

Avoiding or Dealing With Conflict on School Council

Conflict is a natural part of life. In an 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 can also have an ugly side. Left uncontrolled, it can divert energy from the group, destroy morale, and create suspicion and distrust.

Conflict can often be avoided and solutions more readily achieved when positive working relationships exist. It is important that council members take the time to get to know each other's values, beliefs, and interests and to develop trust and helpful working relationships. The use of good communication skills will help clarify the council's discussions and prevent misunderstanding.

Outlined below are some ways to helpfully manage conflict and how to prevent, diffuse, and resolve conflict when necessary.

Preventing Conflict

If the chair of a meeting handles differing points of view carefully, conflict can be prevented at an early stage. Here are a few simple strategies for those chairing meetings to ensure that differences are accommodated in a constructive manner:

- Focus the discussion on school council issues (remember it is all about improving outcomes for students)
- Take control in a firm, positive, constructive way
- Establish an agenda that is agreed on by all present
- Establish ground rules for behaviour - refer to the sample school council code of conduct located at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/governance/schoolcouncils/operations.htm>
- Treat each person's concerns as legitimate.
- Use the council 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?"

Tools to hear different points of view

Conflicts sometimes arise because people feel their views have not been heard. Here are some tools that could be used to help give everyone a chance to be heard at a meeting.

Questionnaire

Develop a brief questionnaire to get input on an issue.

Problems/Solutions

Have council members work in small groups. Ask participants to identify problems/issues and possible solutions and write them on flipchart paper or whiteboard. Have someone from each group share their group's work.

K-W-L

Participants answer questions on a page that is divided into three parts. The participants complete the first two parts (K, W, see code below), read some material or listen to a speaker, then complete the last part (L). This can be done individually or in a group using flipchart paper, whiteboard etc.

K = What I already know about the topic?

W =What I want to learn about a topic?

L = What I have learned as a result of reading or experience?

Resolving conflict

The following is a four-step consensus approach to resolving conflict. The chair may take a lead role as facilitator of the discussion or if it is a difficult situation it may be best to engage a person such as an independent, experienced facilitator who has no association with the school council to facilitate discussion and problem solving.

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. 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 facilitator 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 a positive tone for problem solving and opens the council to a variety of solutions. Emotions should be accepted and acknowledged since they are a part of conflict.

4. Seek the best solution.

As viewpoints and solutions are described, the person 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. A consensus is achieved when the meeting agrees on a way forward. Council members could 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 finalised at a future meeting. If the conflict cannot be resolved, the group may wish to seek the assistance of the Regional Education Office.

If that fails....

From time to time, school councils may find that they are not able to come to agreement on matters under consideration. Consistently being unable to find common ground in decision making is almost certain to result in a dysfunctional school council, which is one that cannot work towards providing the best education for the students.

In such cases, it is important that the council takes time to identify the issues that seem to be triggering its disputes. The volume of disputes may be reflective of unhappiness or uncertainty among members of the council or perhaps may indicate an inadequate understanding or appreciation of the roles of councillors, the principal and the function of the school council itself. Sometimes some role clarification (see roles and responsibilities of school councillors for more information <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/governance/schoolcouncils/role.htm>) will assist.

It is also possible that, in spite of all efforts of a council to be productive and to work as a team, the unhappiness among some council members may be so great that it polarises council members on particular issues and it is difficult to move or make decisions.

Some signs of dysfunction may be:

- verbal abuse or harassment of other council members or the chair
- constantly interrupting speakers
- interjecting / derogatory comments
- displaying behaviour that is inappropriate for adults entrusted to represent their community and work towards desirable outcomes for the students in the school.

Such behaviour is bound to jeopardise attendance at meetings and to discourage potential members from seeking positions on the council. As a result, the council risks losing its credibility and the confidence of the school community.

In such cases, it is especially important that the president be willing to take firm and consistent action to restore order so that the council can continue working towards achieving its goals.

Note: For further information on behavioural expectations, see the sample School Council Code of Conduct and Role statements at this website

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/governance/schoolcouncils/operations.htm>

Source for some of this material is:

- Reference Binder *for School Council Chairs and Members*: Hamilton - Wentworth District School Board
www.hwdsb.on.ca/schools_curriculum/councils/pdfs/School_Council_Reference_Binder2005-06.pdf
- *School Councils A Guide for Members* : Ontario Ministry of Education
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/council/councile.pdf>