



CONFLICT AND DISPUTE - QUICK TIPS

Five quick tips to help academic leaders wisely manage interpersonal conflict and dispute among colleagues.

Step Back, Assess

Once you realize that you are in a dispute or some form of conflict with a colleague, stop and reflect before engaging more fully. If conflict erupts unexpectedly, say in the course of a meeting, try to de-escalate in the moment, reflect, and re-engage later when tempers and emotions are not running so high.

Consider the following questions:

* What is the source of the conflict and why are you involved? Who else is involved?

* What are your goals? What is the outcome you'd like to see?

Your goals may include solving the problem; changing certain procedures; or pursuing an alternative solution to a problem. Or, you may be seeking an apology. Once you can articulate what your goal is, it can be easier (not to mention more feasible) to devise a path to a solution or remedy.

* What relationship do you hope to have with the individual/others afterwards?

If your goal sounds more like "win and never see the person again", it may be time to do more thinking.

SAMPLE
QUESTIONS (1)
for situation
assessment

Having considered those core issues, go on to specifics about the situation:

* Is this a matter about which you need to engage? Or, is this a dispute that has been transferred to you?

* What is your role in the conflict? Are you a party to the dispute, are you serving as a mediator, or are you the decision maker?

Once you know what others want/expect of you and what you are willing to do, explore what happened, how the current situation or impasse developed, what the perspectives of the different stakeholders are, what the parties (including you) want and need, and what the most likely outcome that you--as a group--can achieve.

* When will you pursue the next step?

If you can choose, is there a time of day that will be most conducive to problem solution? A time that is best for most if not all of the involved parties? Time for working the problem all the way through? Choose to deal with the problem in person if at all possible, or on the telephone or where you can see the person's face, if not. Avoid email when having a dispute.

* Where will you meet? Your office, the other person's office, or a neutral site? Will you invite others to participate? Why or why not?

SAMPLE
QUESTIONS (2)
for situation
assessment





Prepare

Identify the information needed to move to a good or acceptable resolution. Gather documentation or evidence. Do not assume others are aware of what you know or that they have all the facts that influence your goals. Consider how this information will "read" to neutral or objective parties. Pause to think about what information might change your perspective: what chance might there be that the other party/ies have information to which you do not have access? Work to keep an open mind.

Prepare tools for disengaging if the situation escalates or you need to call a break. Have words ready, ones you can say and use, to avoid making decisions in the moment, and for agreeing to disagree. Prepare strategies to agree on a time, place and method for another meeting.

- * "I would like to reflect so that I can give you a thoughtful answer. Can I get back to you in twenty minutes?"
- * "I would like to give this issue further consideration. Might you have time tomorrow when I could get back to you?"
- * "I'd like to recheck some of the matters we're discussing, and resume our conversation later..."

SAMPLE SCRIPTS
for delaying decisions

Do not air your concerns with others before you have pursued a resolution with the people most directly involved, if at all possible. Keep the circle of conflict as small as possible.

Rehearse with someone you trust if you can do so confidentially. If the consequence or seriousness of the discussion is significant, it is important to be well prepared and a fresh perspective might help lead to a more constructive interaction.

Stay Calm, Stick to Facts

The more calm you are, the more effective and persuasive your comments will be and the more like you are to be heard. Do not attribute to malice anything that miscommunication may explain. Assume positive intent. This will help you stay in a constructive, problem-solving mode. If things are caused by bad intent, that will emerge soon enough. Clarify the facts. Rather than saying "everyone knows...", share information you have and listen before responding. Be ready to consider alternative explanations, especially that you might be wrong. Ask clarifying questions before drawing conclusions or making charges about what the other has done.

- * "Have I understood your concerns properly?"
- * "I'd like to understand more about why..."
- * "Maybe I'm confused. As I understood from our previous conversation, you were going to do X and Y. Could you help me understand where I've gone wrong?"

SAMPLE SCRIPTS
for clarifying facts





Use Low-Key Language

Strip all accusatory, blaming or angry words out of everything you say. Focus on conduct, not intentions or motives. Use neutral descriptors and specific action words. Take out all emotionally-laden words, and replace them with more neutral ones.

- * "You left the meeting at that point" instead of "you stormed out of the meeting."
- * "You became red in the face and raised your voice" instead of "you pitched a fit."
- * "We had differing perspectives on some central points." instead of "You lied about all the facts."

SAMPLE SCRIPTS
for neutral sentences

Soften your introductory phrases to leave room for a misunderstanding.

- * "Would you agree that, when we discussed this in August, we had allocated effort as follows?"
- * "As I understand the situation, there was an exchange in class that became heated, between A and B, and you were intervening. Is that accurate?"

SAMPLE SCRIPTS
for soft introduction

Use "I" not "you" messages. This strategy is to avoid making a rushed or poorly founded accusation, and to help the other person understand what is clear to you and what isn't.

- * "I'm confused ..." or "I'm hoping you can help me understand..."
- * "I'm concerned ..."
- * "I wonder ...?"

SAMPLE SCRIPTS
for avoiding accusation

Stay factual. Do not infer cause or connection.

- * "You stated ..."
- * "I saw / noticed / observed ..."
- * "First X happened, then Y happened ..."

SAMPLE SCRIPTS
for checking facts

Show respect for the others in the conversation. Disputes are, at base, negotiations in which both parties have something they want to achieve; setting the tone and doing what is possible to build trust are critical for constructive outcomes.



Stay on the High Road

If the other party makes unprofessional remarks, it is tempting to respond in kind. If the other person says something hurtful or rude, acknowledge that the other person is upset and return to the topic at hand in as low-key a way as possible. Seek to avoid escalation of anger and negativity.

- * "Let's stay focused on the problem, not on each other."
- * "Would it help to take a break?"
- * "You are really invested in this and I see that you're frustrated. We will not solve this at volume. "

SAMPLE SCRIPTS
for focusing on the
topic

You can win the battle and lose the war through a stinging rejoinder, losing your temper, or speaking in anger. Remember that your affect, how you handle conflicts, will be remembered. Leave out that great one-liner at the expense of others. Stay polite and seek a civil closure to the interaction. Express appreciation and double check the person's well-being. Remember that relationships in academia last for decades, and how someone feels will linger long after the particulars of the event have receded in memory.

- * "This has been pretty intense. Do you think we're on a better track now?."
- * "Thank you for hanging in there with a hard topic. I really appreciate your commitment."

SAMPLE SCRIPTS
for closure

