

10

Conflict Resolution

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ Evaluate your market's policies and procedures for dealing with conflict.
- ▶ Recognize elements and stages of conflict.
- ▶ Be aware of strategies to handle and resolve conflicts.

Managers can build a positive environment through open communication, skillful management, ethical behavior, and fair and respectful treatment of vendors, customers, staff, board members, and others who are involved in the market. Still, conflicts will arise. One of the most frequently cited challenges for market managers is how to handle the myriad personalities and interests that coexist at a market. Success in dealing with conflict depends on the skills and techniques used to manage it when it arises.

Evaluating Your Organization

You may not realize the importance of having an organization-wide policy for resolving conflicts until you face a major problem. The following questions will help you assess your organization's ability to deal with conflict. If there is recurring or constant tension within your market organization, these questions can help you identify some of the root problems that are causing or fostering tensions. If applicable, raise these questions with your board to make sure that the lines of communication stay open for everyone involved in the market.

- Do we have a dispute-resolution system or process? What is it? Is everyone aware of it and do they use it? If not, why not?
- Does our system or process seek to resolve conflict as its primary goal or does it seek to assign blame and/or punish one party?
- Is our system confidential?
- Is it committed to timely and fair resolution?
- Do we encourage communication when differences arise?
- Does our system foster trust and facilitate growth in relationships?
- Does it take into account inherent power imbalances between managers and vendors? How does it address those imbalances?



Identifying Conflict

Conflict can come from a wide variety of sources, ranging from a bad night's sleep to a long-held resentment about a perceived injustice committed by another person. Conflict can be caused by a breakdown in communication, and miscommunication almost always aggravates situations where conflict already exists. Power imbalances between managers and employees and managers and vendors are also a significant source of stress on working relationships and on the health and functioning of the market. The manager is responsible for enforcing the rules and regulations of the market and yet vendors often pay the manager's salary. If managers are volunteers (often they are also vendors), they may resent the amount of work they do for the market if other vendors are perceived as contributing little to the market's functioning and administration.

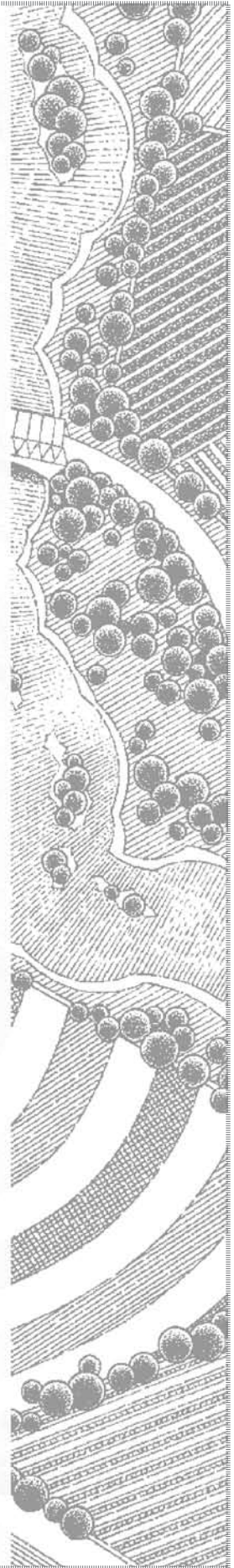
It is important to keep the lines of communication as open as possible so grievances are less likely to build up. When they do, however, there are steps managers can take to address problems and negotiate compromises and solutions. Not every problem can be solved. Keep in mind, as well, that conflict resolution is a skill that requires time to develop. If your first attempts at resolving conflict do not go as smoothly as you would like, take heart. You will get more practice and eventually build the skills necessary to more effectively manage contentious situations.

Finally, while conflict situations can be exhausting and time-consuming, they do not always have to be a bad experience. Handled appropriately, they can be an opportunity to stimulate creativity, revise outdated procedures, and encourage the growth of the organization and the individuals involved in it. If you can learn to view situations of conflict as opportunities for constructive change and problem-solving, you can turn some challenges into opportunities.

Stages of Conflict

Part of successfully managing conflict is developing some perspective and choosing strategies for dealing with the conflict based on your analysis of the situation. In the midst of a conflict, especially when your own emotions are engaged, it is easy to lose perspective, so it may be helpful to recognize that conflicts generally progress through five stages:

- **Latent Stage:** Participants are not yet aware of the conflict but hidden frustrations may surface at any time.
- **Perceived Stage:** Members are aware that a conflict exists.
- **Felt Stage:** Members feel stress, anxiety, and possibly hostility.



- **Manifest Stage:** The conflict is open and can be observed.
- **Aftermath Stage:** The outcome of the conflict, which can vary from resolution to group dissolution or perhaps a return to the latent stage, is determined.

If you can recognize the phases of a dispute, you will be better able to anticipate and prepare for the actions and reactions of those involved. You also may be better equipped to influence the aftermath stage to achieve a favorable outcome.

Understanding the Conflict

Before you attempt to resolve a conflict, it is important to understand the nature of the issue. Bring all of the affected parties together to discuss the issue at hand. If you are involved in the conflict and are trying to facilitate communication, check your ego at the door. You need to be able to control your emotions and try to see the conflict from the other person's perspective. It may be useful to use an outside facilitator if the relationship has broken down to the point that the individuals cannot communicate directly with each other. If so, find someone who is perceived as unbiased and can effectively hear both sides of the story.

Pay attention to the environment in which the discussion is taking place. Make sure that the atmosphere does not unknowingly give an advantage to one side or intimidate someone. For example, the market manager's office may be a very comfortable place for the manager to discuss his or her emotions and feelings, but it can alienate a vendor by the distance it creates through the hierarchical environment. Choose a place that is more neutral and acceptable to all individuals involved. Sometimes just being in a different environment helps people think differently about a situation and can lead to more creative solutions to problems.

Seek to establish ground rules for the meeting so that each person can contribute to the conversation. Participants should be told not to criticize each other and to speak only in "I" terms. ("I feel like this happened" rather than "You did this to me.") Setting these basic rules from the outset and adhering to them will likely lead to a more productive meeting that is less likely to dissolve into chaos or attack.

With everyone at the table, ask the following questions to uncover information that will aid in resolving the problem:

- **Is the conflict real?** It may be that what seems like a conflict is actually a miscommunication or misunderstanding.



- **What is the conflict?** Try to get at the root of the problem instead of focusing on secondary issues that may be clouding the picture. Identifying the actual point of conflict will help to avoid future occurrences and may help remedy the situation.
- **What is the cause of the conflict?** It is also important to accurately identify the source of the conflict. If you erroneously attribute the cause of the problem to the wrong source, the problem can easily return after you think it has been resolved.



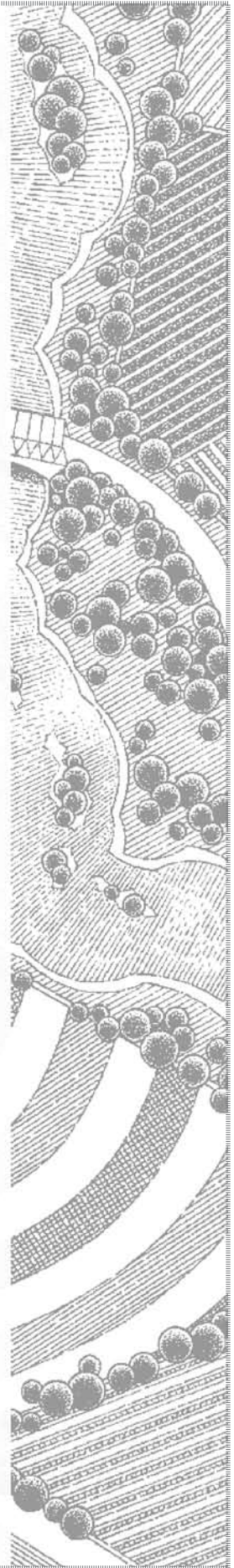
Understanding Each Person's Perspective

To make progress in resolving the conflict, both sides need to understand where the other is coming from. Stephen Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, encourages setting the following ground rule that must be met before negotiations can begin. "The ground rule of communication is very simple—you cannot make your point until you restate the other person's point to his or her satisfaction."

Often, individuals are so emotionally invested in their own perspectives that they cannot see another person's side of things. Many conflict resolution experts recommend having both parties paraphrase the other's grievances as a way to get people to calm down and make an effort to see more sides of the issue. Once people truly understand why a person is upset, they can begin to think about negotiating and compromising. Furthermore, when people see that others are making an honest effort to understand where they are coming from, they become less defensive and more willing to work toward a solution that will satisfy everyone.

Generating Solutions

Once the problem has been identified and the perspectives of those involved have been recognized and considered, it is time to begin negotiating a resolution. In negotiation, individuals often begin the process "knowing" that they have the right solution to the problem if only the other side would realize it. Flexibility is important in these situations, so participants' willingness to consider alternative solutions will contribute to a positive resolution. It is helpful to enter into negotiations with several specific options and be prepared to hear what others have to offer.



Three major obstacles that often impede the generation of alternative options are:

- Premature judgment.
- Fixation on a single answer.
- Assumption of a fixed situation.

These obstacles hinder the creativity needed for effective negotiation and can lead to an “either I win or I lose” view of problem-solving, making it impossible for both sides to find suitable resolution. Rather than attempting to “beat” the other side, individuals must be encouraged and willing to work toward a win-win solution if possible.

With all parties at the table, brainstorm options for resolving the conflict. Make sure, however, that the issue has been clearly defined and that the objectives are clear. If a situation has more than one objective, brainstorm each one individually. Remember, it is important to establish a “no criticism” rule so that all participants feel free to provide input without fear of judgement or ridicule.

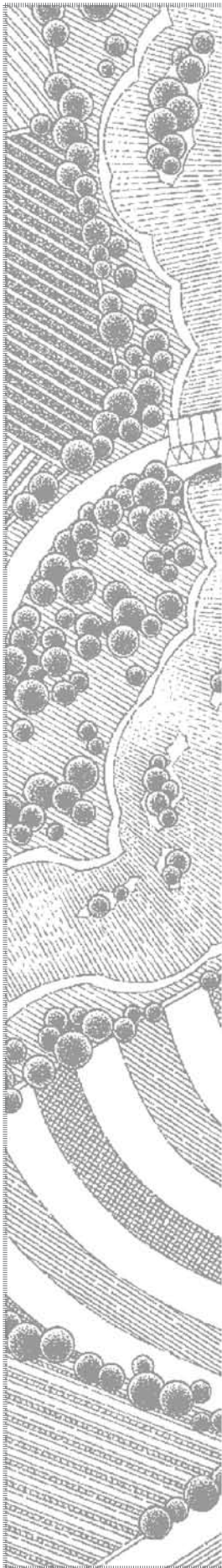
When all reasonable solutions have been suggested, the next step is to prioritize the solutions in relation to their degrees of acceptability. While one party may feel that an option is very acceptable, another party may not approve at all. Understanding the next best option becomes critical to this process, as it may be somewhat acceptable to both sides. During the process, try to find areas where both sides can benefit. This will create a situation in which the parties are not striving for one side to “win” over the other but to reach a wise, fair agreement.



A note about time. Going through this process can be time-consuming and emotionally and mentally draining. Keep an eye on the situation and set a time limit if it seems that the conversation is getting repetitive or dragging. It may be that the group needs to take a “time out” for awhile to get away and think about the situation or that resolving the conflict will require several discussions over a period of days or weeks. Some issues can be resolved more easily and more quickly than others. Use your judgement to ensure that the discussion does not become a marathon that leaves everyone feeling exhausted.

Acceptance

Whatever solution is reached, make sure that everyone is in agreement. Ask each person if they accept the terms of the compromise and give them a chance to voice any remaining concerns. Do not let someone sit silently with arms crossed and assume that they are okay with the discussions. Down the road, these people



may have a bigger problem and feel unempowered. Before considering the conflict resolved, decide how the solution will be evaluated and, if necessary, revisited.

Checking In and Following Through

A few days later, do not forget to check in with all parties involved in the conflict to make sure that the resolution has been successful and that individuals are not still harboring some resentment. Follow through on evaluating the solution on which the group agreed and make whatever revisions are necessary.

Conclusion

Conflict resolution is always easier in an atmosphere of trust among people who respect each other's points of view and expertise. Conversely, if there is an atmosphere of disrespect or distrust, then conflict resolution is very time-consuming and probably not very successful. This chapter offered ideas and strategies for resolving inevitable conflicts, but their application will be successful only if there is a solid foundation for the organization of the market.

