



9. TIP SHEET 7: DEALING WITH CONFLICT

TASK VERSUS INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Before deciding whether to intervene and how to approach conflict, it is important to identify what type of conflict is occurring.

Task conflict occurs when people have different ideas about the work itself. This type of conflict can be beneficial during decision-making (as long as the team has very low relationship conflict) as it leads to productive discussions and new ideas.

Interpersonal conflict occurs when there is tension, resentment, or friction between team members that is unrelated to their tasks. This type of conflict tends to have negative effects on team performance.

COMMON CAUSES OF CONFLICT

CONFLICT	DESCRIPTION
PERSONALITY CLASHES	Personality clashes occur when two people have fundamentally incompatible personalities or work styles.
COMPETITION FOR RESOURCES	This occurs when there are not enough resources (equipment, money) to go around, making it difficult for the volunteers to do their jobs.
FEELINGS OF JEALOUSY OR INJUSTICE	When one volunteer feels that they are contributing more than another or that a particular volunteer is not pulling their weight, it can often lead to feelings of inequity, jealousy, or injustice when the volunteer that is not contributing as much gets more recognition.
STRESS	Stress could be caused by the pressure of an emergency situation, someone taking on too much work or too many responsibilities, being ill-equipped to handle a task, or something going on outside of the volunteering group.
POWER PUSH	A volunteer (or group of volunteers) trying to gain power within the volunteering group. This could mean winning leadership positions or simply influencing volunteers behind the leader's back.
DISAGREEMENTS OVER METHODS, PROCEDURES, AND ROLE ASSIGNMENTS	When people disagree about how something should be done, and when it is unclear what is expected of someone.
CONFLICTING GOALS	Two volunteers in a team or working on the same task or job have different and conflicting end-goals and motivations in mind.





CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES IN PRACTICE

The first thing to do is to **prevent conflict** within your group. Specifically, conflict that can be disruptive to the functioning of your team. You can do this by becoming aware of the potential causes of conflict in your group, and by trying to address them before they cause problems.

If conflict does arise, the first thing to do is to **identify the root cause**. This takes time and requires that you remain as objective and as neutral as possible. Furthermore, you should provide each conflicting party equal attention and consideration. Once you have identified the root cause of a conflict in your group, below are suitable strategies that you can apply in practice to help you deal with it. Be aware that you may need to try a few different things before you find something that works for the volunteers involved.

If it is a procedural or **task conflict (e.g., disagreements over methods, procedures, or role assignments)**:

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
CLARIFY ROLES AND PROCEDURES	It is important that volunteers have a clear understanding of their roles and what you expect them to do. Conflict can arise if, for example, two volunteers each believe that they are supposed to do a task and argue over whose responsibility it is or if one believes that another has not done something that they should have. Clarifying these roles and expected outcomes to the volunteers involved or to the whole volunteering group can help to resolve these conflicts.
MAKE MORE RESOURCES AVAILABLE	When conflict is caused by competition for resources, it can help to make more resources available or to redistribute resources if at all possible. This may mean getting creative in finding alternative resources or prioritising resource allocation.
ALTER THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT	Simple changes in the physical environment around your brigade, group, or unit that affect workflow, equipment storage, and facilities can have an impact on the way that volunteers work together.
CHANGE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES	It may be necessary to implement changes in the policies or procedures within a volunteering group in order to clarify expectations around processes, performance, contributions, or training and attendance requirements. When these are vague, inconsistent, or open to interpretation, there is more likely to be misunderstandings that lead to conflict.





On the other hand, if it is an **interpersonal conflict** (e.g., personality clashes, conflicting goals):

STRATEGY	DESCRIPTION
APPEAL TO A COMMON GOAL	When volunteer personalities are clashing or conflicting goals seem to be causing trouble, it may be useful to remind volunteers why they are volunteering in the first place. Remind them why they are there and why they joined to start with, whether that was to help the community, learn new skills, or to protect their local area. Find something that resonates with both people and help them to see that they have a common goal to work towards.
CHANGE THE REWARD SYSTEM	<p>Sometimes the reward system that is in place at a volunteering group can inadvertently reward behaviour that causes problems or conflict. For example, rewarding best performance (doing the most of something or working the fastest) can sometimes create a competitive environment between volunteers, which may lead to conflict.</p> <p>On the other hand, you can use your reward system to minimise conflict by rewarding and reinforcing positive, collaborative, and sharing behaviours.</p>
RESTRUCTURE TEAMS	If there is a serious personality clash between two volunteers that cannot be solved through other means, it may be necessary to do some restructuring. For larger volunteering groups with multiple teams, this could mean putting the volunteers on completely separate teams. Other options include changing their roles or making a conscious effort to avoid having both out together in the same vehicle.
MEDIATION	In some cases, you may need to mediate a conflict between volunteers. This involves acting as a neutral party and facilitating a discussion around the conflict that is occurring. You can help them to clarify what they are trying to say, highlight common ground, steer the conversation in a problem-solving direction, or help to find a solution to satisfy everyone.

