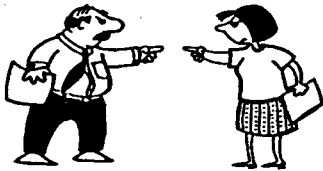


# Steward News...

**A PUBLICATION FOR CUPE ACTIVISTS IN ALBERTA**

**VOLUME 2, NUMBER 1**

**Turning this**



**into this...**



If you're like most stewards, when a member comes to you with a complaint about a co-worker, your immediate reaction is to run as fast as you can in the opposite direction!



Not because you don't care or you don't want to help... but, because you're at a loss to know what to do.



**Dealing with conflict is tough.** We feel uncomfortable ... that we don't have the knowledge or skills to handle these situations.

This issue of Steward News will give you information about the process for resolving conflict so that you can deal with conflict whether it's a minor issue or a serious problem that could undermine your union.

## Resolving Conflict

### Is Conflict Always Negative?

No! It doesn't have to be. In fact, conflict isn't positive or negative. It's the way we choose to deal with conflict that makes it a positive or negative experience.

We all know people who have to win at all costs, who take criticism personally and who play mind games. These are typically negative ways of dealing with people who have different points of view or personalities.

But, there are other people who welcome different opinions and show respect for each other's thoughts or feelings. They develop effective partnerships. They communicate openly and give support to others. They view differences as opportunities and challenges, not necessarily as problems. These are some of the positive ways to deal with conflict.

### The bottom line is...

whether we like it or not, conflict is a normal part of human relationships and everyday, stewards are dealing with it in our union and in our workplaces.

### You can't fix it!

What a relief! It's not up to you to fix a conflict situation between members or co-workers. In fact, you can't do it. The only people who can resolve a conflict are the people who have the problem. The only solutions that will stand the test of time are the ones they have agreed upon and are committed to.

### The good news is...

a steward who understands the process for resolving conflict can create the right environment that will help people work through conflict and find their own solutions.



# Conflict Resolution:

## 1. Listening – Listening - Listening

Active listening involves much more than just hearing. It means paying attention and not getting distracted. It also means making an honest effort to understand the message, not jumping to conclusions and not making judgements. Active listeners provide feedback, ask direct questions and avoid threatening statements.

The importance of active listening as a first step in the process of resolving conflict cannot be overstated. If people in conflict situations are unable to communicate openly, the rest of the process is doomed to failure.

## 2. Gathering Data

People involved in a conflict situation often assume they know what the conflict is about. The reality is that conflict usually involves a lot of factors that arise from the overall relationship, not just a particular thing that happened.

### Beware of "PPS"...Premature Problem Solving

People tend to want to jump to solutions as fast as they can. Sometimes, it's because the process of gathering all the information related to the problem can be quite painful. Or, it could raise old fears. No one likes to feel vulnerable.

Since a successful resolution must address all of the issues related to the conflict, this step of the process must be carefully conducted. If it is hurried along or superficial, you can be sure that some aspects of the conflict will remain unidentified and therefore, unresolved.



## 3. Identifying the Underlying Issues

If we were to think of a visual image of a conflict, imagine an iceberg. There's the part we see above the waterline but there is also a lot we don't see under the water. This underlying part supports and floats the iceberg and is a very important part of the conflict.

The part we can see is called "the position" (normally the disagreement or difference that has happened). It usually surfaces as "wants" or "wishes". The underlying part we can't see is called "the interests". These are "needs" that stem from our values, feelings, fears and preferences.

In order to resolve a conflict, the people need to have a complete picture including their wants and wishes as well as their needs.

## 4. Analysing the Issues

When all the issues have been identified, the next step is to decide which issues are "positions" and which issues are "interests". Often, there are common interests that will help encourage solutions.

Sometimes, people take opposing positions but actually share similar interests. We see this in our union when members who share the interest of being union activists committed to CUPE don't agree on how to carry out a certain union activity.

# The Process

## 5. Identifying Barriers to Finding Interests

Finding interests is usually the tough stuff. This is where people have to be able to communicate openly about their needs...in other words, their personal values, hopes, fears and more.

Sometimes, barriers get in the way such as:

- **Time** – people rushing their communications
- **Perceptions** – are other people's views being considered?
- **Expectations** – do people say what they think one wants to hear?
- **Prejudices** – inflexible, preconceived thinking
- **Distractions** – physical environment makes it hard to focus
- **Semantics** – words with different meanings may create confusion
- **Not listening** – active listening is key to building effective relationships
- **Transferring feelings** – emotions (anger, fear, defensiveness, resentment, need to control) get in the way of working together

## 6. Generating Options

When the positions and interests have been identified, the next step is to identify options for solutions:



- Brainstorm as many options as possible
- Eliminate the ones that both people can agree don't belong
- Identify the key options
- Key options are those that:
  - Meet one or more shared need
  - Meet an individual need that is not incompatible with the other person's needs
  - Require cooperation to implement
  - Are achievable
  - Have potential to improve the future relationship
  - Are accepted by both people

## 7. Identifying Action Steps

Action steps are "doables" that will form the stepping stones to achieving the key options that have been identified. They must meet the following criteria:

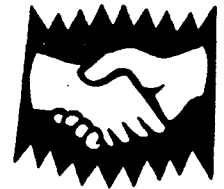
- Stand a good chance of being accomplished
- Do not favour one person at the expense of the other
- Usually require the participation of both people
- Meet one or more shared need
- Meet one or more individual need and are not incompatible with the needs of the other person
- Help build trust and confidence in working together
- Lead to improving the overall relationship

An action step is not an end, in and of itself. Each step simply helps people in conflict to move closer to positive decisions on major issues.

## 8. Making a Mutual-Benefit Agreement

A conflict will not likely be resolved just because a temporary agreement on action steps has been reached. Too often, people find that they understood a solution to mean something different from the other person's understanding.

In complicated situations, a Mutual-Benefits Agreement can ensure that this doesn't happen. It is a written document signed by both people that sets out the solutions, step by step, outlining who is doing what, when it will be done and any other details. It's basically a strategic plan that provides clarity about the solutions that have been agreed upon.



# The best advice...

The best process in the world won't help people who are not interested in resolving their conflict. And, there's nothing you can do about that. But, for people who want to work together to resolve their conflict, here is some advice you can give them:

- Don't let past experiences with someone keep you from developing the ability to work together to resolve conflict.
- Just because another person didn't deal well with a conflict situation in the past doesn't mean they can't deal effectively with this situation.
- Don't focus on someone else's negative behaviour and be blind to other positive aspects of their behaviour.
- Don't keep blaming yourself for past mistakes.
- Let go of a particular demand from the past if it is no longer relevant.
- Don't assume that because something has been done in a certain way that it must be the best way to deal with the present situation.
- Be firm on interests but flexible on positions.



Please send your comments and ideas for future *Steward News* topics to

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