Working Better Together:
Embracing Good Conflict and Solving Bad Conflict

Contents

How To Use The Working Better Together Tool

What You'll Learn

This tool will teach you what conflict is and walk you through ways of solving conflicts. This tool is about the kinds of conflicts that can happen when a team or organization is working on a project.

How To Use The Tool

In this tool you will see how conflict can be hurtful, but also how it can be used to help in a group. A number of examples, showing advocates working together, are used throughout the tool to show the techniques it talks about.

What Is Conflict?

Conflict is what happens when two or more people do not agree. Conflict can happen at any time before, during, or after a team is working on a project. Conflict can be good or bad. Many times, people with disabilities are taught to be afraid of conflict. But conflict doesn't have to be scary. It is important to understand how conflict works and how to handle conflict.
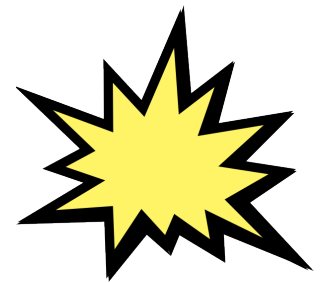
5 Bad Traits in a Team

1. Not paying attention to results

Example: "So what if our event got half the expected people to attend? I still think the idea behind it was great. We need to do it again."

2. Nobody taking responsibility

Example: "The fundraiser hasn't been announced yet? Well, the fundraiser committee should have done that. I'm on the media committee."

3. Lack of commitment

Example: "I think we should hold the rally at the fountain plaza in the park. Or maybe downtown. I don't know, whatever."

4. Fear of conflict

Example: "Yeah, that seems fine. You guys just do what you want."

5. No trust

Example: "Are you really going to present your part of the plan by next week? I know how lazy you are."

Fear of Conflict

Teams that fear good conflict...

- have boring meetings

- cause members to take things personally

- do not consider all opinions

- ignore or avoid difficult topics

- waste time and energy avoiding risks

Teams that embrace good conflict...
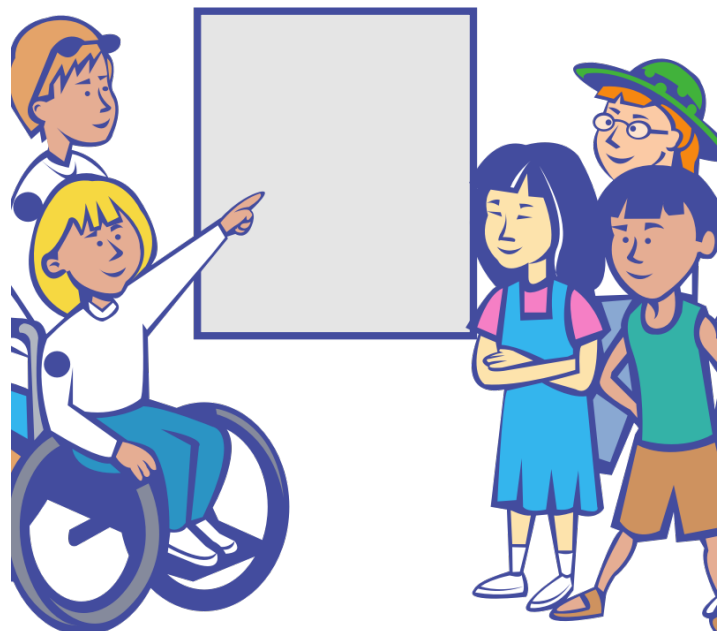
- have interesting meetings

- talk to each other face to face

- get ideas from all members

- talk about all the important topics

- solve problems quickly
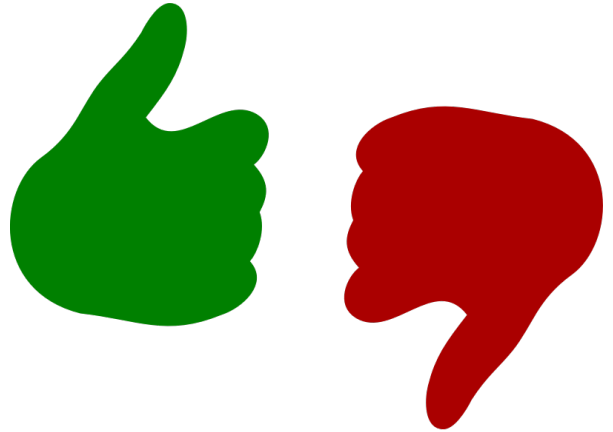
Ways Good Conflict Can Help

With good conflict, team members...

- stand up for themselves and are more confident

- can make fair decisions with everyone's input

- can take more risks

- will have more faith in the project

# Types of Behavior That Cause Negative Conflict

Aggression

- Alice, Beau, and Carl are deciding between fundraising by asking individuals and by asking groups. Alice and Beau want one way, but Carl passionately wants the other. Carl raises his voice until the others agree with him. This makes the decision not fair and causes others to feel left out and bullied.

Passivity

- Daitya and Ewan are working together on a grant proposal. Daitya is doing the typing, and many times asks Ewan if he wants to change any of it or add anything. Even though Ewan has his own ideas, he just goes along with what Daitya is typing, because he does not want to offend Daitya. Because Ewan is being passive, the project lacks Ewan's help and may have lost good ideas.
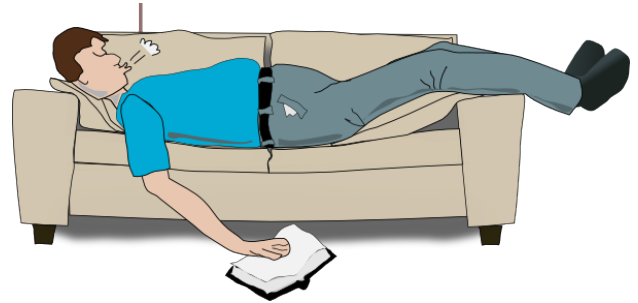
Not showing up

- Fran, Gwendoline, and Hannah are set to meet at noon. At 12:30, Fran and Gwendoline are still waiting for Hannah. Fran and Gwendoline start and finish the meeting without Hannah. Hannah's ideas were not heard. Also, the other group members are angry because Hannah did not show up.

Inattentiveness

- Ichiro is presenting an action plan to Jamshid and Kellan. While Jamshid takes notes during the presentation, Kellan is using his phone and not watching the projected slides or listening to Ichiro. Afterwards, Ichiro asks if there are any questions. Jamshid asks ones that are helpful for the whole group, as they make parts of the plan clearer. Meanwhile, Kellan pretends to know everything about the plan already. Because he did not pay attention, Kellan did not learn anything and did not add anything to the group at this meeting.

Negative attitude

○ Lana and Morty talk about fundraising goals. Lana is confident the organization will take in $10,000 for the following month's fundraiser, but Morty says they will fall far short of the goal. While Morty says he is being "realistic," his negative ideas without proof make Lana feel worse about the fundraiser.

Unreliability

○ Nolan and Olga are both asked to bring in a draft of a grant plan to the following week's meeting. When the meeting comes, Nolan gives his plan to the group. Olga has not done hers, without warning anyone ahead of time. This missed task means the group can only consider one plan, and the grant may be weaker with only one idea for it. Also, the other group members now dislike Olga.

Time-wasting

○ Peg and Quentyn make signs and banners for a fundraising event together. Peg tries to to paint as many items as possible. She makes them look as good as she can. Quentyn starts to sketch out ideas in his pad. But he gets distracted, and doodles instead. Only half of the work gets done, and Peg is angry at Quentyn.

Resentment

○ Radha and Shimon are a team of two. Radha is happy to work with Shimon, but Shimon dislikes Radha because he feels she did not do enough work in an earlier stage of the project. Shimon does as little as he can, and it is not his best work. His anger towards Radha and not wanting to forgive her will cause him to do poor work.

Chart of Cooperativeness and Assertiveness

When conflict happens, it's best to try compromising or collaborating instead of accommodating, avoiding, or competing.
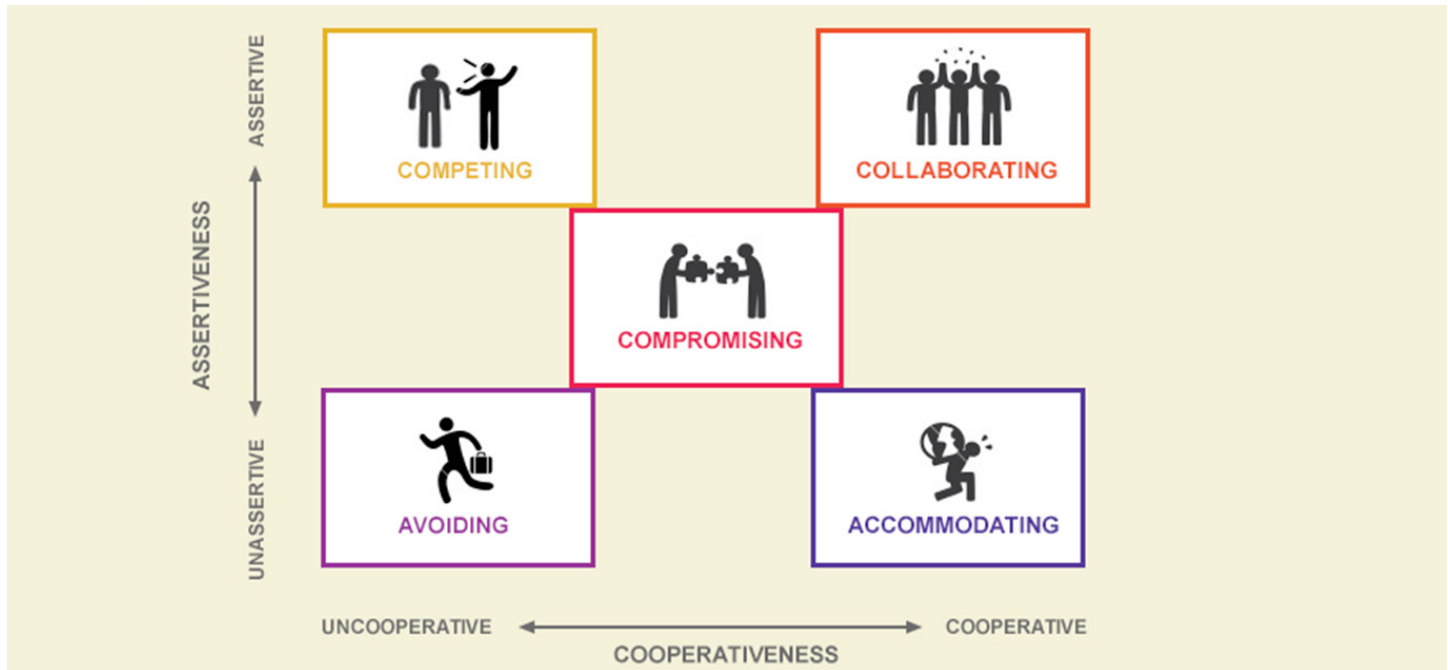
[Image description: a chart, labeled "assertiveness" on the left and "cooperativeness" on the bottom. Different scenarios are shown, and ranked as more or less assertive and cooperative. High assertiveness and low cooperativeness lead to competing. High assertiveness and high cooperativeness lead to collaborating. Low assertiveness and low cooperativeness lead to avoiding. Low assertiveness and high cooperativeness lead to accomodating. Middle levels of both assertiveness and cooperativeness lead to compromising.]

On this chart, **cooperativeness** means how willing you are to work for the good of the group, and **assertiveness** means how much you want your own ideas to win out. As the chart shows, these aren't opposite feelings. In fact, when both these feelings are strong in all group members, they can work together with passion.

Compromising means disagreeing at first, but then coming up with a solution that is not extreme and that everyone can gain something from.

Collaborating means agreeing on how to do the project and working together.

Accommodating means taking on too much work in order to prevent conflict about how the work is divided. This behavior leads to not everyone doing their fair share, and too much stress on a few people. This is a different meaning than what we usually mean when we say "accomodating."

Avoiding means working alone and not speaking to other members of the project. People do this in order to stop conflict from starting. However, this is a bad way to deal with conflict. Avoiding can lead to poor communication and low quality work.

Competing means disagreeing and working against one another. This behavior damages the unity of the project and can cause a lot of anger and stress.

The chart shows that these five states are caused by greater or lesser assertiveness and cooperativeness. If there is too much of either one, the group can be hurt by members being too aggressive or too passive. As long as there is a balance, and members both assert themselves and cooperate, the group can prosper.

10 Tips for Keeping Focus on the Project, Not the Conflict

1. Find a time and place for everyone to talk.

2. Find an answer that works for the group and the project.

3. Listen and repeat back what you hear to avoid confusion

4. Remain calm. Remember, this is not personal.

5. Talk about the issues, not the people. You can think an idea is bad and still not say anything hurtful about the person who came up with it. If conflicting group members all focus on ideas, they will think more clearly and the ideas will be better in the end.

6. To stop hurt feelings, Use "I feel..." or "I think..." statements. Rather than "you are wrong about the cost," for example, "I think the cost may be higher than you have said."

7. Say where you agree.

8. Say exactly what you want the group to do so that the group can decide what is best.

9. Be open to new ideas.

10. Remember what's important is not what is best for one person or multiple people, but what is best for a project.

Diagram of Conflict Resolution Techniques

When conflict happens, using these strategies can turn it from a negative to a positive thing for your group. Conflict can be bad, but you can also have good conflict. Bad conflict prevents your group from accomplishing goals. Good conflict helps your group find creative solutions.

[Image description: Four rectangles with a box in the center. The box in the center says "Ways to stop conflict." The four rectangles say "Stop personal arguments," "Find ways to make everyone happy if possible," "Use fair rules," and "Make sure everyone gets a say."]

Conflict Resolution Technique Examples

1. Techniques used: Find ways to make everyone happy if possible, use fair rules, make sure everyone gets a say.

While Tara and Uri think that most of their fundraising effort should be online, Val believes the group should also do a lot of asking in person, over the phone, and through flyers. Since it is two against one, Tara and Uri talk over Val to make Val change her mind, and Val nearly leaves. Uri does not want to hurt Val or lose her work for the group. So he asks everyone to speak in turn. Everyone gets two minutes to speak, which Uri says is fair. After hearing each other, they all can agree that the fundraising should be split more evenly, and that Uri and Tara will be in charge of the online side while Val will run the in-person side.

2. Techniques used: Stop personal arguments, make sure everyone gets a say.

Wendy and Xenia do not agree on a web page design. They argue, and Wendy insults Xenia's skill as a web designer. Xenia is hurt, but instead of arguing back, she focuses on the parts of Wendy's design she likes. Wendy apologizes for getting angry and attacking her with words. She offers to split up the task, then meet up after it is done to make the page look good.

3. Techniques used: Stop personal arguments, use fair rules.

Yiwen and Zainab disagree over email. They have personally insulted each other. They cannot meet to work things out due to distance. They decide to only speak to one another about their project on group email threads. All of the other twenty-four project members will see what they say. They want to be professional when at work. Yiwen and Zainab forget about their anger, and they are friends again.

The S.T.O.P Method

S.T.O.P stands for:

Stop

Think

Observe

Pull back

Stop and step back. See the big picture. Remember, it is about the project, not the people!

Think: Is this battle important? Can we make this a win-win situation? What would be a fair compromise?

Observe what you're thinking and feeling. True or not? Helpful or not? Is this fact or feeling?

Pull back and then proceed. See the situation as an outside observer. Is there another way of looking at the situation? Practice what works. Honor the group's principles and values.