



# Neighborhood Association Tool Kit

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Neighborhood Associations  
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If you've found this Tool Kit, there must already be something about your neighborhood that you're concerned about, or that you want to maintain and protect, or that you want to change. Organizing your neighborhood can help to accomplish many of these goals, as well as build a sense of unity among the residents of your community, enhance the quality of life in your neighborhood, and help make it a safer and more enriching place to live. If your neighborhood is already in great shape, an active neighborhood group can help it to stay that way, increasing residents' feelings of "partnership" with those living around them, and giving your community a voice to speak to government officials, staff and developers.

## Neighborhood Groups

Unfortunately, neighborhood groups do not start themselves or spontaneously spring from the good intentions of a few members of a community. There are many tools required to organize a neighborhood, and they must be used together if the group is to be successful and accomplish the goals of the community. Every group needs leadership, a division of labor, a vision or plan, organization and communication. With these tools, the group can overcome the more difficult stumbling blocks along the way, cope with the task of finances and build a foundation for a lasting effect on the community.

Before you run out the door, grab three of your neighbors and have a meeting, ask yourself the following questions. These will be the first things your neighbors ask you, so you may as well be prepared!

- **Why organize?**  
Ask yourself what you see as advantages to pulling the neighborhood together.
- **What are your goals?**  
What will this new group of people accomplish? What are the primary concerns in your neighborhood? Are there issues that residents in your neighborhood will be willing to rally behind?
- **How will you define your "neighborhood?"**  
Are there natural boundaries, or is the area more united by a particular issue? Who will you approach to be a part of the new organization? How will you work to bring diverse interests and individuals into the group?
- **Will you be able to convince the majority of your neighbors to support your new group?**  
Will a majority of residents in your community agree with you regarding the issues you feel are important? Will you be able to gain support from neighbors not directly active in the group itself? This kind of support is called "buy-in" and will be very important when you represent your neighborhood before local government or try to organize a neighborhood-wide activity.

The answers to these questions may change over the course of putting together a neighborhood organization in your community. It is important, however, to have your answers to these questions in mind as you set out to organize your neighbors.

As you begin talking to your neighbors about organizing a neighborhood group, show enthusiasm for the process and start building strong relationships with residents beyond the bounds of your block or street. You may want to organize a small event to bring people out to talk about the possibility of the group, such as a graffiti paint-off.

# **Tools: The Human Element, The Neighborhood Plan, Accountable Financing, Dynamic Fundraising, Communication and Overcoming Obstacles.**

## **The Human Element**

### **Leadership**

The person or people who set out to organize any group of individuals, whether it is a neighborhood group, a new scout troupe or youth soccer league, are usually looked to as the leaders of the established organization. Good leadership is essential in creating and maintaining a successful neighborhood organization. It is important not only to be a good leader yourself, but to recognize good leadership in others and to foster new leadership along the way.

There are different kinds of leaders, and it is important to realize where you, as an organizing member of the neighborhood group, fit in. Some people are really good at getting people excited about a new project, while others are better at organizing and delegating tasks. Other leaders play an almost invisible role until the group needs them to sort out a disagreement or solve a major issue. All of these people are valuable, and the group needs every kind of leader. Perhaps, once you've gotten your neighbors to the table, you may need to turn the reigns of the organization over to someone who is a better moderator of meetings, and better at coordinating the work of others. Recognizing your own strengths and weaknesses as a leader, as well as recognizing those of others, will insure the long term stability of the neighborhood group.

### **Committees – The Division of Labor**

Everyone has heard the old adage: "Too many cooks spoil the broth." As essential as good leadership is, it is useless without a good base of people who would rather work behind the scenes than in front of them. Leaders are often tempted to take on too much responsibility and do too much of the work. Good leaders realize that they can't possibly do it all – and even if they could, it doesn't help accomplish the goal of bringing more people into the organization and building community spirit.

By delegating authority, responsibilities and even the most basic of tasks, you get more people involved, give individuals a sense of ownership of the organization, and simply get more accomplished in less time.

Committees become more important as your neighborhood group grows and takes on more challenges. At first, you may be working with a core group of 5 to 10 individuals who will help you guide the formation of the organization. As the group grows, so will its internal responsibilities (such as finances, publicity, agendas and minutes) and neighborhood affairs (such as housing conditions, community maintenance, traffic safety and community services).

- Limit the number of committees by forming them around broad goals and subjects; the more committees you have the more spread out your members become. Large events may need separate, more temporary, committees, such as block parties, annual fundraisers, etc.

- Try to avoid “responsibility overlap,” to reduce confusion over which members are responsible for what tasks.
- Define and discuss the goals and objectives of committees as they are formed. This will help committee members stay focused and accomplish the task at hand.
- Clearly define what actions the committee may take on its own and what decisions need to be brought back before the entire association for consultation. For example, the Block Party Committee should determine the color, theme and menu for an upcoming party, but should have the budget approved by the entire neighborhood group.
- Give recognition to members and committees who have contributed to the organization. Keep it simple, and be consistent. Thank specific members at meetings or hand out fun certificates.
- Don’t be afraid to disband committees that have accomplished their goals. This will free up organization members to participate on other committees or take a well-deserved break. The Block Party Committee, again, may need several months to recover after planning a successful event. The committee can be re-assembled in time to begin planning the next event.

### **Examples of Committees:**

- Executive Committee (Includes president, vice president, treasurer, secretary and committee chairs)
- Fundraising
- Social Committee (for association holiday parties, etc.)
- Publicity
- Graffiti Task Force
- Neighborhood Maintenance
- Traffic Safety
- Community Affairs (might work with local businesses, developers, schools, etc.)

## **The Neighborhood Plan**

Once you’ve gotten a core group of individuals interested in forming a neighborhood group it’s time to hold your first meeting. The first order of business for this “working group” of individuals should be to sit down and draft a “neighborhood plan.” The plan will be a dynamic document to be reviewed periodically to assess what goals have been accomplished and what needs to be re-evaluated or removed from the plan. New goals can be included as they arise.

The neighborhood plan is essential because it will serve as the framework for future decision making. Every group's plan will look different, but the following common elements should be included:

### **Vision Statement**

What do you want your neighborhood to look like in five years? The vision statement should state your primary objective in forming the organization, and should be brief and broad. For example: “To provide a safe, clean neighborhood to be proud to live in and raise our families.”

### **Mission Statement**

Similar to the vision statement, the mission is an action statement telling how everyday actions will impact the vision statement. For example: “To work together to improve upon and maintain the quality of life enjoyed by residents of this community.”

## **Goals**

Keep goals simple and concise. Make certain that the entire group agrees on each goal. These goals should be “stepping stones” to accomplishing your mission and vision statements. For example:

- To significantly decrease crime in our neighborhood.
- To encourage increased participation in the neighborhood group and neighborhood activities through positive communication.
- To increase the neighborhood’s influence on local officials and staff through participation in local government events and meetings.

The working group may want to take a short neighborhood inventory before completing this task. Walk the neighborhood together and discuss everyone’s long term goals for the community. Discuss the logical boundaries of the neighborhood. Point out problems or advantages held by the community as you come across them.

## **The remaining portion of the plan should be a road map for your first year.**

1. Identify one to three issues that are major concerns to the neighborhood, such as crime prevention/reduction, empty lot abatement, and promoting well-maintained front yards.
2. Form committees for each issue or related set of issues. Keep the committees small (3 to 10 members), appoint or elect a chairperson, and develop a realistic timeline for committees to meet and begin working on the issue.
3. As your neighborhood organization grows, increase committee membership by requiring that every member belong to at least one committee. Committee chairs should report back to the larger group at every meeting.
4. The first task of each committee should be to identify available resources to tackle the assigned issue, and to identify strategies and goals to resolve the issue. For example, the Neighborhood Safety committee might decide to form a Neighborhood Watch program. A member would then be assigned to contact the appropriate organization and set up training sessions. Resources also include human resources - talents possessed by members, professional contacts, someone with more free time than other members.
5. After identifying resources, strategies and goals, each committee can include their action plans in the overall Neighborhood Plan.

## **Gathering Neighborhood Support**

When the neighborhood plan is complete, the group must obtain “buy-in” or support from the rest of the neighborhood. You might do this by copying the plan and distributing it to residents in your designated area, or by asking residents to sign a copy of the plan. Without support from all or most of your neighborhood, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to make effective changes or to represent your community before public officials.

Meetings that are well organized can be productive and even fun for the members of the neighborhood organization. Start out on the right foot by being well prepared for the first meeting. This will set the stage for future meetings and give people confidence that the group can accomplish good things.

- Decide on a convenient time and date to meet by consulting with neighbors as you discuss your plans for organizing the community. Weekday evenings are often the best time to schedule meetings, rather than interfere with weekend plans. If your neighbors work a wide variety of hours, schedule a time when the most people can meet.
- Develop a well-planned agenda (see sample agendas).
- Choose a centrally located and familiar place to meet. Sometimes a neutral location such as a school or library is easier for people to approach than the home of someone they don't know. On the other hand, using someone's home may be more intimate and comfortable for a group just starting out. Wherever you choose to hold the meeting, make certain it is comfortable for the number of people attending.
- If possible, set a regular time and place for your meetings. This will make it easier for people to plan the meetings into their everyday lives. It also makes it more likely that curious neighbors may drop in unexpectedly.
- Give people nametags. This will help folks that don't know everyone feel more comfortable.
- Serving food and drinks always helps bring people together and sets them at ease. Don't let refreshments take away from the main objective of the gathering, however.
- Have guests fill out a sign-in sheet with names, addresses, phone numbers and email addresses, if they have one. If you draw a map of the neighborhood ahead of time, people can put their information where their houses are. This can be the beginning of a telephone tree.
- Stay focused on the agenda. If conversations start to stray, ask that new items be brought up during the open forum portion of the agenda. If it appears that a decision cannot be reached on a particular agenda item, table the item until the next meeting, and instruct members to bring back new information on the item.
- Limit meetings to no more than two hours.
- Handle disturbances and disagreements as calmly as possible. Steer the discussion back to the issue on the agenda, and focus on what the group can agree on.
- Sample Agenda - First Meeting

Example:

Generic Street  
Neighborhood Group  
Introductory Meeting Agenda  
Sept. 6, 2001, 7 to 9 p.m.

- I. Introductions
- II. Explanation of Neighborhood Organizing - Mary
- III. Neighborhood Plan - Discussion
  - A. Vision, Mission, Goals
- IV. Neighborhood Inventory - Tour

- V. Committee Creation & Assignments
- VI. Set Next Meeting Time
- VII. Open Discussion
- VIII. Adjourn

- Sample Agenda - Regularly Scheduled Meetings

### **Sample Agenda - Regular Meetings**

Generic Street  
 Neighborhood Group  
 General Meeting Agenda  
 Oct. 4, 2001, 7-8:30 p.m.

- I. Introductions
  - II. Committee Reports (List)
  - III. Guest
    - Stephanie Cannito, Neigh. Watch
  - IV. Old Business
    - A. Graffiti Paint-off - Sat. Oct. 6
    - B. Halloween Partnering Program
  - V. New Business
    - A. Block Party Sign-up Sheet
  - VI. Open Discussion
  - VII. Adjourn
- \*\*All Future meetings scheduled for 1st Thursday of each month.

### **Keeping a Record of Group Meetings**

- Elect a person responsible for taking minutes. This same person will likely also be responsible for writing the agenda.
- Minutes do not have to be verbatim, or word-for-word. They should include main arguments made in favor or against a certain action or task, and the final decision made by the group. Include names of individuals who volunteered for or were assigned to particular tasks.
- Minutes may be distributed with the agenda for the next meeting or may be handed out at the next meeting. Members should vote to accept the minutes or to change them as needed.
- If you're having a difficult time getting people to read the minutes, include funny tidbits, or give a prize to the person who finds the most, or only, typo(s).
- Sample Minutes

#### **Sample Minutes**

**Generic Street  
 Neighborhood Group (GSNG)  
 General Meeting Minutes - Nov. 1, 2001, 7 to 8:30 p.m.**

- I. Introductions - 4 new members joined the GSNG! Please welcome Jan and Dean Smith, Roger Kenny, & Marsha Duncan (and son!)
- II. Committee Reports - The Neigh. Safety committee has successfully established 3 Neighborhood Watch Blocks. The Social Committee set a date for the 1st Annual Holiday Party - See you Dec. 8 at Bob & Linda's house. Fundraising Committee - Nothing to report yet.
- IV. Old Business - The Graffiti Paint-off on Sat. Oct. 6 was very successful - 14 neighbors (+ Kids) came out and painted our entire outside wall. The Halloween Partnering Program was also a great event - we had much less vandalism than in past years. Plan to do even more next year.
- V. New Business - Be sure to sign up for the pot luck dinner for the Holiday Party before leaving tonight.
- VI. Open Discussion - There was a litter of kittens found behind the park dumpster. Anyone wanting a free furball can call Velma at 555-1234.
- Meeting adjourned at 8:40. Next meeting, Thursday, Dec. 6, 7-8:30 p.m. at Lincoln Elementary Library.

## **Accountable Financing**

Organizing the finances of your new neighborhood group may seem like the most daunting task of the process. If your group is less formal and not dealing with financial issues, you may want to postpone going through the process of opening a bank account. Even small events requiring cash collection don't necessarily warrant having a bank account. Be certain to keep cash in a locked box, and to keep track of who contributed to the fund, what money was spent on (save your receipts!) and what, if any, you owe to vendors or members of the group.

If your group becomes very large, or if you start to handle large sums of money, you may want to formalize the process. By running your group like a business and opening a bank account, your finances will be easier to manage. For assistance, you may turn to The Community Oriented Policing Division of the Beaumont Police Department. You may also find a resident in your neighborhood familiar with setting up corporations or establishing corporate bank accounts. Put this person in charge of this task!

If you decide that your group has advanced to the point of needing to formalize your finances, gather information about the proper way to go about this from a local bank. Two things you will have to do are listed below. However, other requirements may change from bank to bank.

- Choose a bank. Research fees and charges, and ask about special waivers of service charges for non-profit organizations or groups that benefit the community.
- Obtain a tax identification number. You can get a tax ID number from the IRS. It is used by the bank to report earnings of the group's account to the IRS.

## **Dynamic Fundraising**

You don't have to have a lot of money to have a successful neighborhood organization. How much money you need depends on your group's goals. Fundraising can be as simple as taking a collection among members in order to pay for refreshments at meetings, or can be as elaborate as organizing a function to

raise money to pay for neighborhood signage, supplemental lighting for the neighborhood, or to purchase an abandoned lot to turn into a playground or community garden.

**The following are examples of practical and fun ways to raise money for your organization:**

- Charge membership dues.
- Sell neighborhood T-Shirts.
- Sell advertising space in an association newsletter (see Communication).
- Ask local businesses to sponsor events such as block parties or community sports teams.
- Hold a neighborhood garage sale. Ask neighbors to donate their items to be sold, with profits going towards the association.
- Host an outdoor movie night by projecting a movie onto a sheet in a neighbor's backyard. Charge admission and serve popcorn and soda.

## **Communication**

The best way to encourage people to participate in the new neighborhood group is to communicate with them as often as possible. Spread the word about upcoming events, ongoing meetings, and other ways for them to get involved.

Use a consistent logo or color of paper so that people know the information is from the neighborhood group. Make certain that the main message of your flier, letter, postcard or door hanger is clear. What is the event? When is it? Where is it? Who should one contact for more information? Is there a deadline to sign up or R.S.V.P.?

**Flyers and invitations aren't the only way to get the word out about group activities. Try any of the following:**

- Neighborhood organization newsletter. Accept articles from group members, include committee reports, advertise events, invite neighbors with particular interests to write columns on home repair, quilting, gardening etc.
- Advertise events in a local newspaper, or school, church or club newsletter.
- Create door hangers.
- Go door-to-door to invite people to an event.
- Make a phone tree.
- Participate at commission, council and town board meetings.
- Put a lawn sign out on regular meeting dates.
- Set up a booth at a school carnival or other local event.
- Distribute invitations, flyers, bulletins, notices and other publicity materials creatively, but be certain they are placed in secure locations and do not end up contributing to clutter and debris in the streets of your neighborhood.

## **Overcoming Obstacles**

**The most important thing to remember as you embark on the adventure of organizing your neighborhood is that Rome wasn't built in a day.**

Every organization experiences set backs and growing pains. The important thing is to learn from mistakes and improve upon the group's actions in the future. Stay flexible and open to the suggestions of others. As you decide to organize a neighborhood group, you may have entirely different goals than will the group of people you assemble. Don't be afraid to let the organization change and become different things to different people. On the other hand, feel free to step in if you see the organization wandering down the path of destruction.

**Continually re-evaluate the neighborhood plan to insure that it is still working for the neighborhood.**

Work at fostering relationships between members of the group, and work together to quickly resolve differences of opinion or miscommunications between neighbors.

**Finally, don't be afraid to call for help.**

Call on other neighborhood associations. You may find that they need help with the exact same problem. Utilize members of your association to the best of their abilities as well; they may be able to help in ways you never imagined!

**501(c)(3) Status**

*Benefits and disadvantages*

Once your organization has become larger and better organized you may want to consider applying for 501(c)(3) Status as a charitable organization. This status comes with benefits but, also a few disadvantages. Here are the list of benefits and disadvantages:

**Benefits**

- Qualify for grants from governmental agencies.
- Qualify for grants from private foundations.
- Provide tax deductions for your donors' gifts.
- Receive tax exemptions from federal, state, local, income, property, sales and excise taxes.
- Provide legal protections for the association's directors and officers.

**Disadvantages**

- Must keep detailed financial records.
- Required to prepare and file an annual report or other periodic report with the state.
- Must make financial records available to organizations or individuals that contribute funds to the association.
- Association must not engage in political activities such as campaigning, lobbying, or support of specific candidates for office.

Whether your association decides to apply for this status is up to them. If your organization is interested in applying for 501(c)(3) status contact the IRS and get package 1023, Application for Recognition of Exemption. The application must be complete and accompanied by the appropriate user fee. The organization should also request an employer identification number using Form SS-4, Application for Employer Identification Number, even if the organization does not have any employees. All forms can be gotten on the web at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov) or you can go to the Beaumont IRS office located at 550 Fannin St., phone number 1-800-829-3676.

## **Neighborhood Association Projects and Activities Ideas**

Neighborhood associations have participated in the following activities and projects:

- "Greet the New Neighbor" program
- Newsletters, directories & telephone trees
- Crime prevention initiatives (i.e. Crime Watch Group or Citizens on Patrol)
- Graffiti Clean-up
- "Neighborhood Night Out"
- Security lighting projects
- Neighborhood Traffic Control
- Youth activities
- Child safety programs
- "Kid Watch" Safe Neighborhood program
- Land use studies
- Street improvements
- Leadership workshops
- Fire prevention education
- Fire safety programs
- Neighborhood surveys
- Block parties
- Festivals
- Home tours
- Paint/fix-up projects
- Neighborhood clean-ups
- Holiday celebrations
- Produce co-ops
- School supply drives
- Fund raising activities
- Neighborhood beautification projects
- Yard of the Month programs
- Median landscaping projects
- Park developments

## **Running your meetings**

When a neighborhood association has become established and more than ten or so members begin to show on a regular basis it may be time to change the way meetings are handled. A new location (other than someone's house) might be in order. Church's, activity centers, local school, libraries etc, tend to be good places for such gatherings. Also, the way the meeting is run will probably have to be changed as well. A more orderly way of discussing and debating topics will be required if you hope to get anything accomplished. Parliamentary procedure will be your best way of conducting your meetings.

**What Is Parliamentary Procedure?** It is a set of rules for conduct at meetings, which allows everyone to be heard and to make decisions without confusion.

**Why is Parliamentary Procedure Important?** Because it's a time tested method of conducting business at meetings and public gatherings. It can be adapted to fit the needs of any organization. Today, Robert's Rules of Order newly revised is the basic handbook of operation for most clubs, organizations and other groups. So it's important that everyone know these basic rules!

## Simplified Parliamentary Procedure

If you're at a meeting where people are making and seconding "motions," it's probably being run by parliamentary procedure (the U.S. version is called "Roberts rules of order").

Organizations using parliamentary procedure usually follow a fixed order of business. Below is a typical example:

1. Call to order
2. Roll call of members present
3. Reading of minutes of last meeting
4. Officers' reports
5. Committee reports
6. Special orders --- Important business previously designated for consideration at this meeting
7. Unfinished business
8. New business
9. Announcements
10. Adjournment

The method used by members to express themselves is in the form of moving motions. A motion is a proposal that the entire membership take action or a stand on an issue. Individual members can:

1. Call to order
2. Second motions
3. Debate motions
4. Vote on motions

### There are four Basic Types of Motions:

1. Main Motions: The purpose of a main motion is to introduce items to the membership for their consideration. They cannot be made when any other motion is on the floor, and yield to privileged, subsidiary, and incidental motions.
2. Subsidiary Motions: Their purpose is to change or affect how a main motion is handled, and is voted on before a main motion.
3. Privileged Motions: Their purpose is to bring up items that are urgent about special or important matters unrelated to pending business.
4. Incidental Motions: Their purpose is to provide a means of questioning procedure concerning other motions and must be considered before the other motion.

## How are Motions Presented?

1. Obtaining the floor
  - a. Wait until the last speaker has finished
  - b. Rise and address the Chairman by saying, "Mr. Chairman, or Mr. President."
  - c. Wait until the Chairman recognizes you
2. Make Your Motion
  - a. Speak in a clear and concise manner
  - b. Always state a motion affirmatively. Say, "I move that we ..." rather than, "I move that we do not ...".
  - c. Avoid personalities and stay on your subject.
3. Wait for Someone to Second Your Motion
4. Another member will second your motion or the Chairman will call for a second
5. If there is no second to your motion it is lost
6. The Chairman States Your Motion
  - a. The Chairman will say, "It has been moved and seconded that we..." Thus placing your motion before the membership for consideration and action
  - b. The membership then either debates your motion, or may move directly to a vote
  - c. Once the chairman presents your motion to the membership it becomes "assembly property", and cannot be changed by you without the consent of the members.
7. Expanding on Your Motion
  - a. The time for you to speak in favor of your motion is at this point in time, rather than at the time you present it.
  - b. The mover is always allowed to speak first.
  - c. All comments and debate must be directed to the chairman.
  - d. Keep to the time limit for speaking that has been established.
  - e. The mover may speak again only after other speakers are finished, unless called upon by the Chairman.
8. Putting the Question to the Membership
  - a. The Chairman asks, "Are you ready to vote on the question?"
  - b. If there is no more discussion, a vote is taken.
  - c. On a motion to move the previous question may be adapted.

## Voting on a Motion

The method of vote on any motion depends on the situation and the by-laws of policy of your organization. There are five methods used to vote by most organizations, they are:

1. By Voice -- The Chairman asks those in favor to say, "aye", those opposed to say "no". Any member may move for a exact count.
2. By Roll Call -- Each member answers "yes" or "no" as his name is called. This method is used when a record of each person's vote is required.
3. By General Consent -- When a motion is not likely to be opposed, the Chairman says, "if there is no objection ..." The membership shows agreement by their silence, however if one member says, "I object," the item must be put to a vote.
4. By Division -- This is a slight verification of a voice vote. It does not require a count unless the chairman so desires. Members raise their hands or stand.

5. By Ballot -- Members write their vote on a slip of paper, this method is used when secrecy is desired.

There are two other motions that are commonly used that relate to voting.

1. Motion to Table -- This motion is often used in the attempt to "kill" a motion. The option is always present, however, to "take from the table", for reconsideration by the membership.
2. Motion to Postpone Indefinitely -- This is often used as a means of parliamentary strategy and allows opponents of motion to test their strength without an actual vote being taken. Also, debate is once again open on the main motion.

Parliamentary Procedure is the best way to get things done at your meetings. But, it will only work if you use it properly.

1. Allow motions that are in order.
2. Have members obtain the floor properly.
3. Speak clearly and concisely.
4. Obey the rules of debate.
5. Most importantly, *BE COURTEOUS*.

## **When members disagree**

Neighborhood associations, like any group of people, can run into problems with personality conflicts, burnout and leadership issues. Conflict usually takes the form in two ways: conflict as a group and conflict as individuals. Either one can be devastating to an organization and what it can and will accomplish. Listed below are some ways to deal with: conflict, difficult behavior and tension/anger. In addition, communication has also been addressed because good communication is key to stopping the conflict before it even starts.

### **Steps in the Problem-Solving Process**

Genuine conflict resolution requires two major components: the principles of conflict resolution (separate the people from the problem; focus on interests, not positions; invent options for mutual gain; and use objective criteria as the basis for decision-making) and a problem-solving process (negotiation, mediation, or consensus decision making). The conflict resolution processes are characterized by a series of steps that enable the disputants to identify their own needs and interests and to work cooperatively to find solutions to meet those needs and interests. Each process gives support and direction to the cooperative effort, assisting the parties to stay focused on the problem rather than on each other and to find a mutually acceptable resolution. In addition, genuine conflict resolution includes extensive training and practice using the principles and problem-solving processes of conflict resolution.

The six steps in each problem-solving process are:

1. Set the stage.
2. Gather perspectives.
3. Identify interests.

4. Create options.
5. Evaluate options.
6. Generate agreement.

## **Principles of Conflict Resolution**

Effective implementation of the conflict resolution processes of negotiation, mediation, or consensus decision-making requires an understanding of the following four essential principles:

### Separate people from the problem.

Every problem involves both substantive issues and relationship issues. By separating these issues, individuals come to see themselves as working side by side, attacking the problem, not each other. Where perceptions are inaccurate, you can look for ways to educate. If emotions run high, you can find ways for each person involved to let off steam. Where misunderstanding exists, you can work to improve communication.

### Focus on interests, not positions.

Understanding the difference between positions and interests is crucial to problem solving. Interests, not positions, define the problem. Positions are something that individuals decide they want; interests are the underlying motivations behind the positions they take. Compromising between positions is not likely to produce an agreement, which will effectively take care of the human needs that led individuals to adopt those positions. Where such interests are not identified, temporary agreements may be reached, but typically do not last because the real interests have not been addressed.

### Invent options for mutual gain.

Disputants focus on identifying options for resolving the conflict without the pressure of reaching a decision. A brainstorming process is used to invent a wide range of options that advance shared interests and creatively reconcile differing interests. The key ground rule to brainstorming is to postpone criticism and evaluation of the ideas being generated. To broaden their options, those in a dispute think about the problem in different ways and build upon the ideas presented.

### Use objective criteria.

Using objective criteria ensures that the agreement reflects some fair standard instead of the arbitrary will of either side. Using objective criteria means that neither party needs to give in to the other; rather, they can defer to a fair solution. Objective criteria are determined by disputants based on fair standards and fair procedures.

*Based on writings of Roger Fisher and William Ury, Getting To Yes*

## **Dealing with Difficult Behavior**

Conflict is inevitable. However, that does not mean that we cannot work to prevent unproductive behavior that leads to conflict. Difficult behavior is a good example of an area where a difference can be made. Although it is easy to label people as difficult, the real focus should always be on the actual behavior. Dealing effectively with difficult behavior is a skill that can nip conflict in the bud.

Difficult behavior is essentially that which inhibits the performance of others. Left alone it will get worse, affect more people and continue to incur hidden costs for the organization in which it occurs. Most difficult behavior is accidental, but it can also be the result of intentional thought. Sometimes it is sporadic and takes us by surprise. At other times it is ongoing and forms patterns.

Difficult behavior takes many forms. It includes gossiping, going over your leaders heads, foot dragging, ignoring orders, refusing to talk, being rude, yelling, ignoring, harassing, and much more. At the core, most conflict is about needs that have not been satisfied-not just physical needs, but also psychological and procedural needs. Difficult behavior is often a result of psychological needs for control, recognition, affection, and respect.

In and of themselves there is nothing wrong with having these needs. Problems arise in the satisfaction of these needs when difficult behavior has been rewarded in the past. For example, if people always listen when we interrupt we will continue to use this as an effective strategy. We should try not to reward difficult behavior. Beyond reinforcement, if we don't have the communication skills to let people know how we feel, or we loose it when things get emotionally charged, then difficult behavior can be expected.

It would be easy if there were some magical cure that could be applied to all difficult behavior. The fact that there is no panacea, does not mean that we are helpless and that there is nothing to be done. Even so, one shouldn't expect instant results. Changing behavior takes tact and time.

The following ideas for dealing with difficult behavior are gleaned from Robert Bacal's book-*The Complete Idiots Guide to Dealing with Difficult Employees* (CWL Publishing, 2000). Lets start with ideas that don't work: ignoring the problem behavior despite its impact on performance, responding in kind, blaming rather than problem solving, labeling the person as difficult and trying to psychoanalyze. If these are bad ideas what are things we can do that help?

### Stay centered

When we loose our self-control and restraint the situation does not improve. In fact it is more likely to get worse. Decisions made in the heat of the moment are seldom the best, and lack the benefits of our creativity. Our challenge is to slow down, and resist a knee jerk reaction. Staying steady, stable and grounded gives us the strong foundation we need to take on the most difficult behavior.

When we indulge ourselves by taking it personally (forgetting that offense is 10% given and 90% taken) we start playing negative internal tapes in our head. We tell ourselves that the person is bad, unreliable, beyond reason. The danger is that these labels become self-fulfilling, and do not give any benefit of the doubt. Rather than putting our energy into problem solving we feel smug blaming the other. We forget that it takes two to make things worse.

### Reality check

An important question to consider as soon as possible is whether the behavior is really causing performance problems. If it is not, and left alone things will not get worse, then leaving things often makes sense. As we reality check it is important to consider the impact of the behavior on others and not just ourselves.

### Focus on behavior

This is the key to dealing with difficult behavior. As tempting as it is to focus on the person this should be avoided. By separating the person from the behavior it enables one-to paraphrase Fisher, Ury and Patton in their best seller "Getting to Yes"-to be hard on the problem and soft on the person.

### Listen

Listening is widely acknowledged as a core communication skill that affects the ways we prevent and resolve conflict. When dealing with people whose behavior is getting to us we should make a special effort to hear the other person out. Even when you disagree! This enables you to validate the psychological needs of the other, and to let them know that you can imagine how they are feeling. In addition to validation and empathy, asking open and closed questions, rephrasing and summarizing, and using “I Statements” are all key listening activities.

### Give feedback

A common problem with difficult behavior is that the person is unaware that his or her behavior is causing a problem. At other times the extent of the impact is not comprehended. By giving timely feedback about specific behavior misunderstanding can be avoided and expectations clarified. A useful formula for giving feedback that deals with both emotions and facts, is the “I-Statement.” I feel frustrated when you interrupt me at our team meetings. It breaks my train of thought and I struggle getting started again. I would appreciate it if I could finish with what I am saying.”

### Use performance management techniques

This is an important preventative technique. The goal is to make sure that responsibility is placed where it belongs. For example, with naysayers it is crucial that responsibility for involvement be returned. This is a useful set of questions that can be used to guide an effective discussion:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we need to be?
- How will we get there?
- What do we need to do?
- How can I help?

### Third parties

Difficult behavior can be intentional, aggressive, sustained and extreme. When responsible talk does not work it make sense to seek help. Be prepared to give a detailed briefing about the situation. In some situations the support of the higher leadership may be necessary.

Beyond internal line support, consider using mediation if you think you and the other person can find a solution yourselves. Arbitration may make sense if a solution to a particular problem is needed quickly and you and the other person are struggling to communicate.

### Formal authority

As a general rule, it makes sense to use power only as a last resort. When you use power you win and the other loses. More often than not, resentment and alienation accompany this action. Unacceptable behavior that does not change should be addressed as a disciplinary matter. Ideally an organization will describe behavioral expectations in a code, and specify how infractions will be dealt with. It is possible to retain the right to expel at will while using a progressive disciplinary procedure. Following a fair procedure can go a long way to defend a charge of discrimination.

In addition to using the above techniques to prevent and resolve difficult behavior, we should be mindful of things we can do to limit the chances of being perceived as difficult ourselves. Matching our actions with our words, and our words, with our tone and body language is important. In congruencies lead

to suspicion and mistrust. Consistent decision making and achievable promises and commitments will also go a long way.

#### Conclusion

The reality is that we can all be difficult from time to time. Dealing with difficult behavior is not easy and so we often procrastinate. We do so at our own peril. Being proactive and engaging the person in a conversation about their behavior is the first step toward conflict prevention.

## **The Top 10 Tips on Managing Conflict, Emotional Tension and Anger**

To be a safe and predictable person for those around you at work and at home, it is essential that you are able to maintain your composure when you feel like your 'buttons' are being pushed. This strength will help you to achieve your goals in business as well as your goals for your personal relationships.

1. Share negative emotions only in person or on the phone. E-mails, answering machine messages, and notes are too impersonal for the delicate nature of negative words. What feels like a bomb on paper may feel like a feather when delivered in person.
2. Pepper your responses with the phrase, "I understand". This phrase will support your goals when the tension is high and you need to find common ground to form compromises or agreements with the other party.
3. Take notice when you feel threatened by what someone is saying to you. Resist the temptation to defend yourself or to "shut down" the other person's communication. It will take this kind of discipline to become an open, trusting communicator.
4. Practice making requests of others when you are angry. It is often much more useful to make a request than to share your anger. For example, if the babysitter is driving you crazy by leaving dirty dishes in the sink, it is better to make a request of them than to let your anger leak out in other ways such as by becoming more distant.
5. Try repeating the exact words that someone is saying to you when they are in a lot of emotional pain or when you disagree with them completely. This mirroring technique can keep both the speaker and the listener 'centered' in a difficult conversation, especially when the attitude of the person doing the mirroring is to gain understanding of a different point of view.
6. Take responsibility for your feelings to avoid blaming others. Notice when 'blameshifting' begins to leak into your speech. "I feel angry when you are twenty minutes late and you don't call me" is much better than, "You make me so mad by being late."
7. Learn to listen to the two sides of the conflict that you are in as if you were the mediator or the counselor. If you can listen and respond in this way you will bring peace and solutions to the conflict more quickly. For example, in response to an employee's raise request, you might say, "On the one hand I understand that you really need the raise, and on the other hand I represent the company, whose funds are very scarce at this time. Is there a way that I can work on your compensation package that does not involve cash?" Here, the mediator's point of view can look for the creative compromise that takes into account the limits and the needs of both parties.
8. Take a playful attitude towards developing the skill of emotional self-control in high conflict situations. You could view maintaining self-control in a tense, angry conversation as an athletic feat. You could also view developing this skill as similar to working out at the gym with weights - the more that you use your self-control muscle the bigger it will grow and the easier it will be to remain calm when tension is great.

9. Wait a few days to cool down emotionally when a situation makes you feel wild with intense feelings, such as rage. As time passes, you will be able to be more objective about the issues and to sort out the truth about the situation more clearly.
10. Make a decision to speak with decorum whenever you are angry or frustrated. If you give yourself permission to blow up, people will not feel safe around you. They will feel that you are not predictable and will carry 'shields' when they are near you. The fear and walls of others will not support your goals for success in relationships or at work.

## **Barriers to Every Day Communication**

One of the most common complaints from clients entering mediation is that they cannot communicate with each other. All of us have experienced, at one time or another, the frustration of feeling misunderstood and being unable to make ourselves understood by another person. In mediation, the first step toward resolving a conflict is for the mediator to understand the point of view of each person, and then to help the parties understand each other. The more people understand each other, the more likely they can resolve their conflict. However, this requires both listening and assertion skills which are different from our typical ways of communicating. Therefore, such skills must be learned. Here at the Northern California Mediation Center, we spend a good deal of time teaching these skills in our trainings and modeling such skills with our clients. The response has been so positive that we would like to share some of these basic communication skills with you in this series of articles.

This article introduces the concepts of good communication and discusses some of the common barriers to communication. Future articles will address what is good listening and constructive assertion, and how to do each effectively.

Good communication skills are mutual respect skills. Ideally, each person will show respect for the other as well as respect for self. You show respect for the other person by listening fully and demonstrating that you "get" what that person means; and you respect yourself when you assert or "give" your own legitimate self-interest without aggression. To have a complete communication, each person must both "get" and "give."

Let us look at some of the conversational bad habits, which often interfere with full and complete communication. Anything, which blocks the meaning of a communication, is a barrier to communication. These usually fall into one of three categories: judging, sending solutions or avoiding the other person's concerns. Some common examples follow:

**CRITICIZING:** "Well, you brought that on yourself."

**NAME-CALLING:** "You bullheaded, stupid jerk."

**DIAGNOSING:** "You are only saying that because you feel guilty."

All of these responses judge the other person and therefore impose the speaker's point of view. The other person will often feel misunderstood and unsafe, and is more likely to react in a defensive or self-protective manner.

**ORDERING:** "Go fix that right now."

**THREATENING:** "If you don't agree to these terms, I will sue you."

**MORALIZING:** "You ought to apologize to her."

**EXCESSIVE/APPROPRIATE QUESTIONING:** "When did it happen?" "Are you sorry?"

**ADVISING:** "If I were you, this is what I would do..."

Each of the above is an attempt to solve the other person's problem. They are variously direct, manipulative, self-righteous or coercive. Even when caringly intended, the solution is often proffered without a full understanding of the problem. Such responses may make the problem worse, or create a new issue without resolving the original problem. They also demean the other person's capacity to handle his or her own problems, and are likely to foster anxiety and resentment.

**DIVERTING:** "If you think that's bad, let me tell you what happened to me."

**LOGICAL ARGUMENT:** "If you leave your keys in the car, you can expect someone to steal it."

**REASSURING:** "You have the tools to handle this. You'll get over it."

The last three responses avoid the other person's concerns and enable us to keep an emotional distance from the person or from an uncomfortable topic. By using such responses, we often are trying to make ourselves feel more comfortable, rather than truly being helpful to the other person.

The barriers to communication listed above do not always have a negative impact on communications. However, they are high-risk responses when people are interacting under stress. They tend to block the feeling of the other person, who then is less likely to express his or her true feelings in a constructive way. Rather than fostering understanding, they may diminish the other's self-esteem, or foster resentment, defensiveness, withdrawal or dependency in the other, and inhibit their problem solving ability. Unfortunately, it has been estimated that people use these responses 90% of the time when they are discussing a problem or need.

In the next article in this series, we will discuss effective responses to substitute for the above barriers. The essence of good communication is understanding each other's meaning which requires effective listening. And that is where we will begin.

*Sources: Robert Bolton, People Skills, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979). Thomas Gordon, Parent Effectiveness Training: The "No-Lose" Program for Raising Responsible Children (New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1970).*

## **Good Communication Starts With Listening**

Many of us think that communication is talking - and talk we do. We interrupt, advise, reassure, judge, analyze, criticize, argue, moralize, threaten, divert, diagnose, etc., etc. But, good communication requires good listening as well as talking. In fact, since we have two ears and only one mouth, listening just might be the more important skill. However, we receive almost no training in good listening and usually do not realize that really "hearing" someone is not a passive activity.

To be a good listener, we must, first, pay attention. The remainder of this article will focus on "attending" skills. The next article will discuss how to listen "actively" rather than passively.

When you are speaking and someone is not paying attention, how do you feel? Annoyed, frustrated, discounted, rejected, anxious or angry? Such feelings usually make communication more difficult. So how can we show someone who is speaking that we really are paying attention to them? We can do this both nonverbally and verbally.

Research shows that about 85% of what we communicate is nonverbal. This includes our posture, physical movements, eye contact and our psychological presence. So, when someone is speaking to you, is your posture inclined toward the speaker, so as to invite and encourage expression? Or is your back turned or your arms or legs tightly crossed, which discourages and cuts off involvement? Are you fidgeting or otherwise distracting the speaker or yourself? Are you making good eye contact with the person? By looking at and observing the speaker, not only will the speaker feel "attended" to, you will learn more about

what is really important to him or her. Finally, we cannot pretend to pay attention by employing these physical techniques without also being psychologically present. We can't fake interest. The speaker will know if our hearts and minds are not really there.

Verbal ways of showing that we are paying attention include:

- 1) An open invitation to talk,
- 2) Using one or two words to encourage talking to continue,
- 3) Asking open-ended questions and
- 4) Knowing when to be silent. For example, "You look like something is bothering you. Do you want to talk about it?" describes a person's body language followed by an open invitation to talk. It is important to silently allow the person time to decide whether to talk and what to talk about. If someone chooses not to accept the invitation, don't try to force them. Back off and respect their privacy.

Brief responses to encourage continued talking include "mm-hmmm," "I see," "Oh?" "Right," "And?" "Go on," "Tell me more," etc. These don't imply either agreement or disagreement. They simply mean, "Yes, I hear you - please go on."

A good listener uses questions sparingly because questions tend to focus the conversation on the questioner's perspective and concerns and can derail the focus of the speaker. Work on asking fewer questions, and when you do, ask "open-ended" questions. Compare "Did you call the police?" to "What did you do?" Or, "Do you feel anxious about the meeting tomorrow?" to "How do you feel about the meeting tomorrow?" An open-ended question is like an essay question, which allows the speaker, rather than the questioner, to lead the conversation and clarify his or her own concerns. A closed question is like a true/false question and often suggests or narrows the agenda.

Finally, knowing when to be silent can be a powerful communication tool. Silence allows the speaker to become aware of his or her own feelings, to explore more deeply and to proceed at his or her own pace. Because many listeners become self-conscious with silence, they feel the need to "break" it by talking or asking questions. Unfortunately, this usually disrupts and derails the speaker. How can silence be handled? Pay attention to the body posture of the speaker and "listen" to what it says to you. Try to imagine what the speaker might be feeling, consider various ways that you might respond, and then choose the most helpful response.