Is Conflict Reducing Your Capability to Make Decisions?

Is there a dead smelly animal in the middle of the boardroom table that no one wants to talk about? As issues build up and fail to get addressed, that smelly pile can continue to grow until it becomes an unpleasant experience to attend one of your association meetings. Under pressure, the table will ultimately collapse – often it's then that someone will suggest it's time to seek help. And, as long as the situation persists, it distracts staff members and volunteers from the important work they need to do to serve their members.

Having dragged a few of these dead smelly animals off of meeting and board tables throughout my career, I like to share some ways of keeping the number of animals to a minimum – clearly, it's easier to deal with one or two conflicts than it is to deal with a multitude of them. And, dealing with difficult situations and conflict as soon as it arises requires less effort and cost that tackling the whole pile at once.

Understanding the elements of conflict and how consensus can be used effectively to support decision-making is critical for associations who don't want to get side-tracked and perhaps, even worse, eliminated entirely.

Conflict

Conflict is inevitable. It develops because people are different and complex individual styles exist. Conflict will occur when an individual or group is not obtaining what they need or want and are seeking to serve their own self-interests. In not-for-profits, lack of strategic management, policy and processes, and poor communications are indicators that suggest conflict will happen.

These indicators, combined with individuals seeking power, weak leadership and dissatisfaction with leadership and/or management styles are the beginnings of conflict. Conflict becomes more evident with body language, disagreements occurring regardless of the issues, an increasing lack of respect, the withholding of information, and lack of shared goals.

Conflict is destructive. It directs attention away from other important activities and results in poor cooperation and polarization. Conflict can also cause good friends to become strangers. And last, but certainly not least, conflict costs money.

And yet there is a positive side. Conflict can be constructive when it is addressed and results in clarification or solutions to problems and issues. Involving people in resolving issues important to them helps build better solutions.

Although inevitable, conflict can be minimized through evaluation practices. Evaluation practices can provide not-for-profits with early warning indicators, allowing them to catch potential

conflict early and reduce the risk of it expanding and causing disruption. Some commonly used evaluation practices in the association sector include:

- Board of Directors/Committee Performance Evaluation
- Individual Director/Committee Member Performance Evaluation
- Strategic Management Evaluation
- Best Practice Reviews
- Member Surveys
- Board Competency Evaluation
- Orientations (resulting in an understanding of the issues of importance to, and the expectations of, new Board or Committee members

Today's reliance on technology for communications is also causing conflicts: the tone in emails messages; not having the personal voice to voice connection; information overload; and, assumptions that members will visit the association's website.

Board and Chief Staff Officer Conflict

Board conflict frequently relates to their key employee and leadership partner, the Chief Staff Officer (CSO). Some examples include: delving into administrative and operational matters (overstepping their authority); arriving unprepared for meetings; failing to follow through on commitments; bringing up issues at board meetings that would be better addressed elsewhere; avoiding knowledge-based decisions; and, not supporting the CSO in discussions with members.

In turn, the CSO can cause conflict for the board. Examples include: treating board members differently; not providing enough information or providing the wrong information; minimizing accountability; incompetence or disorganization; not being tuned in to board needs; having a hidden agenda, and, not being objective enough on board issues.

Many of the above issues apply equally to relationships between association committees and association staff.

There are ways to resolve conflict and processes exist that have proven very effective. Some are more effective than others depending on the group and issues to be resolved.

Reducing Conflict

Some suggested ways to reduce conflict are:

- Have a policy and supportive procedures to help address and minimize conflict and stay focused on your core purpose
- Provide training to the Chair and others on how to run effective meetings and resolve conflict
- Employ proven practices such as: not avoiding conflict and meeting conflict head on; being honest about concerns; disagree with ideas, not people; treat it as a shared

problem; plan for and communicate more frequently; agree to disagree; and, engage those involved

- Seek out the root causes of conflict such as: false assumptions; individual needs or wants not being met; and, provide information related to the root cause of the issue
- Be prepared for the meeting, making sure it's at a convenient time and place. Talk directly to one another. Prepare notes in advance. Don't specify blame. Listen to, understand and acknowledge. Ask, "What can we do to improve the situation for both/all of us?" or, "What can we do to resolve our differences?"

A tremendous amount of conflict arises during periods of change or pending change in the association environment. If change is seen as more acceptable, conflict will be minimized. Making change more acceptable means ensuring it:

- Offers to solve persistent or difficult problems
- Is presented by a respected individual or group
- Indicates the benefits and they are clearly communicated
- Is compatible with accepted values
- Is easy to understand
- Is easy to implement

Understanding and addressing resistance to change in advance will make the change more acceptable and will help reduce conflict.

Consensus

Consensus-building is a process that allows opinions to be shared. It requires the negotiation of a solution, personal flexibility, and a willingness to accept less than everything one might want.

Getting together to talk about the issues is important, but the process used needs to be understood by all. The Chair or facilitator needs to share the steps that will be followed to reach a solution for the issue causing the conflict.

One proven process that is effective in resolving issues requires the following steps:

1. Headline the issue to be resolved. Put it in writing so everyone understands the issue and why it must be resolved (thereby avoiding misinterpretation).
2. Provide background on the issue. Everyone should have all the information available on this issue including potential impact, causes, and limits.
3. Generate ideas to solve the issue. Hold off on discussing and judging the ideas presented so the brainstorming can be effective.
4. Select the best idea. Provide a time period for clarification and discussion on the ideas. Then, narrow the ideas down by assigning a number of votes to each participant. They can democratically apply them to the ideas listed. The idea with the most votes is chosen.
5. Identify the benefits of the idea. List the ways the idea contributes to resolving the issue.

6. Identify and list problems with the idea (idea-stoppers).
7. For each idea-stopper, determine if it can be overcome. If it cannot be overcome, you may have to treat it as an issue and start over again. If that is not successful, consider the next best idea.
8. Accept the idea as the solution. It is important to ask everyone to support the idea to ensure successful implementation of the solution. If two or more members cannot give their support, put the issue of "why not" back into the process at step seven.

Remember, consensus does not imply or require unanimity – it implies the achievement of a commonly held agreement.

Those who do not support the idea solution can say, "I don't see the need for this, but I'll go along." Those with reservations can say, "I think this may be a mistake but I can live with it." Respecting the majority and ones own position can be stated as, "I personally can't do this, but I won't stop others from doing it."

There are a number of barriers to consensus-building including: trying to score points; power struggles; working with unclear expectations; and, role conflict. Every barrier can usually be overcome by a specific or series of corresponding actions. Some time-tested ways to overcome barriers include:

- Work for a solution that has something positive for each party, based on defensible criteria
- Accept the validity of "there is more than one right way"
- Eliminate all "good guy/bad guy" preconceptions
- Commit to basic ethical principles, e.g. honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, trust
- Demonstrate patience, appreciation and optimism
- Clarify the issues, as distinct from the facts
- Create options for consideration
- Use "time outs" to cool down, reflect, or caucus

Trying to achieve consensus is good for an organization. But if it is simply not possible, and all participants have been heard, have the points of difference summarized and proceed to dealing with a motion on the issues as appropriate.

It is easy to avoid dealing with conflict in the short-term as it makes most people feel uncomfortable. However, avoiding it, and making decisions while conflict is in the air, has been proven time and time again as unwise and full of risk.

To fuel your thoughts on this subject and perhaps inspire you to develop solutions that will minimize conflict in your association in the future, I'll leave you with a question. Why does an

association Board with a three-year strategic plan in place as well as one year board terms, struggle with direction and values?

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to trends, issues, challenges and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant www.amces.com and the CAE Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.