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Useful Community Development... quick notes

3 Causes, 3 Solutions for Conflict in Community Organizations; Back-to-School Events
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What's the Cause of Organizational Conflict?
Inherent in Situation? Just Finger Pointing? Different Styles?

The correct answer would have to be "all of the above."

We notice plenty of questions coming our way about how to handle conflict between neighbors, within homeowner associations or subdivisions, and within entire neighborhoods or communities. Before we talk about solutions, it may help your peace of mind to identify which of these three most common types of conflict you are experiencing.

1

Sometimes, like New Orleans in the top photo, the situation lends itself to conflict. Your townhouse might be overshadowed by skyscrapers, or your dumpster may be along the street because that's the only place for it. If you want to sit outside, you may be facing parked cars. While many thrive on diversity and colorful landscapes, others become difficult when exposed to unfamiliar irritants.

2

Other times, the conflict starts small and escalates when someone starts pointing a finger. Blame is an accelerant for any and every kind of disagreement. Try to keep a ground rule of never blaming people when your neighborhood association or community organization fails. Even when aimed at local governments, business groups, irresponsible landlords, or tacky property owners, blame rarely improves people's behavior.

3

In still other situations, conflicts in work style or play style, or just obliviousness to other people's agendas, leads to big problems. Like New York commuters to work, we look and act different, but in organizations, we can't entirely avoid one another. You might discount my opinion or expertise because my style is informal, and I might not be open to what you are saying because you wear those funny overalls. On a neighborhood level, you may think we need more upscale coffee shops, while I want to see the old-fashioned hardware store continue to occupy its corner.

Can we de-escalate based on understanding these three primary drivers? Yes. We can gather patience with our disagreements if we recognize that we are all trying to cope with complex human behavior. We can make a ground rule that we try our best to avoid blame and instead favor action to correct problems. We can decide that style doesn't need to matter so much; we aren't choosing a mate or dealing with an in-law, we're just trying to run a community organization!

Three Ways to Address Conflict in Community Organizations

1. Reinforce the positive bonds, and downplay the disagreements. Most people active in their communities seem to have an inherent understanding of this technique, but especially if you have the New Orleans Type 1 inherent conflict situation, you need to emphasize and frequently remind one another about what brings you together. This is also true, by the way, if you are living in a situation where your mega-environment is polarized, such as maybe a Brexit vote or a U.S. presidential election. Try to forget about it when you meet to focus on community or neighborhood issues.

2. Confront the conflict directly. For a public issue, create a thoughtful structure giving all sides an opportunity to explain themselves and encouraging everyone to listen respectfully. If your conflict is more private, involving too much finger-pointing or differences in personal or work styles, the direct approach may involve a strong leader making a little speech that addresses the different sides of the issue directly and pleads for tolerance and for stepping back from any personal attacks that have been made. It sounds paradoxical, but often the direct approach means that a private meeting with each leader of a faction or feuding personality is in order, often followed up by a meeting among all the major participants in the squabble if all sides agree they want to cool down. Mediation also can be seen as a direct approach.

3. Problem-solve on a piecemeal basis. Divide the basic disagreement into the smallest chunks you can imagine, then pick the one that seems least likely to stir up additional controversy. Get busy with action that is acceptable to all sides, building confidence that all can be treated fairly. Especially if you are in an "inherent conflict" situation, you won't be able to resolve everything once and for all time. Key leaders can lower their stress levels by admitting that you will need to do this often; if the leaders project this reality, community members often will follow in a calm, realistic approach. If you have style or finger-pointing differences, you may be able to change the subject by starting a small action project that will help resolve a nagging problem.

If you haven't taken a logical first step toward resolving a disagreement, agree to do so now. It's amazing to us that we receive many questions about non-functioning homeowner associations or sticky deed restriction dilemmas from people who have yet to talk to an attorney. Yes, sometimes it costs money to take the logical first step, but do you prefer to be mired in uncertainty and argument about your options? Agreeing to understand your true situation can be freeing, although we have to admit that sometimes people don't want

to take this step because they are afraid their side will be shown to be wrong!

The other dirty little secret is that sometimes people just enjoy the conflict. If you are one of those people, try to remember that newcomers to your group won't enjoy the friction a bit.

We write about this topic somewhat differently and at more length in our [newest page on neighborhood associations](#). (Check it out if you live in that world; our material on neighborhood groups has really expanded this month.)

Some Tips for Successful Back-to-School Events

Many communities will stage some kind of back-to-school kickoff in the next few weeks. Bring out the entire community to reinforce the importance of education to young people and parents. Here are a few ideas to inspire freshening up your event, if it's something you do every year. If this will be your first, these thoughts should help you brainstorm:



1. If you live in an affluent community, it's time to think deeply about the values or experiences the children are missing. Then partner with a museum, organization, or cultural institution to design an over-the-top event that will provide experiential learning, deepen understanding of global issues, or increase motivation to do something compassionate and socially constructive.
2. If you live in an economically challenged community, by all means organize the traditional giveaway of school supplies. But if you find that a number of nearby organizations are doing this already, design your half-day with a twist: maybe the children need clothes, old-fashioned toys without batteries, or the start of an at-home library. In these areas, remember to include education and job-oriented service providers for the adults.
3. Keep the event short, fun-packed, and energetic. Adults may think they want to spend all day together, but really they don't; other needs will intervene.
4. Cast a broader net than usual looking for organizations and agencies that will be useful to the assortment of families in your area. This is a place and time when parents are very open to learning about lesser-known regional organizations or new programs and activities.
5. Radiate optimism about the world that these precious children will shape. Put your

cynicism on the shelf for a morning; the young people deserve to return to school confident, hopeful, and curious.

With careful planning, back-to-school events can challenge adults to think meaningfully about community needs. Don't blow your chance to get this right!

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