

How can you turn a conflict into a productive discussion?

Do you avoid conflict? Are you able to effectively speak up for your own viewpoint? Or do you unintentionally escalate arguments? This resource provides tips and strategies to help you turn a conflict into a productive session. After going through these scenarios, you will be able to better manage conflict by:

1. Selecting an environment that will not distract from the conflict.
2. Modifying your actions to facilitate communication.
3. Focusing communication on the goal.

Choose a scenario to get started:



Scenario 1: Conflict with a member



Scenario 2: Conflict with a sponsor or site supervisor

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This module includes 2 scenarios: Conflict with a member and Conflict with a sponsor or site supervisor.

Scenario 1: A sample conflict with a member



Daniel, one of the VISTAs you are assigned to supervise, has been coming in late to the office almost every day for the past few weeks. How should you approach him?

- You're short on time, and feel tardiness is an issue that everyone should be warned about. You bring it up during an all-staff meeting.
- You send Daniel an email and attach a work-hour policy.
- You invite Daniel into your office to talk one on one with him about the issue.

Talking with Daniel in your office is the best answer. When dealing with conflict:

- Pick an appropriate place and time for a conversation.
- Try to meet in person to avoid misunderstandings that can sometimes occur in phone and electronic communication.

If you can't meet in person, what other methods could you use to try to avoid misunderstandings in your tone and language?

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- B. You send Daniel an email and attach a work-hour policy.
- C. You invite Daniel into your office to talk one on one with him about the issue. [Correct]

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Scenario 1: A sample conflict with a member



What do you say to begin a conversation about Daniel's tardiness?

Enter your response here.

Submit ↵

When dealing with conflict:

- Ask questions and listen to the other person.
- Do not assume you know what others might be thinking or feeling.
- Do not use strategies which exploit weaknesses you know about in the other person.

An example of an appropriate response might be: "I've noticed you've been coming in late almost every day for a few weeks. Is there something going on?"

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Scenario 1: A sample conflict with a member

Daniel says, "I didn't think being on time was that big of a priority. I get my work done, so that's what's important, right?"

Enter your response here.



Submit ↵

- Be empathetic. Try to put yourself in the other person's place and to understand how you would feel if you were arguing the other position.
- Be descriptive about behaviors or issues rather than evaluating the other person: do this by using "I" statements and avoiding "you" statements.
- Try not to deal with too many issues at once. Break down complex conflicts into smaller parts that can be solved one at a time.

An appropriate response might be: "I do appreciate your work productivity, but the culture of our organization expects people to be on time. We have found that it is the most productive way for us to work."

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Daniel says, "I didn't think being on time was that big of a priority. I get my work done, so that's what's important, right?"

What's your response?

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Scenario 1: A sample conflict with a member



Daniel says, "I just don't see what the big deal is. I work better in an environment with a flexible schedule."

What is your best response?

- Unfortunately our organization doesn't allow for flexible schedules. You will have to find a way to make it in on time.
- We need to work as a team to meet our project goals. Part of that teamwork involves team members having a consistent schedule. Let's work out a schedule that meets the project needs as well as your own.
- Why is that important to you?

Either B or C are correct. When dealing with conflict:

- Focus communication on the desired goal rather than specific means for attaining that goal.
- Identify areas of common goals rather than focusing on your differences.
- Be open to alternatives for solving the conflict by considering the broadest range of solutions possible. Make suggestions and listen to the other person's suggestions.

While it is important to focus communication on the goal, you can also use metacommunication (i.e., communication about communication, such as "Why is that important to you?") to get at the deeper relational issues involved with the conflict.

How else might you resolve this conflict in a productive manner?

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- B. We need to work as a team to meet our project goals. Part of that teamwork involves team members having a consistent schedule. Let's work out a schedule that meets the project needs as well as your own. [Correct]
- C. Why is that important to you? [Correct]

Either B or C are correct. When dealing with conflict:

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How else might you resolve this conflict in a productive manner?

Scenario 1: A sample conflict with a member

Congratulations!

You and Daniel create a schedule that fits his work style and meets the team's needs. By selecting the proper environment, modifying your actions to facilitate communication, and focusing your communication on the goal, you defused the situation and worked toward a goal that satisfied both of you.

Other methods for a productive conflict:

- Monitor your own nonverbal communication to be sure that you are not sending mixed messages to the other person - messages of anger, domination, frustration, insecurity, or fear.
- Try not to become defensive. Do not take criticism personally. Realize you can admit you are wrong about something w/o losing face if you do so gracefully.
- Realize that emotional outbursts can serve a useful function of catharsis. This means that by blowing up, some people can let out frustration and anger and get it out of their system. At these times, one of the best things to do is simply wait and listen without becoming defensive and counter-attacking. At the end of the outburst, you can ask, "What do you want to do about this?" and involve them in problem-solving.

For the complete list of suggestions presented in this tutorial, download the PDF, "[How to Have a Productive Conflict](#)". Share it with members, or use it to drive a training about conflict resolution.

This tip sheet was adapted by Education Northwest/Bank Street College (BSC) for use in VISTA training sponsored by the Texas CNCS State Office, May 2006.

You have completed both scenarios. Click the "Next" button below this window to continue.

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Go to:

Scenario 2: Conflict with a Site Supervisor

Congratulations!

You and Daniel create a schedule that fits his work style and meets the team's needs. By selecting the proper environment, modifying your actions to facilitate communication, and focusing your communication on the goal, you defused the situation and worked toward a goal that satisfied both of you.

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Scenario 2: A sample conflict with a site supervisor



Dina, one of your site supervisors, wants to be hands-on with her VISTA and have her run decisions by her. Meanwhile, the VISTA is complaining that Dina is always traveling and not available when she needs her. Dina's testy with the VISTA for falling behind on her projects while she waits for Dina's help. You've heard the VISTA's side of the story and now it's your turn to talk to Dina. How should you prepare to approach her?

- Set up a meeting time and ask Dina how the VISTA is doing and if they are on track for meeting the project goals listed in her VAD.
- While in a meeting with several of your site supervisors, tell Dina to give the VISTA more responsibility and power to make decisions, as that can apply to all your site supervisors.
- Forward the emails from the VISTA complaining about Dina and ask her to send her side of the story.

Identifying common goals is a solid strategy for resolving a productive conflict. Also, it's hard to read tone in an email, and communication channels such as email, phone, and texting are less productive than face-to-face conversations. A better approach might be to email or call to arrange a time to meet in person if practical to do so. In your email you can disclose your expectations and goals for the conversation. Meeting one-on-one also allows you to listen to others, and not make assumptions about what they're feeling or thinking.

If you can't meet in person, what other methods could you use to try to avoid misunderstandings in your tone and language?

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Scenario 2: A sample conflict with a site supervisor

Dina, one of your site supervisors, wants to be hands-on with her VISTA and have her run decisions by her. Meanwhile, the VISTA is complaining that Dina is always traveling and not available when she needs her. Dina's testy with the VISTA for falling behind on her projects while she waits for Dina's help. You've heard the VISTA's side of the story and now it's your turn to talk to Dina. How should you prepare to approach her?

- A. Set up a meeting time and ask Dina how the VISTA is doing and if they are on track for meeting the project goals listed in her VAD. [Correct]
- B. While in a meeting with several of your site supervisors, tell Dina to give the VISTA more responsibility and power to make decisions, as that can apply to all your site supervisors.
- C. Forward the emails from the VISTA complaining about Dina and ask her to send her side of the story.

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If you can't meet in person, what other methods could you use to try to avoid misunderstandings in your tone and language?

Scenario 2: A sample conflict with a site supervisor

In your meeting, you set out a goal to find a better way for Dina to work with her VISTA. You ask questions, listen closely to Dina's side of the story, and work hard to monitor your own nonverbal communication so that you are not sending mixed messages. When talking about her VISTA, Dina raises her voice and begins to blame you for assigning her a VISTA who can't take initiative. What's your best course?

Enter your response here.



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Some people use emotional outbursts as a way to get anger and frustration out of their system. Try not to become defensive and not to take criticism personally. At these times, one of the best things to do is simply wait and listen without becoming defensive and counter-attacking. At the end of her speech, you can ask, "What do you want to do about this?" and involve Dina in problem-solving and focusing the conversation on the goal.

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Scenario 2: A sample conflict with a site supervisor



After the fireworks, Dina admits that she's put her VISTA in a difficult situation. She still feels the VISTA needs help too much of the time and should approach her with only high-priority items. As a suggested remedy, Dina agrees to sit down with the VISTA and list the items the VISTA can act upon without Dina's approval and the items Dina needs to be consulted on.

Dina's temper is another concern of yours. How should you approach this?

- Avoid dealing with too many issues at once. Monitor your VISTA's progress and
 - Shift the conversation to a discussion of the hostility reported by your VISTA (some of which you've seen yourself).
 - Either of the above.
- Both of these are workable strategies, but it's a judgment call. Often it is a good strategy to not deal with too many issues at once. Break down complex conflicts into smaller parts that can be solved one at a time. Discussing Dina's hostility with her at a later time also gives you an opportunity to think about how you want to approach it and consult with a mentor, colleague, or your own supervisors about the best way to proceed.

Tips for Further Discussion

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Dina's temper is another concern of yours. How should you approach this?

- Avoid dealing with too many issues at once. Monitor your VISTA's progress and save this conversation for another day. [Correct]
- Shift the conversation to a discussion of the hostility reported by your VISTA (some of which you've seen yourself). [Correct]
- Either of the above. [Correct]

Both of these are workable strategies, but it's a judgment call. Often it is a good strategy to not deal with too many issues at once. Break down complex conflicts into smaller parts that can be solved one at a time. Discussing Dina's hostility with her at a later time also gives you an opportunity to think about how you want to approach it and consult with a mentor, colleague, or your own supervisors about the best way to proceed.

Tips for Further Discussion

When you feel Dina is receptive to talking about her hostility and you are prepared to do so, some helpful tips include:

- Be specific about the behavior you witnessed or heard about.
- Give Dina a chance to respond to the specific behaviors you identified, and listen to what she has to say.
- Explain why the behavior is unacceptable and the negative impact it has on the organization.

Ask Dina to help you craft a plan for how her behavior can be addressed and improved.

Scenario 2: A sample conflict with a site supervisor

Congratulations!

You and Dina agree on a solution that fits her work style and meets the VISTA 's needs. By selecting the proper environment, modifying your actions to facilitate communication, and focusing your communication on the goal, you defused the situation and worked toward a goal that satisfied all of you.

Other methods for a productive conflict:

- Do not hit below the belt or use strategies which exploit weaknesses in the other party because of your relationship with him/her.
- Be empathetic. Try to put yourself in the other person's place and to understand how you would feel if it were you arguing the other position.
- Be descriptive about behaviors or issues rather than evaluating the person with whom you are in conflict by using "I" statements.

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Go to: [Scenario 1: Conflict with a Member](#)

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