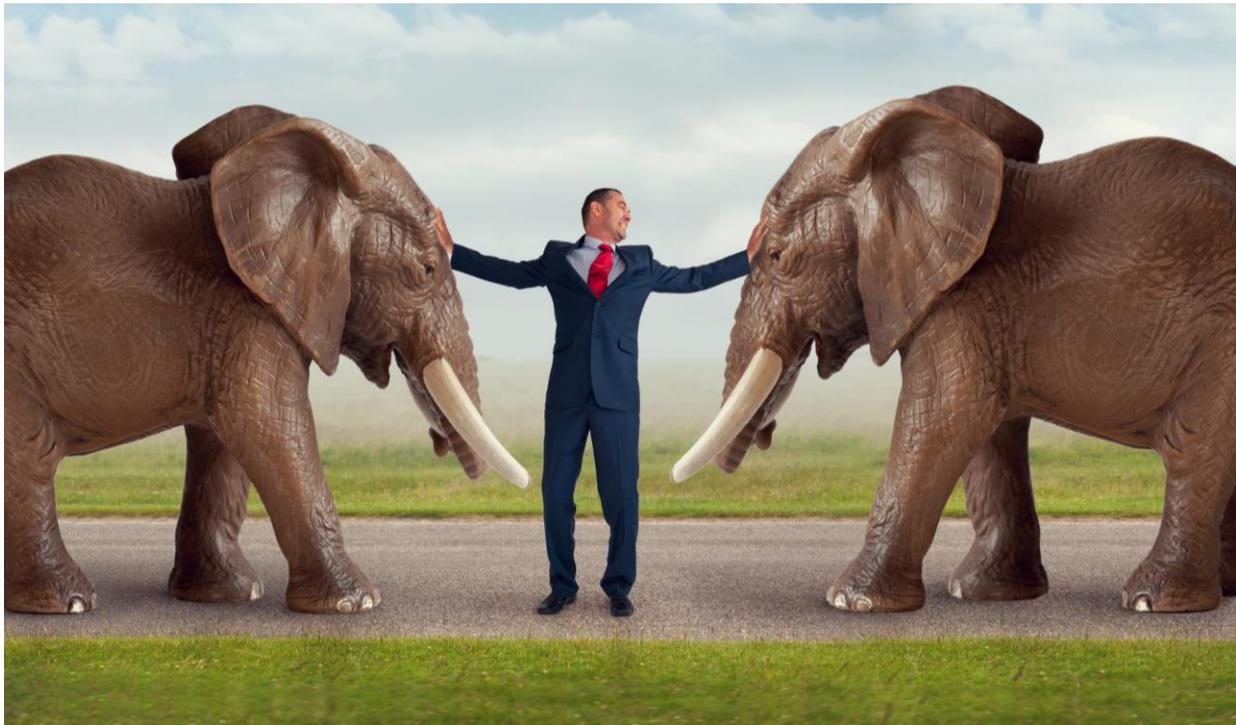




Conflict Resolution for Facilitators

by Stacey Bruton



Educators and other professionals spend a lot of time participating in online and onsite meetings. As a facilitator, your role is to guide and manage the group. At times, this assignment can be challenging when conflict arises. Recognizing early warning signs can minimize the potential for trouble. However, some issues naturally generate differences in opinion. When facilitating, it is important to stay neutral and avoid the appearance of taking sides in order to move the group forward.

Careful planning can set a positive tone from the beginning and prevent the onset of negativity. When meeting onsite, arrange the room to have a conducive setting for group discussion. If meeting online, schedule your poll questions or create your breakout groups before the meeting begins. Start the session on time and outline norms for self-monitoring. Introduce all participants, or in the case of larger groups, provide them with name tags or tent cards. Ask online participants to verify the screen name displayed is correct. Make sure to have an agenda — hard copy or electronic — so the goals are known to all. When developing the agenda, try to structure the time to have the participants spend more time talking than the facilitator.

When resistance occurs, consider the reasons behind it by asking some questions.

Is there another event taking place simultaneously that participants are missing?

Was the meeting location difficult to find or inconvenient for travel?

Did participants have insufficient notice, or was it scheduled at the last minute?

In addition, there may be other reasons group members are apprehensive. Some may have preconceived ideas about the outcome of the meeting, which can overshadow productivity. Participants may anticipate more work as a result of the meeting, or they might believe there will be limited support if new ideas are implemented. Individuals may also have something personal going on. Regardless of the cause for tension, facilitators need to avoid becoming defensive, pushing through despite the climate or countering the resistance with force.

Differing opinions are a part of healthy decision-making. Even when facts are presented and used to make the best choices, sometimes challenges arise. ***How do you know whether to intervene?*** Signs of problems include continual sidebar conversation with peers, noticeable digital conversations, folded arms, leaning back in the seat, eye-rolling, and complete disengagement. A quick gauge of the situation allows the facilitator to determine the next steps.

Is the problem serious?

Is the situation disrupting focus?

Are the conversations becoming personal?

Do I have enough credibility to mediate?

What could happen if I do nothing?

Choose careful wording in order to restore group effectiveness and avoid damaging relationships.

Facilitator intervention starts with a neutral tone and approachable voice. If the group is no longer functioning as a whole, point out that the energy seems to be lost. Ask a question and use exploratory language with plural forms to show there are options for a solution. ***What are some ways we can regain the focus?*** If there is a contentious discussion, again, intervene through questioning. ***What might be some causes? Reasons? Ideas?*** If a heated discussion continues, paraphrase the conversation in order to recap the options put forth and redirect adversarial behavior by asking another question. Asking always elicits a better response than telling because participants are more likely to accept suggestions generated by fellow group members. Telling the group what to do is the last option; however, it may be necessary when members display the inability to follow group norms of behavior.

Sometimes group discussion becomes group dysfunction requiring action. If someone is intent on criticizing another's ideas, use a question such as "We have heard your opinion about the cons of ____'s idea, but what are some of the pros?" Do not allow personal attacks or blaming others,

but avoid confrontation in front of the group. It may be necessary to call for a break and then approach the naysayer privately during that time. Online meetings allow chat conversations without involving the entire group. When people feel passionate about a topic, they might “vent” in private just for the simple need of being heard. Guided questioning can be an effective way to allow the person to share his/her feelings. ***Why do you feel this way? What happened the last time? What do you think would make things better?*** When emotions have been released, the participant is more likely to move forward in identifying solutions. Establishing rapport through non-verbal cues of posture, gestures, and breathing will have a calming effect. Avoid arguing and using loaded language, stating the participant is angry. That will only create more conflict. Remember to listen and empathize with concerns, but continue to stay neutral to help de-escalate the situation.

As the whole group comes back together, reward positive interactions with head nods, eye contact, and a friendly face. Complimenting participants for providing feedback is also helpful to set the new tone. The facilitator can also promote understanding of different viewpoints by allowing one side to present and answer questions. The alternative side can then share their points and field questions. Comment on the strengths offered by both sides so the group can move to make a decision.

If the group cannot reach a consensus on a group decision, the facilitator may need to utilize specific steering questions.

What needs to happen for this to work for you?

What will eliminate your concerns?

What support needs to be in place?

While the preferred approach is to face the conflict and come up with a group decision, asking people to compromise and be more tolerant might be necessary. When it is apparent that a resolution will not happen that day, place the issue on the agenda for the next meeting and ask participants to come with any new ideas and be prepared to make decisions.

In short, the keys to mediating conflict are to identify the signs of dysfunction, determine when to intervene and provide the correct guidance to reach a resolution. When issues are more involved, it may require multiple meetings to come to an agreement. Using a systematic approach to meetings is just one dimension of being a good facilitator. To create a positive experience for everyone, facilitators should also be adept at mediating conflict and leading groups to solutions through various questioning techniques.