



The Air Force Guide to Managing Conflict on Conference Calls

The usual challenges of conducting meetings by phone - lack of visual input, more distractions, and trying to interpret what you cannot see - are heightened when conflict among group members emerges.



Learning to deal with conflict effectively can save you time and energy and help you stay on track to fulfill the Mission. Whether you are leading or participating in the meeting, there are a variety of techniques to help you

INTERVENE AND RESPOND to conflict in the moment.

STEP 1

STEP 1: Use your Agenda, Goals and Established Norms When Conflict First Emerges.

Reminding the group of the need to hear from everyone and to speak in turn often addresses immediate tensions and helps the group refocus.

*But how do you talk through a confrontation or really tough issue and keep the meeting productive?
Move on to Step 2!*

STEP 2

STEP 2: Use These Techniques for the Tough Conflicts.

- ★ **Share Your Observation of What's Happening.** Simply state what you hear. It can help the group self-regulate and regroup. But, avoid assigning blame or judgment (e.g., "You're holding us up." or "You're being difficult."). Try something like:
 - *"It seems like there's a strong difference of opinion on this, let's take a few minutes to talk about it."*
 - *"It looks like we're going around in circles. Let's look for a different approach."*
- ★ **Stay Future Focused.** There may be a history of conflict among certain group members – they may be stuck rehashing the past and unmoved by the other's argument. You can acknowledge the past but use your agenda to keep the focus on what's needed now and in the future.
 - *"I want to be sure everyone understands your point of view. What's important for us to hear now?"*
 - *"OK, let's keep to the agenda, but I'll reserve the last 10 minutes to talk this out. I'll schedule a follow-on if we need more time."*
 - *"What's the outcome we should be focused on for this meeting?"*
- ★ **Confront Without Confrontation.** When disagreements become unproductive or disrespectful, it is time to intervene. Ask a clear question or redirect the discussion.
 - *"It sounds like you've had a different experience than others. Can we talk more about that after we hear from the rest of the group?"*
 - *"It's important to get everyone's input. That can't happen if a few of you are competing to speak. Let's give those who haven't spoken yet a chance to join in."*
 - *"I appreciate what you said but the way you're talking is very pointed. I'd like to hear you try that again but with a focus on the problem, not the person."*
- ★ **Call Time – Take a Breath, a Time-out or a Break.** When heated arguments impact the whole group, you may need to call for an intentional pause and give members a chance to reset.
 - *"Something's happened here, and we need to understand it. Let's take a 10 second pause and then I'm going to invite each of you to share your thoughts to see how we can proceed."*
 - *"I don't like calling a time-out, but we all need a breather. Take 10 minutes – Get some air. Come back ready to talk about how we're going to move forward on our decision."*
- ★ **Know When it's Time to Shift the Conflict Off-line.** If conflict continues despite your efforts, or becomes more volatile, it may be time to talk off-line with those directly involved in the conflict.
 - *"I can tell we need some dedicated time to discuss this, and this meeting isn't the place. Let's set a time to discuss this later today."*
 - *"What you're sharing is important, and it deserves more time to discuss. Let's finish the topics on our agenda and then you and I can talk after the meeting."*

For more information, contact your local dispute resolution manager or reach the Air Force Negotiation & Dispute Resolution Program through their website at www.adr.af.mil.