

## DEVELOPING CONFLICT GUIDELINES

Conflict management guidelines created through a consensus-building process can greatly improve a group's success at navigating challenging situations. As conflict management experts, Runde and Flanagan, write, "Teams that do take the time to establish norms or team agreements, especially early in their existence, are much better positioned for meeting the inevitable conflicts that emerge."<sup>1(p172)</sup> The following is a process for how to develop such guidelines. To effectively implement this process with your particular group, consider consulting with the Ombuds Office. For best practices on facilitating an effective group discussion, see the Ombuds Office's *Tips for Facilitating Difficult Group Discussions*.

### Prepare for the Discussion

- Determine the group readiness for this process. Newly formed groups and groups with little or no active conflict are best positioned to develop and maximize the use of group conflict guidelines. If there is active conflict within the group, it will likely be more effective to first manage the active conflict before using this process.
- Prepare yourself for the potentially new and different role of facilitating this type of discussion, including how to clearly communicate your facilitation role for your team at the outset of the process.
- Allot an adequate amount of time for the conversation, such as 1 to 1.5 hours.
  - Prepare the team for the conversation by normalizing conflict. Conflict is often stigmatized and perceived of as a negative, shameful thing to be avoided. However, depending on how it is managed, conflict can lead either to both negative and positive outcomes. Encouraging your team to approach conflict as normal, natural, and necessary enables more openness and positivity.

### Optional: Self-Reflection Activity

Provide the list of **Conflict Preference Questions** below to the group and ask group members to prepare their answers to these questions either:

- a) In advance of the group discussion, or
- b) At the beginning of the group discussion

### Facilitate the Brainstorming Discussion

- Set the tone and course for the discussion, including setting intentions and discussion guidelines and clarifying the role of the facilitator.
  - A recommended guideline for this type of discussion is to refrain from making direct or indirect complaints about specific people.
- Assign a note taker to capture the preferences shared in a comprehensive list visible to all participants, noting any overlapping preferences shared by multiple team members.
- Prompt group members to share their responses to the **Conflict Preference Questions**. Discuss everyone's responses to each question before moving on as a group to the next.
- To maximize participation and productive discussion, consider tailoring the process as follows :

**Small Groups**  
(fewer than 12 people)

Facilitate sharing as a whole group.

**Medium-Large Groups**  
(12 or more people)

1. Divide the group into small groups of 3-4 people to share their individual preferences.
2. Reconvene as a whole group and invite a representative of each small group to share out with the whole group.

### Conflict Preference Questions

1. How would you like someone to handle a conflict that directly relates to you?
2. When someone has a conflict with you, how would you like them to behave while discussing it with you in order to help you listen and engage effectively?
3. When you have a conflict with someone else, what would you like them to do to help you engage respectfully and effectively in discussion about the conflict?
4. If the above things have been done, and the conflict is still unresolved, what are appropriate next steps to resolve the conflict?<sup>2</sup>



## Streamline and Finalize the Guidelines

Engage the group in an inclusive and consensus-based process to prioritize the suggestions from the brainstorming discussion and come to consensus on a shortlist of the highest priority (5-10) suggestions.

### Small Groups (fewer than 12 people)

1. Prompt the group to share ideas for how to combine similar items while keeping key aspects of each individual item.
2. Then ask the group to share ideas for how to prioritize the items in order to retain only the most important and impactful items, resulting in a list of 5-10 suggestions.

### Medium-Large Groups (12 or more people)

1. Divide the group into small groups again, and prompt the groups to:
  - Combine similar items in their list while keeping key aspects of each individual item.
  - Prioritize their suggestions and identify a shortlist of 5-10 high priority suggestions per small group.
2. Come back together as a whole team and invite each small group to share their 5-10 suggestions with the whole group.
3. Repeat this process as a whole group.

After completing the steps above, take the following final steps as a whole group to finalize the guidelines and wrap up the meeting:

1. Refine the language of each item on the short list to focus on actions and behaviors that clearly convey what the guideline would look or sound like in practice. For example, instead of “treat each other with respect,” describe what “respect” looks like through observable behavior.
2. Review, finalize and share the guidelines with the team. Consider the **Optional Additional Review**.

### Optional: Additional Review

Invite the group to bring any proposed edits to the draft list of guidelines to a follow-up group meeting for review and agreement.

## Regularly Review the Guidelines

Review and update the guidelines every 3-6 months and whenever new group members join to continually adapt the guidelines to the current needs of the group.

1. Schedule a meeting with the entire group, including new members (consider incorporating the **Optional Self-Reflection Activity**).
2. During the review meeting, post the agreements where everyone can see them.
3. Consider sharing the **Conflict Preference Questions** (Page 1) again and reviewing the process you went through to come up with them, especially if new group members have joined or it has been a long time since the guidelines were created or reviewed.
4. Facilitate an inclusive discussion of group members’ responses to the **Guideline Review Questions**, with thorough discussion of each question in sequence.
5. Facilitate the group coming to consensus on any proposed changes to the agreements.
6. Share the updated written guidelines with the whole group.

### Optional: Self-Reflection Activity

Provide all group members with the current group conflict guidelines and ask group members to prepare their answers to the Guideline Review Questions below either:

- a) In advance of the group review discussion, or
- b) At the beginning of the review discussion

### Guideline Review Questions

1. Which guidelines, or parts of guidelines, seem to be working well?
2. What could benefit from clarification?
3. What seems to be missing?

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Runde, C.E. and Flanagan, T.A., (2010). *Developing Your Conflict Competence. A Hands-On Guide for Leaders, Managers, Facilitators, and Teams.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Sebok, T., University of Colorado-Boulder Ombuds Office, conference presentation, 2014.