



SOCIETY OF  
RESEARCH  
ADMINISTRATORS  
INTERNATIONAL

# Conflict Management Skills for Research Compliance and Integrity Professionals

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# Session Overview

- What is conflict?
- Reasons for conflict
- Essential elements of managing conflict
- Proactive prevention of conflict
- Discussion

# I. What is Conflict?

# Conflict versus Dispute

- Conflict ≠ dispute
- Conflict tends to be longer-term and can often be managed (Burton, 1990)
- Dispute tends to be shorter-term and can often be resolved (Burton, 1990)



## II. Reasons for Conflict

# Contributors to Conflict

- Competing needs
- Different perspectives or focus
- Different ethical systems
- History
- High stakes, high emotion ('hot cognition')

# Competing Needs

- Researcher
  - Publish or perish, grant deadlines, institutional or lab pressures
  - Personal: achievement, reputation, employment, visa
  - Scientific passion
- Institutional
  - Compliance with federal regulations
  - Protect public safety and well-being
  - Protect institutional reputation and efficacy of research enterprise

# Different perspectives or focus

- Different baseline knowledge
- In the weeds versus 60,000-foot view
- Fundamental Attribution Error: actor versus observer





# Different Ethical Systems

- The Big 3
  - Autonomy – empowerment
  - Community – relationship, social order
  - Divinity – virtue, purity, natural order
- Ethical Lenses (The Ethics Game™)
  - Responsibilities
  - Results
  - Relationships
  - Reputation



# Impact of History



- History of interactions – trust or mistrust
- Habits of mind and action – rigidity, resistance to change
- Education/training – perceptions of expertise (self and other), actual expertise

# High Emotion: “Hot Cognition”

## Type 1: Intuitive thinking (default mode)

- Rapid
- Automatic
- Emotional (“hot”)
- Heuristic-based
- Concrete imagery
- Experiential, narrative

# High Emotion: “Hot Cognition”

## Type 2: Analytical thinking (effortful mode)

- Slow
- Rational/logical
- Reflective, deliberative (“cold”)
- Abstract, symbolic
- Relies heavily on working memory resources

# Why Hot Cognition?

- Thought to be hard-wired, based in evolutionary history
  - Generally adaptive – time and effort-saving
  - Mismatch to situations that are complex, nuanced



# Threat Evokes Hot Cognition

Stress, anxiety, and perceived threat evoke System 1 (hot) and suppress System 2 (cold) resulting in:



- 'Hind brain reactance' rather than forebrain planning
- Heuristics and biases rather than reflective thinking
- Entrenchment and defensiveness

# Example: Control and Reactance

- Premise #1: Researchers in general are highly motivated and highly autonomous individuals who are not used to being told what to do.
- Premise #2: And they don't like it.

Not a faculty party



"Henry! Our party's total chaos! No one knows when to eat, where to stand, what to ... Oh, thank God! Here comes a border collie!"

More typical of faculty





# The Need to Predict and Control

- Humans (and most other creatures) don't like to feel helpless.
  - Personal control is so important that we perceive illusory control, even where there is no control.
  - Lack of this illusion correlates with clinical depression.
  - This is an adaptive tendency rooted in the relative cost versus benefit of persisting or giving up.
- Ergo, being told what to do can feel threatening.  
The result is **reactance**.

# Psychological Reactance

Brehm (1966): “*Psychological reactance*” is an emotional reaction to pressure or persuasion attempts, that results in the strengthening or adoption of the contrary belief.



# Hot Cognition and Conflict Management

Both conflict management and dispute resolution require assessing, addressing, and reducing perceived threat - a.k.a., stress.



# III. Essential Elements of Managing Conflict

# Interest v. Position

- **Interest** based means looking for common or shared ideas or values
- **Position** based means operating with the presumption that “my way is right”



# Common Position Statements

- We won't let you do that.
  - Who do you think you are?
- There are the rules, and they must be obeyed.
- You can't make me do that.
  - Don't you know who I am??
  - Who do you think you are?



# Common Interest Statements

- We share a common goal of advancing good science.
- We are here to help.
  - You wouldn't look good in orange.



- Let's figure out how to make that work.

# Dispute Flashpoints



- Perceptions
- History
- Education
- Expectations
- Immediate conditions  
(internal and external)



# Essential Elements of Managing Conflict (after Weeks, 1994)

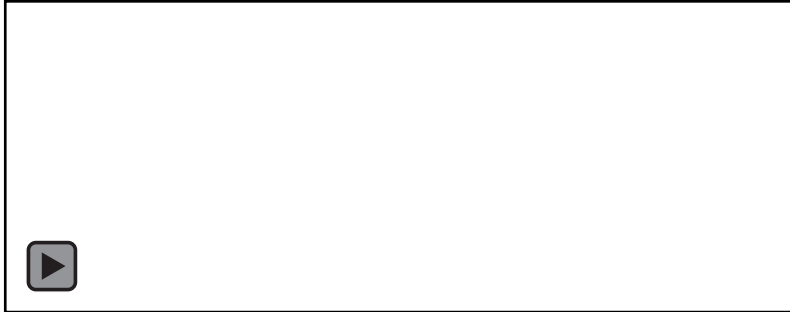
- ① Assessing the environment:
  - a. Physical aspects
  - b. Emotional aspects
- ② Clarifying perceptions
- ③ Exploring shared and individual needs
- ④ Managing power imbalances
- ⑤ Keeping a future orientation
- ⑥ Being creative
- ⑦ Being realistic

# Assessing the Environment

- Physical aspects – sense of physical safety
- Emotional aspects – psychological safety

# Clarifying Perceptions

Have you ever had a conversation with someone where each of you knew *exactly* what was being discussed, and both of you were wrong?

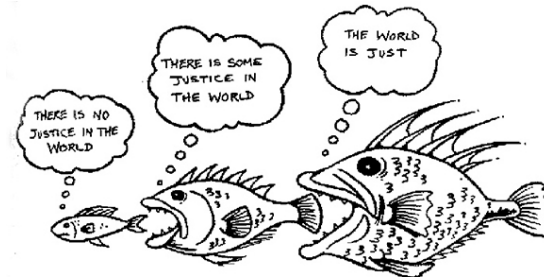


# Exploring Shared and Individual Needs

- Interest versus position
- Working from position typically leads to zero-sum outlook
  - One person wins, the other loses
- Working from interest typically can be cast as both parties win
  - May not get everything, but can get enough to live with, bounded, of course, by limits of law, regulation and policy

# Managing Power Imbalances

- As distinct from psychological safety, this refers to real-world power imbalances
- Importance of the 'neutral' party



# Keeping a Future Orientation

- What's past is past.
- Focus on learning and future actions, rather than recrimination and blame.
  - Often requires active listening and micro-emotional intervention to get to this point.



# Being Creative

- Note that stress inhibits creativity! (You can't think outside the box if you're hiding in it.)
- Instead of “No!” try “Not that way, but let's figure out how.”



# Being Realistic

- Need to be cognizant of individual and environmental restrictions
  - E.g., unaffordable; beyond the person's capacity; illegal





# IV. Proactive Prevention of Conflict

# Proactive Conflict Management to Prevent Disputes

- Manage expectations in advance!
- Have a conversation. Listen. Talk. Listen more.
  - Techniques of Active listening, Powerful Non-Defensive Communication
- Use techniques from informed consent.
  - Informed consent is a process for managing expectations.
  - Legal, moral in context of research etc.;; good/respectful practice in terms of everyday relating

# Elements of active listening

- Clarification (discussed above)
- Paraphrasing
- Reflecting
- Summarizing
- Brief foray into micro-emotional interventions

# Informed Consent

- A person's agreement to allow something to happen (such as surgery) that is based on a full disclosure of facts needed to make the decision intelligently; i.e., knowledge of risks involved, alternatives, etc. (Black's Law Dictionary 6<sup>th</sup> Ed. 1990)
  - Process, not paper
  - Legal, moral, respectful

# More Techniques: Powerful Nondefensive Communication

- PNDC developed by Sharon Ellison
- “Colombo approach”
- Minimizes likelihood of escalation
- Powerful for de-escalation

# Case 1

- Veteran researcher, will not be told what to do. Hates IRB, will not participate in IRB process unless forced to.
- What's going on? History, competing needs and focus, reactance
- Active listening, PNDC
- Humour
  - Our work is serious but we don't always need to be

# Case 2

- Junior regulatory staff person, ineffective time management, frankly hostile reaction to efforts to improve performance
- “I know what to do, don’t micromanage me!”
- What’s going on? Stress/threat to self-concept
- Active listening
- PNDC
- Micro-emotional intervention

# Case 3

- Senior administrator directs staff not to participate in recorded investigation interviews
- Describes regulations as ridiculous – it's only animals.
- Important contextual piece: One party state
- What's going on? Baseline knowledge is lacking; competing needs/goals; threat to perceived control/self-perception.



# Case 3, continued

- Active listening
- PNDC
- Shared interests
- Creativity
- Not all disputes can be resolved, but conflict can be managed by ‘dancing’ – interactional aikido.

# V. Discussion

# Q&A

- Key Takeaways
- Questions and Suggestions