

Conflict Resolution Solution—A Policy and Procedures

By: Paula Steffen

Conflict. There. I said it. Now you say it. How does that feel? Where do you feel it in your body? For me, I feel it in the pit of my stomach. My eyebrows furrow, my lips tighten, my arm muscles tense. For many of us, conflict does not feel good. However, ignoring conflict will not make it go away—in fact, avoidance can make the situation worse.

The best way to deal with conflict is to plan ahead and have a policy and procedures in place to refer to when you or staff find yourselves in the midst of turmoil. In the *Program Administration Scale (PAS)*, Teri Talan and Paula Jorde Bloom define a conflict resolution policy as, “more than a statement describing who to go to with a grievance. The policy must address conflict resolution in the context of the work environment and identify an expectation that staff works together to resolve their disputes using open, professional communication.”

If you are familiar with the PAS, in Item 9, Internal Communications, the quality indicator at the minimal level states that “there is a written conflict resolution policy regarding staff disputes.” At the excellent level, “there are written procedures to guide staff implementation of a conflict resolution policy (behavior or communication strategies to be used).” So, it is important to start first with a policy. With the PAS definition of a conflict resolution policy in mind, consider the following points when writing such a policy for your program.

- **Who is your policy for?** The way conflict is handled will differ slightly between the various groups of people associated with your program. At the beginning of your policy, and, perhaps, even in the title, be clear about for whom it applies. Policies might be written to address conflict between staff members, staff and family members, and/or between families. This blog will focus on conflict resolution among staff.
- **What is your vision for how conflict will be handled at your center?** Think globally for your vision. What is the ultimate goal for how conflict will be handled for the audience your policy is designed to address? This can be a simple sentence or paragraph outlining the expectation that staff work together to resolve their differences using open, professional communication and addressing what to do if the conflict is not resolved after staff attempt working to solve it together.

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Once your policy is written, it is helpful to think through the procedures needed to guide staff in conflict resolution. Procedures are the “how to” steps in resolving conflict. Having written guidelines in place that outline your center’s expectations for interactions between staff will give you and your staff a blueprint to refer to when problems arise. Consider the following guidelines as you begin to outline procedures:

- **Reflect.** Encourage staff to individually reflect on the situation prior to their meeting. You may even want to provide staff with guiding questions to help them think objectively about the issue, consider how the situation made them feel, and identify possible solutions. Reflecting on the situation in advance often helps those involved to think more rationally and better articulate their points of view.
- **Talk.** Expect the persons involved to talk to each other. Like the above definition states, the first expectation should be for staff to try to resolve the conflict themselves, without supervisor support. As early childhood professionals, we are good at helping, and expecting, children to talk with each other to work out their differences. The same goes for staff. In your procedures, suggest staff members find a neutral place and agreed upon date and time where there will be little chance of interruption to have this conversation.
- **Focus on behavior and events.** Encourage staff to take the emotion out of the situation and to objectively state their side of the situation. Suggest they separate themselves from the problem. Also, encourage them to avoid the use of the word “you” in phrases such as “when you did...” or “you made me...” which sounds accusatory. Instead, encourage staff to use “I messages” to state their feelings.
- **Listen.** Suggest staff employ active listening techniques such as affirmations, summarizing, and repeating back what they heard the other person say. Many times, the conflict can be resolved at this level because, by understanding each person’s perspective, misunderstandings are clarified and issues are resolved.
- **Identify points of agreement and disagreement.** Encourage staff to work together to come up with a list of topics in which they agree and disagree. For the topics of disagreement, in their book, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, Roger Fisher and William Ury encourage brainstorming and thinking outside the box for generating possible solutions.
- **Develop a plan.** Ask staff to identify solutions from the ideas generated in the brainstorming session that both parties can agree on. Discuss what responsibility each party has to reach the solution. In *Six Steps to Conflict Resolution in the Workplace*, Kimberly Benjamin suggests formally acknowledging the solution by using phrases such as “I agree to...” and “I acknowledge I have responsibility for...” doing so is another way to clarify what has been agreed to and demonstrates a commitment by both parties.
- **Check-in.** Suggest that the parties involved set a date to check in with each other, again in a neutral setting with little chance of interruption, to determine if the agreed upon solution is working the way each party anticipated. If not, clarifying expectations and tweaking the original plan would be in order.

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- **Seek Support.** If employees have made the effort to resolve conflict on their own, but they cannot come to a resolution, encourage them to seek supervisor assistance to guide them through the process, and/or come to a final decision regarding the conflict.

Having policies and procedures in place is the first step in guiding staff as they deal with conflict in the workplace. In addition, staff will need continued training and support in implementing a conflict resolution policy. This support can come in a couple of ways:

- **Be available.** Let employees know that administrative staff is available to support them in their efforts to resolve conflict. An open-door policy is one way to let staff know that you are available to support them in all aspects of their job, including their efforts to resolve conflict. Encourage employees to ask for guidance in implementing the procedures that are written for them to follow.
- **Training.** Offer training in conflict resolution at least annually. In Item 9 in the PAS, to receive credit at the “good” level, the expectation is that “training in conflict resolution was provided for staff within the past year.” Training involves more than spending a few minutes reviewing the center’s policy; it involves a component that might include brainstorming, role plays, and small group discussions to name a few. By actually practicing situations where misunderstandings and conflict might arise, staff will be more confident in addressing issues that may come up for them in the future.

I am reminded of the famous quote, “Failing to plan is planning to fail.” With a conflict resolution policy and procedures in place, as well as ongoing administrative support and training, staff will have a roadmap to guide their efforts at conflict resolution that align with your program’s vision. Although conflict is never comfortable, it does feel better to have a solid policy and procedures in place to refer to when conflicts do arise.

[Do you coach directors and want to know more about the topic of conflict resolution? Attend the Transformative TA Institute September 24-26, 2019 at the McCormick Center.](#)

References

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