Conflict Resolution for Board and Commission Members

Introduction and Purpose

The purpose of conflict resolution for board and commission members is to provide positive options for managing conflicts that may arise during the course of board and commission deliberations, so issues may be dealt with in a productive manner.

Conflict resolution seeks to resolve conflict by recognizing and addressing the underlying issues of the conflict. It involves taking action to keep a conflict from escalating and implies some ability to control the conflict. As a board or commission member, you want to manage the conflict before it escalates.

What is conflict?

Conflict is a struggle, or contest, between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values or goals. Conflict among groups of people working together such as teams, boards and commissions is common because reasonable people may often have differing points of view. Although few people go looking for conflict, more often than not, conflict results because of miscommunication between people. It is not always a bad thing to have conflict occur. If not managed, it can often lead to loss of time and unproductive results; but, it can also serve to improve outcomes and decisions made by a group. Understanding the nature of conflict and how we as individuals influence the results, is the key to effective conflict management.

What are the reasons behind conflict?

The primary reasons behind most conflicts are: differences, needs, perceptions, power, or values. These are not negative things but they can become the cause of conflict when they are not understood and accepted.

Figuring out how people feel or what they are thinking may help you identify some of the reasons behind the conflict.

Let's take a closer look at these reasons.

It's not difficult to feel threatened or vulnerable when someone has a **different** opinion than we do. Often we close our minds to the differing opinion and try to protect our own. Sometimes differences of opinion in one area can affect or damage a relationship in another area. But differences can also be beneficial and let us see things with an open mind. As a board or commission member you have the responsibility of allowing differences to be heard and respected.

Needs are conditions that we believe we cannot do without or that we believe are critical. Needs are not the same as desires. Desires are things we want but are not essential. Needs on the other hand, are essential because they contribute to our self worth, our motivation and our performance. If they are ignored, obstructed, or confused with desires, that can be a reason behind conflict.

We each have a unique **perception** of the world and the people in it. Austin is a diverse city and each person's perceptions have been shaped through their own life experiences and education. Our actions are based on our perceptions. Conflict may arise when we fail to recognize when others are approaching an issue from their own perception. Recognizing and helping

others understand these varying perceptions is an important part of managing conflict.

Power has many definitions. Power can be positive when it means the ability or capacity to perform or act effectively. But in a conflict, power often is abused or used incorrectly to mean the ability or capacity to exercise control. It is seen as a way to dominate or control another person. True power in managing conflict comes through your understanding the differences, needs, perceptions and values of others.

A **value** can involve a belief, a principle or a behavior that we think is extremely worthwhile. It is something we consider is of significant importance, such as honesty in our relationships or fairness in our judgments. Conflicts can occur when a person interprets a value or principle of another person to be merely a preference. Values, however, can be a powerful force behind a person's position in a conflict. It is important to respect those values during a conflict.

So, how do people typically respond to conflict?

Responding to conflict is a delicate balance between cooperation and assertiveness. People choose to respond to conflict in various ways. Some people choose to compete with others in order to win the conflict. Whereas, others choose to avoid the conflict all together. Some people will accommodate others by letting them have their way to make conflict feel easier. Some people will find ways to compromise with others or collaborate to get a mutually acceptable resolution. You can find more information in your online handbook. The key is to choose your approach according to the needs and importance of the conflict.

What factors should I consider before responding to conflict?

There are two goals of conflict management: clarify the issue and maintain the relationship. Sometimes you have a choice whether to involve yourself in a conflict or avoid it. You should consider several things before you make your decision:

- the **relative importance of the issue,**
- the **impact on the relationship** with the other person or party, and
- the **potential consequences** of engaging in the conflict.

You should always consider how your action or inaction will have an effect on your board and its goals. Be sure to uphold the City's ethical standards and consider the impact on the community you serve over your self-interests.

What can I do to understand conflict?

In order to understand a conflict, it is wise to not only know the reasons of conflict but to be able to understand others feelings about the conflict. One way to do this is through **active listening.** Active listening is a way of listening and responding to others that improves shared understanding and trust. It is a useful skill but especially useful in a conflict.

Active listening is a skill that takes practice because you must focus on the speaker's message instead of on distractions, and you must listen for ideas, not just facts. Active listeners judge the message, not the messenger, and listen for complete thoughts from beginning to end. They ask questions to clarify what's been said before presenting their own ideas.

Follow good listening rules: be attentive, be nonjudgmental, allow people to finish, stay on subject, and make sure you understand what the speaker is saying before formulating your own position.

What are the essential steps to resolving conflict?

Public meetings can be challenging but they are an important part of the democratic process, especially at the local level. Your goal as a board or commission member is to make sure that your meetings are as effective as possible. Sometimes, participants will be highly motivated and often nervous creating the possibility of conflict. Your role is not to eliminate the conflict but to guide the conflict to positive results. Here are some suggestions that should help you manage conflict in a meeting.

Do your homework and come prepared to every meeting so you can actively listen and ask pertinent questions.

Carefully explain the purpose of the meeting, the expected outcomes of the meeting, and the ground rules for the meeting.

Be unconditionally constructive and address people with respect at all times.

Treat all sides fairly and help balance emotion and reason.

Focus on the issues, not the people, and separate relationship issues from substantive issues. Ask specific and neutral questions.

Accept and deal seriously with difficult people and avoid repetitious debate with speakers and other board members.

Provide for balanced discussion on proposals and motions by inquiry, listening, and gaining understanding.

Use persuasion and not coercion.

Ensure that all points of view have been heard.

Always provide time for consultation with other members before decisions or agreements are made.

Check to see that all solutions can be supported.

Conflict will arise because reasonable people often have different points of view. Conflict is not always a bad thing; it can often lead to beneficial results. Understanding how conflict may arise, how people typically respond to it, and factors that influence it can help you to more effectively manage conflict when it arises.