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RESOLVING CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

Conflict is dysfunctional to program quality. It is a disruptive factor that can be dramatically reduced with preventive planning. Better communication is a way to help solve these problems.

RESOLVING CONFLICT

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal conflicts often develop during recreational activities. Activity leaders, though they may have relatively little professional training, need to deal fairly and effectively with these complex situations. However, this will occur only when leaders are prepared to deal with such problems. Leaders, especially those at the upper end of the administrative ladder, face conflict situations daily. If such conflicts remain unresolved, they will have a definite effect on job satisfaction, productivity, and self-satisfaction for the staff member. At the same time, conflict will decrease the enjoyment, fulfillment and relaxation of the participants so much that they may never return. That is why responsible leaders cannot leave this potential for conflict to chance. Advanced planning is necessary if an organization is to minimize the harmful effects of personal conflict.

Conflict between individuals may occur at three areas or levels: (1) between participants, (2) between participants and staff members, and (3) between staff members. I will emphasize the role the chief administrator must play in resolving such conflicts, though subordinate staff must also be able to provide the necessary support and direction.

CONFLICT BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS

Although problems between participants of a basketball game may be undesirable, they do not usually do damage if handled quickly and appropriately. Procedures can be established in advance whereby the

coach, the referee, or the organization is prepared to handle these common problems. On such occasions, leaders must act without emotion and follow departmental procedures. The response may be to reprimand without penalty, suspend temporarily (or for the season), or in more serious situations, eliminate the individual(s) or team from further participation. Departments should anticipate these incidents and formulate clear and adaptable procedures.

The key is for the leader to avoid becoming emotionally involved. In such situations that cause conflicts, leaders reacting out of emotion tend to respond inappropriately. While unemotional response may be difficult--especially for new or young leaders--it is nevertheless critical. This can be a learned response, and therefore it deserves a great deal of attention in leadership training sessions. I find after thirty years of experience that women generally handle conflict between participants better than men, because women handle their emotions more appropriately. Men are inclined to get involved physically--to grab, push, or pull--in an effort to quiet a situation. This in itself creates emotional involvement. Leaders need to formulate a plan of action in advance. Responding to conflict without preparation can prompt actions that are later regretted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Clearly communicate policies, rules, regulations and guidelines that are important to the agency and that will be enforced.
2. Establish a rapport among leaders and with participants that will encourage understanding, support and loyalty.
3. Provide quality, well-trained supervisors and officials for all activities, and require that they maintain control from the outset.
4. Provide an appeals committee to hear grievances or protests. Make sure the process is known and used.
5. Become aware of the participants likely to cause problems and work to either bring them to compliance with program objectives and standards of conduct, or remove them from participation. These are the only acceptable alternatives for the leader.

CONFLICT BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS AND STAFF MEMBERS

A conflict that occurs between a participant and a staff member is usually more disturbing because it tends to create an emotional climate and takes longer to resolve; its effects on operations is more detrimental. When the participant willfully endangers another by ignoring rules and procedures, takes undue advantage of a situation, or confronts a leader without just cause, the leader must act. A participant who enters a facility illegally "just to shoot a few baskets," a seemingly harmless thing, must receive disciplinary action

from the leader; otherwise chaos prevails. When someone purposefully damages equipment, such as slamming a table tennis paddle down on the table, the leader should react and resolve the situation. A young man or woman who challenges being turned away from a dance because he or she does not meet dress standards may express hostile and aggressive behavior. Even if that person is a popular young man or woman with a great deal of support, the leader must defend and uphold the policy. Often personal accusations or insults become a part of such occurrences, and uncontrolled emotions enter in. It is in these situations when the most devastating and damaging events occur. On occasion however, controlled emotions can and ought to be expressed by a leader and may help convey an important message of what will, and will not, be tolerated.

An agency must have clear standards and policies, in combination with committed leaders who will enforce them. This combination, along with the ability and willingness of leaders to show love and understanding, will help create a positive situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish an acceptable relationship model. Staff must understand the policies and do their best to make the model work.

2. Staff members must be able to carry out their responsibilities, while at the same time remaining emotionally stable, unthreatened, or unthreatening. A training program, using case studies to simulate conflict, should be provided.

3. Staff members should be encouraged to get to know participants. When this occurs, conflict is often curtailed or substantially reduced.

4. Staff members with an "ego problem" need to be counseled in or out of the program. There is no room for leaders who are not willing and able to give freely of themselves.

5. Staff members must become good listeners. Empathic, caring, and responsive leaders generally have less difficulty when working with participants.

CONFLICT BETWEEN STAFF MEMBERS

A third concern, one that is potentially most difficult as well as damaging, occurs when conflict arises between staff members. George Hjelte, Superintendent of Parks and Recreation for the city of Los Angeles for many years, once stated that his most important job as an administrator was to ensure that good staff relations existed. Leaders who have had the opportunity to work in a department where supportive relationships are encouraged find these to be an important factor in professional satisfaction. Without good staff relations, no matter how often paychecks are increased, leaders begin to look elsewhere.

Conflict between staff members cannot be minimized, ignored, nor tolerated. Repercussions reach out in every direction and can have devastating and long-lasting effects. If not controlled quickly, resolution will ultimately be sought from top administrators. Often the press, or other professionals, are made aware of the internal strife that takes place, and this complicates the situation. Leaders must gather information about interstaff conflict quickly yet thoroughly and act with tact and thought in bringing about a quick and fair resolve. Because conflict seems to be a part of life, the leader or administrator who is able to deal with it effectively and efficiently, with the least amount of damage to the involved individuals or agency, will be an asset to his or her organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop staff rapport that emphasizes support and loyalty. Establish a line of communication for all to know. Speak often of the need for unity to ensure a good working environment. Recognize and reward those who exemplify this trait.
2. Deal carefully and quietly with minor problems and place much emphasis on protecting the individuals involved.
3. Encourage professional communication and social interaction between staff. Encourage interest in the other person.
4. Act quickly and discreetly on critical issues where lives are affected and where staff changes may be necessary.