



Effective communication – Managing conflict

Being able to communicate effectively can help develop more positive relationships. Sometimes, we have interactions with others that don't go as well as we would like. We might feel misunderstood but are able to move on with relative ease but at other times we can feel personally attacked causing us to feel angry, maybe wanting to lash out, or withdraw in fear. The strength of feeling we experience may make it difficult to hear what someone is trying to say to us and, in extreme situations, such confrontation can feel threatening to our overall wellbeing and functioning.

Some common situations where students find themselves at risk of conflict with others are:

- differences with room mates over house rules
- disagreements with parents' wishes or advice
- miscommunications with boyfriends/girlfriends/partners
- challenges from university staff
- clashes of opinion in discussions with peers or academics which feel 'personal'.

We can often prevent minor conflicts escalating by changing the way we communicate.

Conflict can be an opportunity, not just a threat

It is possible to look at our personal interactions in a different way so that we can turn conflict into an opportunity to achieve clearer communication and bring about change. There are two common reasons why people get into conflict:

- not communicating clearly or listening respectfully
- having different needs or interests which, without negotiation, don't easily coexist.

Guidelines for good communication – a three-step process

Send	Send clear messages. Verbal communication and body language <i>both</i> count. Think about what you want to say and how it may be perceived.
Receive	What is heard is part <i>fact</i> and part <i>feeling</i> so try to be clear on both levels. When you are listening, pay attention to both facts and feelings.
Acknowledge	Check that you have communicated what you intended by summarising what you have perceived. Ask questions to seek clarification if parts of the message seem unclear.

Respect the other person's needs as well as your own

You have valid concerns which need addressing, as does the person with whom you are in conflict (even if these are not immediately apparent).

Tackle the problem directly with the other person

It can be clearer if you can communicate directly with the other person in the conflict; going via others can escalate the conflict or make further misunderstandings more likely.

Try to avoid involving peers, friends or family in 'taking sides' and, as far as possible, keep the conflict out of the public eye. While it can be useful to check others' perceptions of the situation or seek others' views, if you're merely seeking confirmation for your own views this is only likely to lead to a more entrenched position.

Separate the *problem* from the *person*

Pointing out the distinction between the problem and the person, and confirming you wish to treat the other person respectfully may help them do the same. Your issues are more likely to be resolved if you avoid making personal attacks which embarrass or ridicule the other person.

Speak without interrupting each other

Make sure that you let the other person have the opportunity to finish what they have to say. This will help avoid further

misunderstanding. It's also helpful to ensure that there is agreement about everything said so far, before going on to the next point at issue.

Win-win solutions

Look for mutually satisfying agreements - one-sided offers tend not to work. Though it is common to think there must be a winner and a loser in a conflict, this is not necessarily true. Participating in negotiations where the goal is a win-win solution (i.e. both parties attaining satisfaction on their needs and interests) is both possible and helpful.

Four steps to resolving conflict

These suggested steps incorporate the guidelines above and can help resolve conflicts:

- If you are in public and find yourself in a conflict, stop and ask to meet the other person in a neutral, private and safe setting at a mutually convenient time so you can speak confidentially without creating a scene and without being interrupted. This might also help to take stock of the situation and review your position.
- Look at and listen to each other, so each person feels heard and understood, and has their views acknowledged. It's worth taking time hearing the other person's viewpoint. Take turns to list the issues you want resolved as practical matters to be addressed. Take turns listening to each other until

each person has fully stated their views and you both agree that you have been heard and understood.

- Offer options with an open mind, thinking of as many possible ways of meeting the expressed concerns, needs and interests of both people. Combine and refine the options you've both thought of, remembering that it may very well be possible to work out a win-win solution *together* which neither of you could have thought of on your own.
- Conclude negotiations with agreements that are *specific* and satisfy you both. This minimises the risk of future conflict.

Finally, if you don't reach agreement, don't be afraid to try again another time. It can sometimes be better to try to resolve a conflict bit by bit, allowing time to think and rest.

Where to seek more help

You can find information on a range of resources on the University Staff Counselling Service website: <https://staff.counselling.cam.ac.uk>

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