Conflict Management: Theory and Practice in an Academic Setting
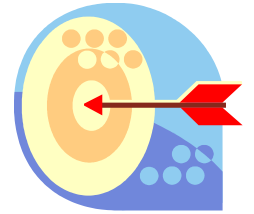
Presented by:

Matilda Aidam

Binnie Singh

Mandatory Two-Day Workshop for New Chairs

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Agenda

- Goals & Introductions
- Types of Conflict/Approaches
- Conflict Management Steps
  - Plan
  - Engage
  - Use Resources
  - Problem Solve
  - Document
- Put Theory into Practice/Scenarios
- Conclusion/Resources

Goals

- Provide a "step approach" to managing conflict
- Consider what's unique in an academic setting
- Putting steps to work
- Review of resources and when to use them

Introductions

- Your name and department
- Type of conflicts you anticipate that you will have to manage as a chair

Unique Factors in Academia that Impact Conflict Management

- Faculty autonomy & independence
- Team-oriented decision-making on Department issues/changes
- Pre-tenure vs. post-tenure dynamics
- Lengthy Faculty careers

- Rotational nature of leadership
- Differing philosophies
- Competition for limited resources within the College or discipline
- Other factors?

Source: Mending the Cracks in the Ivory Tower: Strategies for Conflict Management in Higher Education by Cynthia Berryman-Fink

Types of Conflict:

- Interpersonal, outside of work
- With a colleague
- Managing others in conflict

Effects of Unmanaged Conflict:

- Affects the workplace and home life
- Affects the caliber of the working/learning environment
- Can trickle into other areas

The Importance of this Work

- Demonstrates your responsiveness as a chair
- Sets environmental tone
- Builds morale
- Prevents issues from escalating
- Reduces formal complaints and grievances
- Minimizes "infection", less spreading

Prevention Reminders

- Principles of Community eCourse
- Use Direct Communication (vs. indirect)
- Use faculty meetings to set climate and allow for input & feedback *(October 15th Chairs brown bag)*
- Foster discussions regarding how, as a department and interpersonally, issues are addressed
- Consistent follow through and follow up
- Modeling effective behavior and engagements

Conflict Management Approach

1. Plan
2. Engage (Interact)
3. Resources (Use them)
4. Problem Solve
5. Ensure (through follow-up) and
6. Document

Plan

- Consider the approach (including time, place and manner)
- What do you want to say, what are your goals, specific points to cover
- Consider the outcome you want, and have that ready, but be open to that changing depending on what you hear

Scripting

Purpose

Scripting Benefits

1. Working with experts on crafting an effective discussion template or response

2. Keeps discussion on track

3. Provides a transparent process

4. Promotes consistency with future issues

5. Improves likelihood of a comprehensive response

Engage

- Instead of avoiding as if nothing occurred
- Talk/communicate/listen – what does each person want, need
- Dispel misperceptions, gain better understanding
- Communicate next steps, don't leave people in the dark

Engage

- Help the individual consider what he/she wants as a result/outcome
- Help him/her generate the main issues/concerns
- Remind him/her to be willing to listen to the other person
- Remind him/her to be, or remain, open to change

Engage

- Encourage parties to engage with each other as appropriate, especially very early in a conflict

  Under what circumstances would you discourage them from direct engagement with each other?

- Let them know your willingness to get involved if needed, "I can talk to ____, but I think s/he would prefer hearing from you directly and here is how you might do that..."

Intervention Strategies

- Intervene immediately if you observe dysfunctional conflict
  - Public vs. Private interventions
- If necessary buy time
- Gain better understanding of needs/expectations/interests
- Dispel misperceptions
- Interrupt problem interactions
- Leverage your knowledge of the individuals in conflict to facilitate resolution

Problem Solve

- Compromise
- Negotiate
- Look exterior, use resources as needed (before, during and after)
- Define a course of action
- This is not just venting

Problem Solve

- Help parties consider compromise, giving a little in a balanced way
- Help them navigate and negotiate the conversation
- You can also look exterior, consider using resources as needed to help you help your colleagues
- Help them come to practical, real action steps

Follow-Up

- Consider an appropriate time to check in, typically more than once
- If there were action items, did those occur?
- Any collateral effects that should be addressed (for the workgroup/unit), consider confidentiality

Use of Resources

Your Dean's Office is a great place to start – they may be familiar with the issue and have insights/strategies to address the problem.

Use Resources (see Resource List):

- To help deal with conflict early to reduce potential for escalation
- If you aren't getting anywhere or could use the extra help
- If issues are larger than you can handle or have potential repercussions, policy implications, etc.
- To spread the liability by keeping others with a need to know in the loop
- As a place to start; conflict stems form a variety of situations, a resource list helps pinpoint the best place to start, you don't have to be the "expert".

Document

As a new chair, it's important to check in with the outgoing chair for briefing on any pending or ongoing department issues

- Document for yourself along the way, as needed (note to file)
- When appropriate, document back to the individual(s)
- Don't keep unnecessary documentation in your file
- If this has happened before, documenting may not be enough

The Documenting Process

Do's:

- Use neutral terms and describe facts
  (e.g. "she interrupted me midsentence six times." vs "she was rude".)

- Include time, date, who was present and context

- Describe what was communicated, agreed to, next steps

- Cite applicable policies

The Documenting Process

Don'ts:

- Don't insult or make judgments
(e.g., "she was wrong and inappropriate.")

- Don't "sandbag" unrelated events, stick to the issue(s) at hand, unless there is an observed, documented pattern, i.e., if you have counseled this person before, that should be noted.
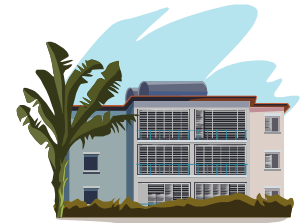
Managing Performance

- Important to address concerns and behavior early
  - ✓ Examples: sexual harassment issues, climate issues, etc.
- Determine reporting/consulting obligations (SH)
- Check for history (department records, deans office, academic affairs, etc.), you may be inheriting an ongoing issue

Scenarios

Scenario #1

One of your faculty members continues to be difficult in her interactions with others. She happens to be senior, she "knows it all", and thinks less of almost anyone who was hired after her. She's very outspoken at meetings, often saying things others find offensive. You're the new chair who was recently appointed and you're worried about her impact on your junior faculty, in particular. The previous chair didn't do much about this faculty member.

Scenario #2

You just learned of a situation in which a new faculty member has become very "chummy" with graduate students. You hear that she's been socializing with them, perhaps out drinking with them. You rarely see her interacting with her own colleagues. What if anything would you do?

Scenario #3

You have a junior faculty member who is up for a merit action. The junior faculty member has expressed to you individually that she feels confident that the work she is putting forward will easily qualify her for a merit. Other faculty within her area of expertise have raised concerns in the past about her productivity. What if anything would you do?

Points to Remember

- Setting the climate is key to prevention efforts
- Planning makes a huge difference
- Dealing with conflict early increases the likelihood of successfully managing the conflict
- Spread the liability! Use your resources, you're not alone.
- Document throughout, even if just for yourself
- A great primer – *Difficult Conversations – How to Discuss What Matters Most*

What do you think?

- Ready to do this?
- Why or why not?
- What else do you need?
- Any questions?