In case of conflict with colleagues or partners

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Key points

- In situations of conflict, the key value is respect. Disrespectful behaviour should not be tolerated in UNHCR offices, regardless of how deep a conflict is.

- Never argue. Arguing does not convince the other party. Try to present your point of view concisely. If you are not heard or understood, manage the situation rather than argue. Ask your adversary to say why he or she believes you think (or feel) the way you do.

- Do not allow yourself to become emotional. Use your reason to understand what is going on between you and your adversary.

- Try to find value in the other's point of view. When you find it, let your adversary know. This may also help you to express your views in a form that your adversary can appreciate and understand.

1. Overview

Conflict in a workplace normally takes the form of an intense disagreement over perspectives and ideas. Often, it grows out of seemingly incompatible concerns. The intensity springs from the emotional engagement of the individuals in disagreement. Emotions are a natural part of our response to disagreement. They are present in office communications whenever committed people work together. In UNHCR emergency response teams, where commitment and long hours and insufficient resources often collide, the atmosphere easily becomes charged.

On average, UNHCR officers spend 20% of their time managing their own conflicts or conflict in their teams. At times, some teams can spend as much as 75% of their time and energy on conflict.

This Entry briefly examines the day-to-day conflict that occurs in most offices and teams. The section on 'Good practice recommendations' describes some of the ways in which conflict can be
understood, foreseen, and avoided. The section 'Considerations for practical implementations' describes how to manage conflict effectively, when it occurs.

2. Main guidance

Underlying policies, principles and/or standards

It is easier to work with conflict if we accept that it is a natural element in our personal emotional landscape and our interpersonal environment in the office. If we expect or want conflicts to disappear and never resurface, we are likely to be frustrated and depleted of energy – which, in turn, will cause us to behave more aggressively, tipping us into a downward spiral.

Conflict may be the single most incapacitating feature of teamwork. It can lower moral, severely impair decision-making, and decrease team output in almost every respect. Simultaneously, conflict sometimes drives outstanding team achievements. It can boost creativity, keep energy high, raise the quality of decision-making, and align a team with strategic objectives. In most cases, it is how we manage conflict that determines the personal and team outcome.

The UNHCR Code of Conduct defines minimum standards of behaviour in UNHCR offices: it calls for constructive and respectful working relations, and requires all of us to contribute to building a harmonious workplace based on team spirit, mutual respect and understanding. When disputes lead to communications that are disrespectful, promote antagonism and deepen friction, it is not only a matter for the quarrelling parties; it is of concern to the organisation.

Good practice recommendations

Tact is extraordinarily important in diverse teams, like those in UNHCR. Tolerance of intense disagreement differs considerably among UNHCR staff. Direct communication for one may be offensive to another. Emotional debate may be reasonable for you and overwhelming for your colleague. The answer is to take care of individuals who disagree with your perspective by communicating in a manner that is tolerable for them. Adjust your tone, not what you want to impart.

Everyone needs to feel valued, heard, and understood: these feelings are far more important to us than our opinions. We can surrender an opinion when we feel valued, and people who feel respected and appreciated by their colleagues are less likely to be hostile and more likely to cooperate.

Apply the following three procedures to prevent disagreement from escalating.

- Listen to understand the other's position.
- Look for value in the other's position:
  - Value how they think, if not their conclusions.
Consider their core concerns, with some of which you will probably agree.
- Remember that their feelings, like yours, often indicate genuine commitment.
- Credit the effort they have made: effort should always be acknowledged.
  - Communicate that you recognize there are values in the other's perspective.

You can appreciate and find value in others' positions without surrendering your own. You can disagree but find some merits in their perspective. Communication can remain open and constructive, and, most important, you can focus on the issue, not egos.

Engagement must be real. Pretense of respect and appreciation does not normally work. You must search for the real value in another point of view. Developing this skill can transform the way you relate to people in your team.

**Considerations for practical implementation**

Two typical responses to conflict are: ‘run away' or ‘battle it out'. In many instances these strategies work well, avoidance in particular. We say that it is wise to pick the battles you fight and good to win the battles you pick. However, you never know if a battle will transform into a war, and wars damage everyone. For this reason, consider a different approach. Above all:

- Do not take an office conflict personally. This common sense advice is easier to acknowledge than to apply. Remind yourself that you are primarily in a professional relationship with your colleague and finding out the solution for professional issues should be the priority. When the conflict feels very personal, try not to react from the emotional perspective. Obtain some feedback from a trusted and neutral friend or talk to a Staff Welfare Officer prior to deciding to act.
- Listen and listen more. When you catch yourself arguing or defending your position, pause and switch to listening again!

See if some of advice below could help. It will be most useful if you take your context into account, for example: are you in a heated argument in a public place, or in your room, tired after a difficult day.

- When you find yourself in an an argument, pause for a moment. Step out if the scene in your mind and observe what is happening from ‘above'. Try to see how the argument might benefit you and might benefit 'them'. Even in the middle of a heated discussion, you will have time to think because people meander and repeat themselves when they are emotional.
- In your mind, imagine you are a mediator between yourself and your adversary. How could your reconcile your position and that that of your adversary?
- Think about what matters essentially to you. Find your underlying concerns and locate your
Think about your adversary: try to identify their emotions, concerns, and look for value in their perspective.

When you have found elements in their perspective that you appreciate, tell your adversary. If you have not yet found any elements you appreciate, ask more questions and listen positively. Do so even if your adversary does not reciprocate.

If you cannot listen, and you are repeatedly interrupted when trying to express yourself, say that you need time to express yourself. Request 3 minutes of uninterrupted time. That is normally enough to say what you really need to say: to outline your perspective, highlight your concerns, and express your feelings.

If your adversary does not appear to have understood, do not continue to assert your point of view. Instead, ask your adversary to explain why he or she believes you feel and think the way as you do.

Resources and partnerships

The most important resource is your mind, and its ability to manage emotions and take care of situations.

The most important partner is your 'adversary'. If both sides genuinely wish to resolve a dispute, most differences can be bridged.

Check if your office includes people who are trained to be helpful in situations of workplace conflict (respectful workplace advisers, peer support persons).

Annexes

Communication Aptitude Self Assessment

Forbes Magazine, article on leadership and conflict

UNHCR, Code of Conduct

3. Links

A site dedicated to human resources management in non-profit organisations A site for mediators and those interested in mediation at the workplace
4. Main contacts

Contact the Ombudsman's office, Tahiana Andriamasomanana, Ombudsman. Tel: +41 (22) 739 8919. E-mail: andriama@unhcr.org.

Contact Staff Welfare Section, who are available for telephone calls at any time.

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