

Some Small Thoughts on Disagreement, Conflict, and Group Dynamics

What follows are some beginning thoughts on disagreement, conflict, and small group dynamics. We've been feeling like this is an important topic worthy of more discussion and thought.

- **A conflict is more than just a disagreement.** It is a situation in which one or both parties perceive a threat (whether or not the threat is real).
- **Typically, conflicts don't go away by themselves. Left unresolved, they often grow.**
- **We respond to conflicts based on our *perceptions* of the situation.** Our perceptions are influenced by our life experiences, culture, values, and beliefs. Different people will look at the same facts and come to different conclusions – see different things. It is these perceptions which guide our responses.
- **Conflicts trigger strong emotions.** Strong emotions can be overwhelming. Be prepared and expect to feel strong emotions from time to time when dealing with conflict.

Most of all

- **Conflicts create opportunities.** The ***process*** of resolving inter-group conflict can
 - Create relationships where before there were none (when those in conflict did not have a prior relationship)
 - Strengthen relationships (when those in conflict already had a relationship)
 - Build trust
 - Teach you new things about the cultural and life experiences you, your group members, and others involved in the conflict are bringing to the world. This new knowledge allows you to more effectively work in the future with those who are different from you.
 - Can draw new people to become involved
 - Can create opportunities for discussion
 - Can allow you to explore your empathy for others

Tips for Handling Conflict

- ***Give everyone a chance to be heard.***
- ***Listen.***
- ***Interrupt personal attacks.*** When problems occur, encourage an open and respectful discussion among the members. Guide the discussion towards issues, ideas, and desired outcomes. Interrupt statements attacking or demeaning a person.

- **Slow communication down.** Controversy can put people into high gear at exactly the time they need to slow down. Take time to carefully consider your communications. Is a potential communication moving you towards your goal or moving you away from it? What is your intent with each communication? And, what might be the impact of the communication? Are there other ways to communicate your ideas which might better meet your goals and intentions?
- **Remain open.** Be open to new ways of understanding what's going on, new ways of thinking about others' intentions and goals, new ways of communicating and working through conflict,... The more open you can remain during the process the more likely you are to find mutually agreeable solutions. (Note - Remaining open is not the same as compromising on the values and goals you can't afford to compromise on.)
- **Think well of others.** Approach others as if they, like you, are doing their best in a rough situation and want to arrive at a positive solution.
- **Mediation.** If these approaches are not working, another course of action is mediation with the help of a neutral outside party. A neutral person assisting in the conversation can change dynamics and allow both sides to feel listened to. Often this can help you reach a mutually agreeable resolution. Contact EPNO for information on mediation resources.

A Word on Prejudice

Guaranteed you and your NA Board will experience prejudice during your work. This prejudice may be directed at you personally, others present, or others not present. Whether it's directed at someone present or absent, it's harmful.

Prejudiced statements and actions often catch us unawares. The more thought you and your board have put into how you will handle harmful, prejudiced statements should they come up the more prepared you'll be. And, the more prepared you are the more success you will have in creating and maintaining an inclusive and inviting environment whether that be within your board, your committee, or your general Neighborhood Association Meetings.

Note - The above thoughts have been focused on the dynamics, disagreements, and conflicts that come up in small groups, e.g., boards, committees, and working groups. Larger groups, such as Neighborhood Association general meetings, can have different dynamics. Some of the above will apply but there are also differences.

If you want help don't hesitate to contact EPNO staff. We're happy to help you plan for a meeting if you suspect there will be a lot of disagreement and potential conflict. We're happy to help you in handling active disagreements or conflicts in your Neighborhood Association board, committee, working group, general meeting, and more.