

...RESOLVE CONFLICTS (29)

In most experiential education (EE) programs, the emphasis is placed on personal risk taking to expand intrapersonal skills. However, the development of **prosocial** or **interpersonal skills** tends to receive less deliberate attention. For some, a group in conflict is a mistaken sign of poor leadership. Yet, conflict is both desirable and necessary in EE programs to enable change.

Conflict is the social friction or tension caused by discord or discrepancies between two or more parties (among a group of clients). While programs do not want to manufacture conflict, they should allow it to **arise naturally** from the stress of living outdoors in close quarters while enduring difficult challenges and hardships in groups. Conflicts (with the potential to become hostile, aggressive or even violent) arise from:

- miscommunication about plans or decisions,
- disagreement over tasks or performance,
- differences in workload or contributions,
- competition rather than collaboration, and
- feelings of being overlooked or excluded.

Leaders and facilitators avoid being drawn into group conflict, but allow clients to resolve their own conflict and reflect on success or failure. Here are methods to share with both parties.

STEPS TO RESOLUTION

1. **Prepare** by learning everything about the conflict. Seek to understand its background and the unique needs of each party. Identify where they disagree and define those disagreement in detail. Raise the conflict issue with both parties and convince them to seek resolution. Provide a neutral environment, a comfortable setting, and sufficient time for discussions.
2. **Collect** much more information by probing deeper. Meet with each party to determine feelings and expectations. Be sure to know what lies on both sides of the dispute.

Avoid temptations to suggest an obvious solution. This rescuing behavior loses your neutrality and draws you into conflict, with the appearance to have taken sides. Instead ask questions to help them find answers.

3. **Exchange** information between parties. This includes verbal consent to proceed with resolution, willingness to share intentions and desired outcomes, and agreement with guidelines to the process. These guidelines can include separating the conflict from its cause, using “I” statements, not attacking, and listening without interrupting. During the exchange, encourage disclosure, clarify vague issues, paraphrase for everyone to understand, and validate people for sharing or following the guidelines.
4. Check to ensure understanding and begin to **bargain** toward middle ground. Encourage each party to state what they would be willing to give and what they would want in return. Work within ideal limits between the best outcome (getting all that you ask for) and the worst outcome (conceding to all demands). When arguments arise, move from debate (not heard) to dialogue (heard and understood) by asking open-ended questions that get both parties to share.
5. **Compromise** through collaboration by persuading each party to give a little to get more in return. If each can be persuaded to give up one concession that the other wants, then arguments will deescalate, animosity will evaporate, and progress will be made. The key to this lies in concessions that are perceived to have equivalent value.
6. Once resolved, summarize results, seal the deal, and **agree** with recorded verbal or written statements. Celebrate their success and decide how to monitor their progress.

Tom Young & Simon Priest