

Understanding Conflict

Conflict is inevitable and can even be healthy and productive (sharing different opinions, raising conflicting viewpoints, etc.). However, to build a high functioning team and bring your community together, you must successfully manage conflict. A key strategy in managing conflict is to discuss conflict resolution techniques and practices with your team members and troop leaders early in your collaboration. From the start, give them tools to appropriately address and solve conflicts by themselves.

As a reminder, your volunteer support manager (VSM) is there to help you navigate conflict situations when they arise.

What Is Conflict and How Does It Happen?

Conflict is a disagreement through which the people involved perceive a threat to their needs, core values, interests, or concerns.

Why conflict happens...

- Inexperience, misunderstanding
- Emotions, anger, embarrassment, ego
- Culture, history, communication style
- Jealousy, power, etc.

How people respond to conflict...

- Verbally
 - Gossip, passive aggression, sarcasm
 - Retaliation, denial
- Physically
 - Threats, retribution, lack of cooperation, avoidance

How Core Values Affect Conflict

Finding out a person's core values will help you identify the reason for the conflict and help resolve it. Try to identify the values or real needs in their statements and behavior. As Girl Scout volunteers, the first core value is "what is best for the Girl Scout youth?" Recognizing this as our shared starting place helps, but there will still be different opinions about what is "best."

Example: (Statement) = "I deserve a promotion." (Core value/need) = recognition or achievement

Some Core Values:

Achievement	Equality	Responsibility
Order	Trust	Honesty
Recognition	Respect	Independence
Inclusion	Fairness	Security/Safety

Changing Conflict Into Conversation

Acknowledge

Acknowledging a conflict makes the people involved feel that their concerns are being heard. It also is a way to test their readiness to move toward resolution—if emotions are too strong, postpone and try to resolve the issue later.

Examples of acknowledgement:

- “I understand your frustration and would like to help you resolve this.”
- “I had no idea you were being affected this way. Let’s see what we can do about it.”
- “I hear what you’re saying. Can we talk more about this?”

Share

Conflict and crossed conversational wires can be the result of a perceived imbalance of power. If one person in an interaction feels overpowered, communication will be diminished. In all communication, especially between people at different hierarchical levels, it is important to express the intent to share power.

Clarify

Clarify by asking questions that reveal the core problem and help identify the facts. Start by asking the person to help you understand, then continue to ask questions to reveal the entire situation. Good listeners ask open-ended questions thoughtfully, until they get to the actual problem. (What, When, Why, and How?)

- “You’ve just said that you’re really mad at Sue. Can you tell me exactly what it was that happened between you two?”
- “Tell me more about the leader’s concerns as they were communicated to you.”
- “I’m hearing that you feel hurried and stressed. Tell me more about what’s causing that.”
- “You said she was ‘acting crazy’, can you describe what that means for me?”
- “Why was that?”

Open-ended questions, when asked with concern and sincerity, help others clarify their own thoughts and create their own solutions. Good listeners often create an experience in which the initial issue changes or evolves during the conversation. Good listeners are experts at revealing the root causes and concerns behind the issue that was originally brought to the table.

Clarify, through questions, what the other person wants before stating your needs.

Talk it out with respect. Create solutions with the goal of having both leaders’ needs met.

Carefully listen to both sides of the story. The rules of any difficult conversation (whether between youth or adults) should always be discussed up front. Here are a few basic rules to institute:

- Focus on solving the problem, not changing the people. The issue is typically how the person went about getting what they want as opposed to who they are.

- Talk about how you feel and try to understand how the other person feels.
- Really listen to what the other person has to say. Don't interrupt or talk over them.
- Seek solutions and ways to improve things for the future; don't focus on the past or continue to rehash negative feelings.
- If you come to a resolution, be clear and specific regarding next steps and responsibilities.

Make sure you keep your VSM involved at all times. It's a good idea to take notes on the situation so you can share the information with your VSM. Your VSM may feel that a discussion is the best way to go, and offer to moderate it themselves, or offer some other alternatives.

Conflict Management Styles

There are five conflict management styles according to Thomas, K.W., and R.H. Kilmann, researchers who developed a model for conflict resolution in the 1970's.

- **Accommodating:** This is when you cooperate to a high degree, potentially at your own expense and even against your own goals, objectives, and desired outcomes. This approach is effective when the other party is the expert or has a better solution. It can also be effective for preserving future relations with the other party.
- **Avoiding:** This is when you simply avoid the issue. You aren't helping the other party reach their goals, and you aren't actively pursuing your own. This works when the issue is trivial or when you have no chance of winning. It can also be effective when the issue would be very costly. It's also very effective when the atmosphere is emotionally charged, and you need to create some space. Sometimes issues will resolve themselves, but in general, avoiding is not a good long term strategy.
- **Collaborating:** This is where you work together with the other party to achieve both of your goals. Collaborating is how you break free of the "win-lose" paradigm and seek the "win-win." This can be effective for complex scenarios where you need to find a novel solution. This can also mean re-framing the conflict to create room for everybody's ideas. The downside is that it requires a high degree of trust and reaching a consensus can require a lot of time and effort.
- **Competing:** This is the "win-lose" approach. You act in a very assertive way to achieve your goals without seeking to cooperate with the other party, and it may be at the expense of the other party. This approach may be appropriate for emergencies when time is of the essence, or when you need quick, decisive action. People involved should be aware of and understand the approach.
- **Compromising:** This is the "lose-lose" scenario where neither party really achieves what they want. This requires a moderate level of assertiveness and cooperation. It may be appropriate for scenarios where you need a temporary solution, or where both sides have equally important goals. The trap is to fall into compromising as an easy way out, when collaborating would produce a better solution.

Common Strategies for Addressing Conflict

Address conflict early and often! Get ahead of an issue as soon as it is presented or witnessed.

- **Good relationships are the first priority.** As much as possible, treat each other kindly and try to build mutual respect. Do your best to be courteous and remain constructive under pressure.
- **Keep people and problems separate.** Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just “being difficult.” Real and valid differences can lie behind conflicting positions. Separating the problem from the person helps to discussing real issues without damaging working relationships.
- **Focus on similarities and agreements instead of differences and disagreements.** This creates an environment with less tension so the conflict can be looked at more objectively.
- **Pay attention to the interests that are being presented.** By listening carefully you'll most likely understand why the person is adopting their position.
- **Listen first; talk second.** To solve a problem effectively, you have to understand where the other person is coming from before defending your own position.
- **Determine the facts.** Establish and agree upon the objective, observable elements that will have an impact on the decision.
- **Explore options together.** Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you can get to this idea together.

By following these tips, you can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps prevent antagonism and dislike which can often cause conflict to spin out of control.

Useful Tips For Parent/Guardian Engagement

Using “I” Statements

Perhaps the most important tip for communicating with parents/guardians is for you to use “I” statements instead of “you” statements. “I” statements, which are detailed in the *aMAZE* Journey for Girl Scout Cadettes, tell someone what you need from them, while “you” statements may come across accusatory and make the person feel defensive.

Here are some examples of “you” statements:

- “Your daughter isn’t responsible.”
- “You’re not doing your share.”

Now look at “I” statements:

- “I’d like to help your daughter learn to take more responsibility.”
- “I’d really appreciate your help with registration.”

If you need help with specific scenarios involving caregivers, try the following:

If a caregiver . . .

You can say . . .

Asks how they can help but seems to have no idea of how to follow through, take leadership, or take responsibility...

"I do need your help. Here are some written guidelines on how to prepare for our camping trip."

Constantly talks about all the ways you could make the group better...

"I need your leadership. Project ideas you would like to develop and lead can fit in well with our plan. Please put your ideas in writing, and perhaps I can help you carry them out."

Tells you things like, "Rylie's mother is on welfare, and Rylie really doesn't belong in this group..."

"I need your sensitivity. Girl Scouting is for everyone, and by respecting others' situations, you help teach the whole group sensitivity."

Shifts caregiver responsibilities to you and is so busy with their own life that they allow no time to help...

"I love volunteering for Girl Scouts and want to make a difference. I'd appreciate it if you could take a few moments from your busy schedule to let me know what you value about what we're doing and how you're able to contribute. It would keep me going for another year."

Ways To Help Children Resolve Conflict (or Problem Solve)

There may be times when you are called upon to help resolve a conflict between youth members of a troop. The following problem-solving model may be of help. The key is to assist them in resolving the conflict themselves rather than handing down a solution. This can be a very positive learning experience that they will be able to use in the future. The key steps are:

- **Announce the problem.** Start the process by identifying that there is a problem. “It looks like we are having a problem.” Don’t let it escalate. The more anger/emotions are involved, the harder it is to solve the conflict/problem.
- **Help clarify what the problem is.** Everyone in the group gets to voice what they think the problem is and what happened during the conflict. Encourage “I” statements – “I feel...when you...because...” Everyone gets a turn (without interruptions).
- **Brainstorm solutions.** The Girl Scouts come up with possible solutions to the problem. Adults can help, if needed. Ask for ideas of compromise.
- **Choose a solution.** Try for the win/win, if possible. The solution should be a positive one everyone can agree upon.
- **Carry out the solution.** The Girl Scouts should carry out the solution with support from the adults.

Remember, your service unit team can help navigate conflict and your VSM is available for additional support and can step in when necessary.