



## A Process for Managing Conflict

Each of your peers may have different feelings about conflict from you, but that doesn't mean that you have to develop a different conflict management process for each of them. Becoming aware of these differences and the impact they have on conflicts will help you resolve disagreements more effectively than if you just trade favors. Such horse-trading might deliver a solution, but it won't do much to turn a peer conflict into an effective and more productive working relationship.

The nature of peer relationships can sometimes make a conflict management process difficult to implement. You and your peers likely occupy equal but different positions in the organization. Because contemporary organizations rely so heavily on peer relationships to achieve results (command and control hierarchies giving way to collaborative, horizontal networks), using a conflict management process that relies on partnership can be a successful strategy for reaching resolution. A collaborative conflict management process focuses on finding an underlying common principle that you and your peer can agree on. From that common point both of you can move toward a resolution. Because peer relationships often continue for some time, if either side of a conflict feels a loss the relationship can be damaged and the organization loses—it misses out on the productivity, innovation, and implementation that effective work relationships bring.

Think about a conflict you have now or have recently had with a peer. Is there a common principle (for example, the best interests of the company or your department) that the two of you can or could have agreed on? What can you do, or what could you have done, to manage the conflict to achieve that result?

You move a long way toward answering those questions, and toward more effectively managing conflict with your peers, by considering more fully who your peers are (how they respond to specific emotional triggers, what they value, what kind of organizational power they have) and who you are (your responses, your values, your power). That knowledge gives you a better idea of what your conflicts are likely to be about and what the stakes are. The following guidelines introduce themes that are common to success-

ful conflict management. They draw on your strengths as a manager—problem solving and technical skills—and add to those strengths an awareness of conflict situations, what may lie beneath them, and what possible connections you might build with your peers as you work to resolve them.

**Define the problem.** Create a clear picture in your mind of the particular peer conflict you are having. Sometimes it can help to write out a detailed description of the conflict, including the circumstances around it, what each of you said, the behaviors you observed, and your thoughts and feelings about the conflict.

**Gather information.** One key to managing conflict well is to keep it focused on ideas and procedures, not on emotions. Make

### Conflict Partner

When two people are in conflict, it's easy to see them as adversaries or opponents. But CCL has found it useful to think of them as *conflict partners*. Each may have a different view based on values, management style, and power, but neither is totally "wrong" or "right." Instead, each is a partner in an uncomfortable situation. By acknowledging that discomfort, and being aware of their differences, conflict partners can work together to understand and resolve the conflict, or at least make the situation more comfortable and alleviate personal and political animosity.

sure you understand the facts behind the issue that spawned the conflict. Do you and your peer have opposing strategies or tactics for achieving a specific organizational objective? Think through your ideas and give your peer's ideas due consideration.

**Look for options and different perspectives.** Find the missing piece. Seek advice from a source whose opinions and perceptions are different from your own. Consulting with a trusted advisor might be helpful in broadening your perspective on the situation. If you can get several different perspectives, you might want to record them in a journal and use them to help you think through the situation.

**Envision a solution.** Take what you know of yourself, what you've learned and observed while working with your peer and during the specific conflict, your understanding of the problem, and then imagine how the conflict might play out. Try writing a short "script," complete with lines for you and your peer. Use the worksheet on pages 30–31 to walk through this process. Preparing this way gives you more confidence to handle whatever comes up, even when your conflict partner acts differently from what you had imagined (as he or she probably will). Your conflict partner may be "off script," but you can still be more effective in managing the conflict if you've thought of at least one possible resolution.

**Evaluate your answer.** Are you acting with authenticity and integrity? Do the tactics and strategy you want to use to reach a resolution fit with your values? Are you willing to disconnect from your emotions during the conflict situation? Focus your plan on ideas and procedures. If you keep your conflict management plan close to that path, then you and your peer have a better chance of creating a successful resolution.

**Learn from your experience.** After you have resolved the conflict, debrief the process with yourself (and with your conflict

partner, if possible). Did the resolution of the conflict settle the issue? Did it improve your relationship with your peer? If you can't answer yes to both of these questions, then start planning for the next conflict with this peer. You may have to use your conflict management process more than once to settle an issue. Repeated attempts at resolution don't indicate failure. If carried out with planning and awareness, each attempt can help to build an effective working relationship.

These guidelines give you something to think about as you examine your approach to managing conflict with your peers. But before you adopt these tactics be sure you understand as much about yourself and your peer as you can. Your success at managing peer conflicts relies on your understanding how emotional hot buttons, personal values, and organizational and personal power affect, and are affected by, conflict situations and how they influence their resolution.