

Advising Through Conflict

Student organizations will inevitably encounter conflict throughout the year, be it internal, or with an external party. While some leaders may have the skills to manage conflict on their own, there may be a point where they come to you as an advisor for support. It is not your job to solve the issue for them; however, you can be a great resource to assist them with challenge and support through the process. That said, there may be a point where it would be most beneficial for you to step in more directly.

Please utilize this document as a resource for navigating conflict as an advisor and know you can always reach out to our office for support should you need it.

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Avoiding Conflict Escalation

Conflict is inevitable, but there may be some things you and your organization can do to avoid unnecessary conflict and prepare your members for handling conflict before it escalates or starts to negatively impact your organization. We suggest implementing the following to set yourselves up for navigating conflict with ease:

Set ground rules and expectations for the organization and hold folks accountable. Leadership should set and communicate expectations for interacting with one another and working together on a team, as well as the consequences should folks break those rules.

Over-communicate rather than under-communicate. One may have to reiterate expectations multiple times or explain processes and procedures multiple times and multiple ways. Many disagreements can arise from misunderstanding one another or forgetting processes and expectations. Model and encourage patient communication.

Create an inclusive, welcoming culture. Encourage and/or provide professional development opportunities for members about DEI and Belonging and build the skills to communicate across difference. These concepts should be included in the ground rules.

Encourage constructive communication practices and feedback opportunities. Leaders should offer opportunities for membership to provide and receive feedback both anonymously and face-to-face. When there are disagreements and/or instances of needing to provide criticism, having a process and expectations to follow can help avoid issues and misunderstandings.

Hopefully student organization leaders are prepared to take on the initial concerns and address them, but it may be brought to your attention. Should that happen, you can

consider the steps below. It may also be good to work through these steps with the student leaders, so they too have a guide for managing issues.

Before approaching the conflict, know the issue has likely been persisting for a while and the students involved have either been avoiding addressing it, or have made attempts and not been successful.

Step 1 – Understand the Conflict

- Listen actively - Make time to listen to all parties involved and allow everyone to share their full perspective without interruptions. In-person is best for this.
- Try to identify the root cause - Determine whether the conflict is due to miscommunication, personal differences, or organizational issues.
- Example – Perhaps one side is upset with the direction the organization is going and has made snide comments about it to some members and the President has discovered this and attempted to address the individual who has stated discontent on their own, but rumors and negative attitudes about the leadership are sprinkled throughout the organization now.

Step 2 – Maintain Neutrality

- Stay impartial: Avoid taking sides or showing favoritism. Your role is to mediate and facilitate rather than to advocate for one side or the other.
- Encourage open dialogue and remind of expectations: Create an environment where all parties feel comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings.
- Example - Do your best to set up opportunities to hear multiple sides and concerns. If there are rumors about leadership, try to find the source and hear their perspectives and the perspectives from leadership.

Step 3 - Provide Support and Resources

- Offer Mediation: Sometimes, having a neutral third party can help resolve conflicts more effectively. Consider arranging a mediation session if needed. Otherwise, you can encourage all parties involved to handle it themselves first after ensuring they feel confident in how to approach the situation appropriately and check in with them on progress.
- Access to Resources: Ensure that members know about resources available for conflict resolution, such as counseling services or training workshops.

Step 4 – Facilitate Constructive Communication

- Promote respectful interaction: Set ground rules for discussions, emphasizing the importance of respectful and professional communication; be ready to enforce.
- Focus on issues, not personalities: Encourage addressing of specific behaviors or actions rather than making personal attacks or sweeping statements.
- Example - Express what you believe to be constructive communication, but if the discussion becomes too intense or personal (read the room), don't be afraid to pause and separate individuals to decompress and start again a different way.

Step 5 – Guide Problem-Solving

- Encourage Collaborative Solutions: Help the parties involved brainstorm potential solutions together. Aim for compromises or agreements that satisfy the needs of all involved.
- Be Solution-Oriented: Keep the discussion focused on finding a resolution rather than dwelling on past grievances.
- Example: If you find there to be negative impacts from organization leadership, use an appropriate advising technique to help them come to terms with their intent vs impact, and action items for how to grow and change going forward to meet the needs of their organization.

Step 6 – Set Clear Expectations and Boundaries Going Forward

- Define Acceptable Behavior: Clearly communicate the organization's expectations for behavior and conflict resolution. And share what may happen if disregarded.
- Agree to Compromises: Moving forward, both sides should be taking some responsibility for repairing the relationship and knowing what is expected of them.
- Establish Boundaries: If necessary, set limits on how and when conflicts should be addressed to prevent escalation and ensure productive discussions.
- Example: If the issue is to improve their communication, help them set goals for improvement and ask them how you and their peer leaders can help keep them accountable with that process. Discuss what might happen should they not progress as needed. Do they need to step down? Is there a process for this?

Step 7 - Know When to Seek Help

- Escalate When Necessary: If a conflict cannot be resolved through internal mediation or if it involves serious issues (e.g., discrimination or harassment), involve appropriate campus resources or authorities.

- **Professional Support:** Don't hesitate to seek advice from the Office of Student Engagement or [Student Rights and Responsibilities office](#) at any point. Sometimes you may be dealing with complex or sensitive conflicts.
- **Example** – If there are instances of harassment or bullying, you can try to address minor cases as a means of creating a respectful and inclusive community; however, there are offices on campus who deal with matters of Title IV and the [Clery Act](#) that can support you, and certain scenarios you are required to report as an advisor.

Step 8 - Follow-Up and Review

- **Monitor the Situation:** After a resolution has been reached, check in with the parties involved to ensure that the conflict has been resolved and that no further issues have come up.
- **Review and Reflect:** Evaluate the conflict resolution process to identify what worked well and what could be improved for future conflicts. Perhaps you can use the context of this experience when preparing future executive members for leadership.
- **Example** – In addition to showing support throughout the initial conflict, it is good to follow up with parties involved to ensure everyone knows the issue is being addressed, and make sure there are no additional worries or concerns. Things may be tense for a while, but reiterating to everyone that they need to show one another patience and humility can help them move on and see the progress easier.

Final Note: Effective conflict management requires patience, empathy, and a proactive approach. By fostering a supportive environment and addressing conflicts quickly and constructively, you can help maintain a positive and productive atmosphere within the student organization.

Feel free to adapt these strategies based on the specific needs and dynamics of your organization and your relationship with the students.