



OFFICE OF
**HUMAN RESOURCE
DEVELOPMENT**
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Academic Leadership Support

Office of Quality Improvement & Office of Human Resource Development



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8 Steps For Conflict Resolution Overview

8. Build an Agreement that Works

- Review "Hallmarks" of a Good Agreement
- Implement and Evaluate - Live and Learn

OK, so you are coming down the 'home stretch' and everything is looking rosy... right? Not likely... people have been working hard to overcome their differences and have painstakingly crafted some ideas that may be helpful to their situation. While occasionally people are feeling pretty good at this point, they are much more commonly feeling exhausted and uncertain. Therefore, the final step of the process is just as important as the others along the way.

As you come to the conclusion of the negotiation process, identify areas of agreement as clearly and specifically as possible, preferably in writing. Then review the agreement in light of the following "hallmarks":

- Is it fair? Do all parties feel the agreement is fair and reasonable?
- Is the agreement balanced? Does everyone have a stake and role in its implementation?
- Are the action steps realistic? Do we have the time, energy, skills and resources to follow-through and implement this agreement?
- Is the agreement specific enough to proceed? Does everyone understand what we need to do and when we need to do it?
- To what degree is the agreement self-enforcing, or does it rely on others who were not present for the discussion? What do we do if others are unwilling to do things we hoped they would do in the agreement?
- Is the agreement future-oriented? In other words, have we considered what we will do if there are other problems or conflicts in the future?

As your conversation concludes, leave the session with a commitment to implement the plans that you have determined together. If unexpected problems or challenges come up (for example, someone gets sick or unexpected workload changes make it difficult to pay attention to the agreement for a few days), communicate openly with one another about these challenges. As appropriate, sit down again in order to renegotiate solutions on the basis of new information. Try not to assume that, if something doesn't happen when you expected it to occur, it means that the other person has abandoned the agreement or is intentionally sabotaging the process. People generally try their hardest to make things work, and it is important to communicate with each other about potential pitfalls before they fester and become crises.

It is often useful to build into the agreement an opportunity to "check back" with each other to evaluate progress towards implementation. In this way, any concerns about the agreement can be uncovered in a timely way, rather than waiting for problems to worsen. Such a meeting also provides an opportunity to recognize your good work and progress together - all right! We're actually moving in the right direction! Finally, such a meeting can be quite important for providing a safe space in which to explore additional issues and concerns, especially those that were not viewed as "safe" to explore in the previous conversation. Sometimes, we also find that by implementing solutions to the problems that were discussed, we realize there were other "undiscussables" that we weren't conscious of or which we were reluctant to raise. By peeling away another "layer of the conflict," we may get to important conversations, even if they prove to be difficult. In that event, it is important to return to the first steps of the process, and proceed with patience, flexibility and respect.

Arranging the Furniture: Creating the Best Environment for Dialogue

When considering how to negotiate, it is important to take into account the spaces and rooms in which we do so. As noted earlier, identify a neutral space for the discussion whenever possible. Then take a few moments to consider the following:

1. What type of privacy do we have in this space? Are we able to ensure that what we say in this area will remain as confidential as we would like it to be?
2. Is the table conducive to good conversation? Some tables are long, situated so people either can't see and hear each other or are set up in 'opposing' seats. Seek a round table if possible, or sit at the end of a longer table so you are able to easily communicate.
3. Use seats that convey fairness and equality, especially in situations in which one person supervises (or otherwise has power over) the other person. Avoid large, ornate chairs that communicate prestige and power for such discussions; the people in the room know who has power, so we must work diligently to improve the sense of safety required to take the risks to negotiate a solution.
4. Have resources that support problem solving present for you to use: a flip chart or white board, steno pads, "Post-It notes," etc. can be important as your discussion evolves into a productive meeting.

As with other advice on this site, our goal is to enhance your opportunities to effectively negotiate solutions to the conflicts you confront in your work at the university. By attending to the space in which you negotiate, making it supportive of the purpose that has brought you to the table, you increase your chances for success.

Article courtesy of [Office of Human Resource Development University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) and Harry Webne-Behrman located at <http://www.ohrd.wisc.edu/onlinetraining/resolution/stepsoverview.htm>
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