



## WASB GoLD Staff Answers Your Questions Turning Conflict into Opportunity

### **Q.** What advice do you have for a school board dealing with conflict?

**A.** It's no secret that many school districts and school boards are facing more than their share of conflict these days. How do you feel about conflict? What tools do you have to deal with conflict? In my assessments with groups to determine the need for conflict intervention, the vast majority of people say they don't like to deal with conflict. While the reasons given are varied, they generally fall into two categories:

- People have negative past experience with conflict in which:
  - they've been the losers;
  - the conflict has been protracted; and/or
  - conflicts have degenerated into "brawls" involving parties who have no take in the conflict and cannot help resolve it.
- People lack the skills or tools to deal with conflict effectively.

Conflicts faced by school boards come in all shapes and sizes. Some may involve legal, educational or other board business issues while others revolve primarily around people issues. Many ongoing con-

flicts usually have some of each. But it is often the people-issues that get in the way of resolving a conflict in its early stages. Unresolved conflict takes a toll on people and relationships, hampers productivity and creativity, and wastes limited resources.

Constructive conflict confrontation that encourages people to address all of the issues results in more productive, mutually beneficial conflict resolution. As school board members and superintendents, you are often in a position to move others towards successful conflict resolution before the people-issues become huge obstacles to working things out. But, as Benjamin Franklin said, "The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them."

With some good tools, you and others can turn conflict into an opportunity.

### **Approach conflict with a positive attitude**

Reframing the conflict from a problem to an opportunity is often the first step toward successful resolution. Instead of expecting a "battle," think of the situation as an opportunity to improve something – whether that be educational opportunities for children, a contract, a program, or simply an understanding of why things are the way they are. Instead of seeing those who disagree as "unreasonable," become curious

so you can look at the situation from another perspective. When you can approach conflict with an attitude toward a positive outcome, the odds of that actually happening improve dramatically.

### **Talk with people, not about them**

Whenever possible, communicate directly with those with whom you disagree. Direct communication helps avoid assumptions and misunderstandings by providing the opportunity for an exchange of information that includes all aspects of the conflict. Direct communication also removes the filter of other people's opinions, experiences, motives, and agendas.

### **Approach others with respect**

When you begin with respectful communication, you set the stage for productive dialogue. Keep in mind that how a message is conveyed can be as important as the message itself. Remember that others are people first – then family members, colleagues, employers, employees, neighbors, etc. Each has his or her own emotions, values, background, and viewpoints, which hold many differences as well as some common ground. It is in the sharing of this information that you will find the keys to conflict resolution.

### **Take ownership**

Successful resolution is more likely when all parties are actively involved in dialogue without accusations, blaming, or shaming. Use "I statements" to share your perspective of the problem, how you feel about it, and what you need for resolution.



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“You” statements only serve to point the finger at others and feel like an attack. When people feel attacked, they cannot hear the concerns of others so they are not able to address them satisfactorily. On the other hand, a sincere apology, when appropriate, opens the door to constructive discussion.

**Listen actively**

The process of resolving conflict involves 80 percent listening and 20 percent problem solving. Listen attentively and fully to others, especially those with whom you disagree. Use paraphrasing to clarify and optimize understanding. Providing an opportunity to be fully heard is a

profound gesture of respect and the other party will generally respond in kind. Be careful with questions – people get defensive when they feel they’re being interrogated. To get more information, use neutral, open-ended questions such as, “Can you say more about how you arrived at that conclusion?”

**Focus on interests, not on positions**

When people are embroiled in conflict, they talk about what they want and are often unclear about why that’s important to them. Having a clear understanding of what each person wants (their position), and why they want it (their interest)

leads to the development of more creative options for dealing with problems. Focusing on positions often leads to power struggles because positions may sound like demands. Focusing on interests opens the door to more and better solutions.

Confronting a conflict situation isn’t easy for most people. However, with the help of some good tools you can turn conflict into an opportunity that provides impetus for change, growth, progress, and even improved relationships. ■

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