



KEEPING THE PEACE:

Effectively Managing Conflict in Your TU Chapter or Council

You joined TU to help save the fish or to learn to be a better angler and instead you're dealing with conflict and unhappy volunteers. What now? Please recognize, first, that you are not alone -- all volunteer organizations have conflict; and, second, that good things can (and often do) arise from conflict that is effectively managed. The purpose of this document is to help volunteer leaders reduce the likelihood that conflict will occur within their TU chapter or council and, when it does occur, to manage it effectively. Don't wait until conflict arrives. Use this document and handy checklist as the basis for a board discussion about managing conflict. Prepare your organization now so you can keep the peace and stay focused on saving fish and having fun.

A. What is conflict and what causes it?

Conflict is a difference of opinion, disagreement or clash of styles between people who are competing over perceived or actual incompatible goals or resources. Sometimes the desired resources or outcomes truly are mutually exclusive or incompatible. Many times they are only perceived as incompatible, when there may actually be a way to satisfy both parties. Differing perceptions are the root of many conflicts. Conditions that are likely to create conflict are found in virtually every non-profit organization, including TU. Conditions for conflict may include limited funds; limited time; innovative ideas; change; varied professional backgrounds and approaches; different management styles; vague roles and responsibilities; passionate people; and shared responsibilities (e.g., leadership, decision-making, and implementation). Conflict need not be destructive. Handled effectively, differences can result in new and better ideas and projects, as well as a stronger sense of "team" for having weathered the storm together. When that happens, future conflicts are more likely to also be handled constructively. Conflict side-stepped or not handled in a thoughtful manner can have devastating results. At minimum, such situations chew up valuable volunteer (and, sometimes, staff) time, burn out existing volunteer leaders, and discourage new leaders from stepping forward. More serious and "public" conflicts can stop current members from becoming more active, stop new members from joining, and destroy long-term friendships. Especially virulent situations can lead to complete dysfunction or even "implosion" of the chapter or council itself, and damage the reputation of the organization in the eyes of fisheries agencies, other conservation or fishing group leaders or elected officials. It can take years for an organization to recover from such extensive damage.

B. Reduce the Likelihood of Conflict

Experience with TU chapters and councils across the nation indicates that many conflicts are the result of differing perceptions or expectations about how something should be (or is being) done. Many such conflicts could be avoided by improving communication in ways that will help get people "on the same page." Following are some fairly simple, tried-and-true steps for reducing the likelihood for conflict.

1. Clarify volunteer leader roles and responsibilities:

To do a good job, people need to know what is expected of them. They want to know. So, this is one of the easiest and quickest ways to reduce confusion and conflict stemming from differing expectations.

- Use job descriptions: Sample job descriptions for most volunteer leadership positions (e.g., president, treasurer, secretary, newsletter editor, council chair) can be found in the Leadership Manual along with other support materials.
- Provide adequate guidance to succeed: Each volunteer assigned a task should receive instruction from an experienced leader on how to complete the task successfully, even for the most simple task. They should also be told explicitly what resources (e.g., funds for reimbursement, someone to call for questions) are available to them, when the task must be completed, and how it relates to the TU mission. In some cases, a 10-minute informal training session given by the last volunteer who did that task will be sufficient. In other cases, written materials or day-long training workshops will be more helpful. Contact TU Volunteer Operations for information on training opportunities.

2. Use fair and "transparent" processes:

A process is “transparent” when it is clear to all involved and easy to understand. Using fair and transparent processes can reduce fear, uncertainty, and power struggles (e.g., by “leveling the playing field,”) all of which can serve to increase trust and create a more pleasant and productive environment. Do not assume that everyone knows the procedures. In fact, it is more likely that procedures are not well understood, and such assumptions can especially alienate newcomers.

- Know and use TU’s bylaws: Bylaws are the procedures or “ground rules” for operation of an organization. Make sure your chapter or council bylaws are current and that each elected volunteer leader receives a copy. Term limits, selection processes, voting procedures and lines of authority and accountability can be especially troublesome if ignored or abused, so pay particular attention to those areas. Chapters and councils should be able to provide current bylaws for those levels of the organization; TU National’s bylaws are available on the TU web site under the Leaders Only section.

- Use “Roberts Rules of Order” to make decisions and conduct board meetings: Board meetings are where the business of TU gets done – or, in some cases, doesn’t get done. While they may seem stuff and formal to some, “Roberts Rules of Order” provide fair, transparent and time-tested procedures for conducting meetings and making decisions in an orderly and predictable fashion. Regular and proper use of Roberts Rules can lead to more productive meetings and more successful conservation work. Conversely, overly strict use or other abuse of rules can squelch creativity and create an unpleasant environment.

3. Develop and use a written work plan:

One of the most effective ways to get people “on the same page,” literally, is to have a written plan of action. Whether a full-blown strategic plan or a more simple annual work plan, few activities can unite and focus a chapter or council more effectively than the process of developing, and then using, a written plan

4. Model desired behaviors (“walk the talk”):

Whether you realize it or not, if you are a TU leader, elected or otherwise, other members are looking to you to see what is appropriate and acceptable behavior. Through your conduct, you have the power to support or create a culture in your chapter or council where processes are fair, communication is good, respect and common courtesies are the norm, diversity and new ideas are honored, and conflict is dealt with in a timely and productive manner. See below for information on two highly recommended publications about leadership roles in resolving conflict.

C. Resolving conflict:

As appealing as it may sound at the time, ignoring conflict and hoping it will go away more often than not results in the problem festering and becoming even more damaging and difficult to resolve. When a conflict does arise, it is prudent to deal with it in a timely and professional manner. It is the responsibility of elected leadership to recognize when there is a problem, determine the nature and scope of the problem, and devise and implement a strategy for addressing it. Be aware that the source of the problem is not always what it may first appear to be, and be careful not to rush to judgment. Evaluating the effort (along the way and afterward) can provide valuable information for dealing with future conflicts.

Finding “win/win” solutions:

In volunteer organizations dependent on volunteers and good will, such as TU, it is often desirable to strive for a “win/win” situation that increases likelihood of a good relationship in the longer term. In their book “Getting to Yes,” Fisher and Ury (see below) identify four key elements in negotiating “win/win” outcomes. The four steps are outlined here, along with tips for applying them in a TU chapter or council.

1. Separate the people from the problem: Fisher and Ury’s advice is to “deal with people as humans and the problem on its merits.” Each person involved in the conflict brings his or her own personal feelings, fears and hopes. The higher the stakes (i.e., the more one feels he or she stands to lose), the more likely one is to feel threatened and fearful. Fear breeds frustration and anger and leads to “selective listening” -- hearing things that support their perceptions and rejecting those that do not. Providing opportunities for “venting” and for “saving face” can be useful exercises.

2. Focus on interests, not positions: Typically, problems arise because two or more parties express conflicting positions on something. Progress can often be made by focusing on the interests behind the positions. One way to identify those interests is simply to ask each party why they hold a certain position. The concerns and desires expressed are their interests. Finding shared interests can help reduce “selective listening,” and provide an excellent starting point for working together. In TU, for example, the fish are a “common denominator” that both parties share.

3. Invent options for mutual gain: While it may seem to the parties in conflict that there are only two possible outcomes – my way and the wrong way, often it is possible to create new options so there are no outright “losers.” Brainstorming sessions are excellent ways to “expand the pie before you cut it” (be sure to reserve judgment until after all the creative ideas are on the table). It is often possible to create new options around shared interests, as well as around divergent interests, e.g., one person may hate a certain task, such as speaking to reporters, while another may welcome it.

4. Insist on using objective criteria: Decisions about the outcome of the conflict should be determined by objective criteria, not by who has the strongest will. Have the parties together identify which standards to use, e.g., bylaws, job descriptions, scientific judgment, industry protocols. Agreeing on objective standards ahead of time ensures that no one appears weak, just reasonable. It is important to note that not all conflicts lend themselves to a “win/win” outcome. Criminal acts and conflicts around deeply held philosophical differences are examples. In other cases, if parties have been in conflict for a long time, more concessions might harm rather than help the organization.

Honor TU’s “Chain of Command:”

TU’s hierarchical structure is set up in a manner that encourages leaders to attempt to resolve conflicts at the level of the conflict (see TU bylaws). For example, every effort should be made to resolve local chapter problems at the chapter level. If they cannot be resolved at the local level, chapter leaders should go “up the chain of command” and seek assistance from their state council chair.

If a local (i.e., chapter) problem could have ramifications at the state level, then state council must be notified. Similarly, if a local or state-level problem could have ramifications at the national level, then TU staff must be notified. Conflicts that involve harassment, discrimination, fraud, embezzlement, misuse of funds or other criminal acts, or otherwise have the potential to harm the entire organization, must be reported immediately to TU’s legal counsel or director of Volunteer Operations.

Because state councils serve as a “linchpin” between the national office and local chapters, and play an increasingly critical role in the organization in both advocacy and organizational issues, TU Volunteer Operations is working with volunteer leaders to develop additional guidelines for volunteers and staff working to resolve conflicts at the state level.

Get Help - Resources available to TU volunteer leaders:

Volunteer leaders facing conflicts in their organization should not hesitate to seek the counsel of more senior or experienced volunteer leaders. A previous chapter president or council chair, or current leaders at the next higher level of the organization, for example, can have valuable experience and insight which, typically, they are happy to share. Such an individual, if respected and trusted by “both sides” might be recruited to serve as an advisor or mediator. If national level attention is needed or desired, contact one of the following:

- ☐ Chair, National Leadership Council (most senior volunteer leader)
- ☐ Secretary, National Leadership Council (second most senior volunteer leader)
- ☐ Vice President for Volunteer Operations (staff)
- ☐ Director, Volunteer Operations (staff)
- ☐ TU Legal Counsel (staff)

The following publications are recommended for volunteer leaders interested in learning more about resolving conflict in a constructive manner. Such resources are a legitimate financial investment and a valuable resource for a chapter or council to make available to its volunteer leaders.

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In, by Roger Fisher and William Ury. 1991. Approximately \$13.00 (softcover 187 pages; also available in hardcover). Available in most new and used bookstores. Based on the work of the Harvard Negotiation Project, this concise and easy-to-read book is “the” source for learning how to resolve conflict through “win/win” negotiations.

Resolving Conflict in Nonprofit Organizations, by Marion Peters Angelica, published by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 1999. \$28.00. www.wilder.org; 1-800-274-6024. This 170-page workbook addresses the special challenges facing volunteer organizations like TU. User-friendly; includes exercises and worksheets, the latter of which may be photocopied (if you buy the book) for use in your chapter or council.

Checklist

REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD FOR CONFLICT

- Clarify volunteer leader roles and responsibilities
- Use job descriptions
- Provide adequate guidance to succeed
- Use fair and “transparent” processes
- Know and use TU’s bylaws
- Use “Roberts Rules of Order” to make decisions and conduct meetings
- Develop and use a written work plan for your chapter or council
- Model desired behaviors (“walk the talk”)

RESOLVE CONFLICT IN A TIMELY AND PROFESSIONAL MANNER

- Try to find “win/win” solutions
- Separate the people from the problem
- Focus on interests, not positions
- Invent options for mutual gain
- Insist on using objective criteria
- Honor TU’s chain of command
- Get help if you need it