflict can be prevented or diffused at an early stage if differing points of view are handled carefully by the chair.

- ✓ Focus the discussion on council issues.
- ✓ Take control in a firm, positive, constructive way.
- ✓ Establish an agenda that is agreed on by all present.
- ✓ Establish ground rules for behaviour. Develop a code of ethics for school council members
- ✓ Treat each person's concerns as legitimate.
- ✓ Use the group to help modify the situation. Ask questions such as "Louise is suggesting that we change the order of the agenda. What does the rest of the group think?"

Guidelines for Resolving Conflict

A four-step approach to resolving conflict

1. Acknowledge the conflict. As a group, acknowledge when a conflict exists and determine the source of the conflict. For example, is it related to facts? Goals? Processes? Values? Personal preferences? Beliefs? Communication?

2. Plan how to deal with the conflict. Once the source of the conflict is defined, decide how to deal with it. This may be done by the chair, another individual on the council, or the entire council. (In particularly difficult times, it may be best to engage a person who has no association with the council to facilitate discussion and problem solving.) At this stage, all council members should reflect on the problem and be prepared to state their concerns and viewpoints.

3. Provide time for discussion. The chair or whoever is facilitating the discussion should introduce the problem and ask each member for input so that the nature and source of the conflict

are clear. Acknowledging each person by listening attentively sets the tone for problem solving and opens the council to a variety of solutions. Emotions should be accepted and dealt with since they are a part of conflict.

4. Seek the best solution. As viewpoints and solutions are described, the individual facilitating the discussion deals with them one at a time. Following the discussion, the person facilitating the discussion may use a process for building consensus to arrive at a new solution.

Council members will be asked the following questions:

- ✓ Can you live with this solution?
- ✓ Will you support the solution?

Depending on the nature of the conflict, it is sometimes best for council members to have time to reflect on the proposed solution, with the decision to be finalized at a future meeting. If the conflict cannot be resolved, the group may wish to seek the assistance of resource staff at the school board.

When conflict is resolved collaboratively, both the whole group and the individuals within the group are strengthened.

TVPIC Tip; when issues continue and "difficult people" refuse to defer to the Chair's leadership or to the rest of the Council, support is available from the Superintendent of Education and/or a TVPIC member.

From time to time, school councils may find that they are not able to come to agreement on matters under their consideration. Consistently being unable to find common ground in decision making is almost certain to result in a dysfunctional council.

In such cases, it is important that the council take time to identify the issues that seem to be triggering its disputes. Often, the volume of disputes may be reflective of unhappiness or uncertainty among members of the council. Alternatively, the disputes may be a healthy sign of growth and development in your council.

It is also possible that, in spite of all efforts of a council to be productive and to work collegially as a team, the unhappiness among some council members may be so great that it polarizes council members on particular issues. Actions taken independently, such as sending unauthorized information home to parents on behalf of council, can seriously jeopardize the council's effectiveness. Other signs of dysfunction may be verbal abuse or harassment of other council members or the chair, constantly interrupting speakers, interjecting derogatory comments, or displaying behaviour that is unbecoming of adults entrusted to represent their community. Such behaviour is bound to **jeopardize attendance at meetings and to discourage potential members from seeking positions** on the council.

SAMPLE- Conflict Resolution Bylaw

Council members are elected to serve the school community and will demonstrate respect for their colleagues on council at all times.

- If a council member or members become disruptive during a meeting, the chair shall ask for order.
- If all efforts to restore order fail or the unbecoming behaviour continues, the chair may direct the individual council member(s) to leave the meeting, citing the reasons for the request.
- The removal of a member for one meeting does not prevent the council member from participating in future meetings of council.
- The incident shall be recorded and submitted to the Superintendent of Schools within one week of the meeting.
- When the chair has requested the removal of a member or members from a meeting, the chair shall request that the disputing members of council participate in a special meeting, the purpose of which will be to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution to the dispute. Such a meeting may be a private meeting, and shall not be construed as a meeting of the council.
- The chair may request the intervention of an independent third party to assist in achieving a resolution to the dispute.
- An independent third party may be a board official or another individual mutually agreed on by the parties involved in the dispute.
- Any resolution reached at the meeting to resolve the conflict shall be signed and respected in full by all parties to the agreement