

# Tips and Tricks for Facilitating Conflict Resolution

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## Industry Article

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# Tips and Tricks for Facilitating Conflict Resolution

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We all know that conflict is a difference of opinion and therefore neutral—neither good nor bad. Right? But try telling that to a project manager or business analyst embroiled in conflict. Conflict can threaten to destroy the team and sabotage efforts to elicit requirements. But it doesn't have to. Having a strong, neutral facilitator and a process for conflict resolution can reduce tensions and bring about a positive outcome.

Early in my career I was a liaison representing the interests of a large branch of a national bank. I was on a committee that met monthly to prioritize requirements. Each month I met with my branch management to determine their needs. Each month I and liaisons from the other branches would argue about which new systems and enhancements should be given priority. There was no formal facilitator. Conflict was rampant and remained unresolved. I don't remember much being accomplished in these meetings. Each branch came in with its personal agenda and each of us went away unsatisfied with the results. Time after time I was in the unenviable position of having to tell my management that they weren't going to get what they wanted—again.

In retrospect one of the things I should have done was to spend time understanding the problem management was trying to solve. That way I could have presented a coherent set of recommendations at the monthly meetings.

Another thing I should have done was to meet individually with key representatives before each monthly meeting to discuss our concerns, find common ground, and build relationships. Instead of returning empty-handed each month, I should have returned with a recommendation that helped not just our bank, but the entire network of branches across the country. Everyone would have benefited.

Finally and maybe most importantly, the meetings would have run more smoothly if we had had a facilitator to tell us where we were going and keep us on track.

Many years later I learned that when conflict is preventing important tasks from completing, having a facilitator and a facilitation process is essential. Such a process might include:

1. Find a neutral facilitator. When emotions run high, it is important to find someone without a vested interest in the outcome. Some BAs and PMs take turns facilitating meetings for each other. Some organizations or PMOs provided facilitation services. What's important is having a designated, neutral facilitator role.

2. The facilitator should set ground rules. One ground rule that can be used for conflict situations is that the participants will disagree with ideas and not people. This helps prevent the discussion from turning personal. If the discussion becomes emotional, the facilitator needs to bring the focus back to the issues at hand. If this is not possible right then, the meeting should adjourn.
3. Take time to understand the problem. Conflict arises for a variety of reasons. People have personal agendas, they think their way is the right way, they want to be recognized as experts, etc. We need to understand the real needs behind the stated needs, the issues behind the positions.
4. It is important for those in conflict to resolve it themselves. Once all participants understand the problem, we need to hold a brainstorming session to generate ideas to solve the problem. This can be done individually or in a group. Sometimes it is useful to have the participants write ideas on yellow stickies. It is important at this point to concentrate on generating ideas to solve the problem, not to evaluate the ideas presented.
5. Prioritize the solutions that have been generated by comparing approximate costs and benefits. You may need follow-up action items to quantify both the costs and benefits of the solutions.
6. Another facilitated session may be needed to develop a recommendation, or the recommendation can be assigned to one of several of the participants.
7. Present the recommendation to a pre-determined decision-maker, such as a project sponsor. It's important to have a designated tie-breaker to ensure the conflict is resolved.

These steps will not prevent conflict, which is a natural part of a project. But they will help keep the project on track and prevent ruined relationships.

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