

## Steps For an Organization to Consider When Addressing Conflict

In any organization or team, conflicts are bound to arise at times. Acknowledging the conflict, working to understand it, and creating practices that enable changes to happen, that resolve or dissolve the conflict, can be powerfully transforming for an organization and its members. Working with conflict takes time and resources, including resources of emotional stamina. There are moments that may seem as if the organization has hit an impassable challenge. It requires trust in each other to continue on. When organizations do, the rewards are almost always worth the effort.

The following points may be helpful to reflect on whether your organization is equipped to handle conflict productively. These points are probably most pertinent for organizations/teams that have fewer than 50 members, have receptive leaders and managers, and give some autonomy to employees.

1. Can your organization identify when there is a conflict that it needs to attend to? Can your members tell the difference between productive disagreement that leads to rich conversation and advances the work of the organization from conflict that may derail the work you want to produce?
2. When a conflict occurs that is not productive, who has the “right” to name it, to draw attention to it, and to request a process to attend to it?
3. Does the organization have a clear set of policies and procedures that everyone knows about and can use to begin a process of conflict resolution?
4. Does the organization support those who want to use formal conflict resolution processes? Or does the organization support those who discount either the need to do so or the allocation of time and resources to do so?
5. Once your organization embarks on a conflict resolution process, are there shared agreements about how to engage with each other in a conversation that is likely to be difficult? Who participated in the creation of these agreements and are they regularly updated with your organization’s current membership? What are members encouraged to do if someone does not observe one of the agreements during the conversation?
6. What practices does your organization use to ensure that the conversational space is safe for all who are participating, regardless of their role or status in the organization?
7. Does your organization bring in someone from the outside who has experience with difficult conversations and conflict resolution? Or do you draw your facilitator from within your organization? How does your organization decide and who decides when to do one or the other?
8. Once the organization has embarked on a conversation to address conflict, who monitors it to ensure that all voices that wish to be heard are heard and that there is space provided for reflection?
9. When the conversation has reached its limit – for the time being or because the conflict has been acknowledged, addressed, and resolved – who makes that decision? How are the participants acknowledged and appreciated?
10. How are the next steps recorded and how do they get followed up?

**Kaethe Weingarten, Ph.D.**

*The Witness to Witness Program* | <https://www.migrantclinician.org/witness-to-witness>

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These are a few tips for all participants -- not just the facilitator -- to help a difficult conversation remain productive so that it can reach a mutually agreed upon resolution that everyone present is comfortable with.

- a) Ask questions of clarification when you don't understand what someone has said.
- b) Refrain from making judgements or attacking a person.
- c) If things get heated, request a short pause for reflection.
- d) Notice when you are getting triggered by something happening in the room or someone in the room and try to identify what has evoked your intense reaction.
- e) Continually remind yourself of the purpose of the conversation.
- f) Notice if you are losing interest in the conversation and try to re-engage.
- g) Consider whether the conversation is covering the points you think are pertinent and if not, take the initiative to introduce them.
- h) Be mindful of others in the group and consider whether there is some way you can participate that will help others to fully engage.

A healthy organization should expect differences of opinion and encourage productive conversations when conflict arises. Leaders need not feel defensive when this happens; they can feel appreciative that staff are comfortable to express their opinions in the belief that all voices are welcome and that in addressing differences and resolving conflict, the organization becomes stronger and all members thrive.