Conflict Resolution
by Del Suggs

Resolving Conflicts

Let's look briefly at conflict resolution. Nearly every group has conflicts and disagreements between members. Why are there conflicts? Let me give you five quick causes of conflict:

- **Interdependence:** Every member of an organization depends on other members for help and support.

- **Differences of Values, Goals, or Beliefs:** Members can be diverse, and have widely varying assumptions of worth, what is important, and even basic ideas.

- **Stress:** Members have an important job to do in running their organizaton on campus. But sometimes they actually have to take exams and write papers, too!

- **Scarce Resources:** Imagine a meeting when the budget just got slashed *after* the planning was completed. Who gets their project cut?

- **Uncertainty:** Not knowing the outcome of an issue, problem, or concern.

It can be difficult to resolve conflicts. One reason is the concept of winning and losing. If you feel strongly about something, then stepping back from that conviction might make you feel like you lost the conflict. Nobody likes to lose.

Another reason is sometimes referred to as "zero-sum." That's like a balanced budget, where in order have one thing you have to eliminate something else. So, in order for the conflict to be resolved, some one has to give up something.

The last reason conflicts can difficult to resolve can be the famous divorce term: "irreconcilable differences."

Some times the sides just can't be resolved. In that case, you have to agree to disagree and move on. But when that happens, you can count on conflict recurring.

Conflict Management and Strategies

Here are some ways to handle conflict. See which strategy works best for you and your program board.

- **Competition**: Essentially, having each side compete against each other. You might see this as a discussion and vote on the matter.

- **Accommodation**: This means finding a way to have both sides win. It can be tough to do, but it is sometimes possible.

- **Compromise**: Basically, each side gets part of what they want, while giving up something they want, like a negotiation.

- **Collaboration**: Having both sides work together, and come up with a mutually agreeable outcome. This can be the ultimate team building experience.

- **Avoidance**: Just ignore the conflict. This is a bad choice, because it won't go away by itself.

Negotiation to Resolution

If you are faced with a dispute among your members, you may need to take action. Here are some important things to keep in mind when your resolving conflicts.

First, prepare for the negotiation. Just because you will be the mediator doesn't mean you can enter the negotiation without adequate preparation. Learn as much as you can about the issue, what is involved, and who is involved. It's important to be ready when you face the two sides.

Second, focus on the process. You do this by keeping the people separate from the problem. If it's a budget matter, that means looking at the budget process and the outcome of that process, not "Brandi wants this much money, and Chad wants this much." Try to take the people-- and the personalities-- out of the problem.

Third, deal with the actual issue or interest, not the position. That means look at the Big Picture. For example, it's less important what each of the opposing sides wants to do than it is to consider whether the entire program or project matters.

Ultimately, you want to seek a balanced solution. You may have to pick one side as the winner on occasion. You may find a way to have both sides win sometimes. But true long-term conflict resolution involves compromise and collaboration. The sense that you are fair to both parties in resolving the conflict will go far in reducing future problems on your members.

Plus-- it's the right thing to do.