# Communication tools for resolving conflicts

## Have you ever experienced:

- **a conflict in a work team or in a lab?**
- **a problem you needed to discuss with a professor or supervisor?**

How do you approach the other person?

How do you communicate to move toward problem-solving?

**Let's take the example of a conflict within a work team.**

## The situation

Your professor has assigned you to a random group of four. The group must work together on two assignments worth 10% and 25% of the final grade. The first assignment is a disaster. Chris and you get along OK because you both want high grades. But Pat and Sam don`t seem to put in any effort or to care, as long as they pass the course.

In the end, Pat didn`t show up for meetings. You and Chris had to rework Pat`s portion to make it fit the format you had adopted. Sam`s work was late and incomplete. You got it with a few minutes to spare and had to use it as it was. Your group ended up with a grade of C.

Chris and you decide to have a talk with Pat and Sam before starting work on the second assignment, but you`re afraid of getting into a conflict.

## Things to avoid

- **Negotiating about positions** (i.e. narrow and often opposite statements like: "*I want an A*" versus "*I just want to pass*"; positions are too narrow to offer common solutions)
- **Imposing a solution** (that may not take relevant factors into account)
- **Getting angry** with your teammates or **blaming**
- **Making assumptions** about teammates

## Tips for problem-solving

- Negotiating around **interests** (see below)
- Identifying **common goals** (e.g. completing the project)
- Organizing the work by taking into account **strengths and constraints**
- Asking **open-ended questions** (what, how, etc.)
- Remaining **non-judgmental and creative**

# Identify interests

Interests are reasons that motivate people to act as they do. Interests offer a greater range for problem-solving. Be careful of making n checked assumptions. Ask open-ended questions. You will find <u>common</u> interests, <u>separate</u> interests that don`t conflict, and some <u>competing</u> or opposite interests. **By building a solution based on more of people`s various interests, you have a better chance of success**.

**What interests are at stake? For you? For your teammates?**

-   Improving your CGPA?
-   Keeping your scholarship?
-   Not spending too much time on this course because of the workload in other courses?
-   Doing course work at night while your kids are asleep?
-   Doing course work in short periods because your schedule is full?
-   Feeling included in deciding how the work gets done?
-   Having discussions that are respectful?
-   Having efficient meetings and communications?
-   Other?

**What strengths/weaknesses and constraints do you need to take into account?**

-   When are people available to meet?
-   What other ways can you communicate if meeting is not possible?
-   Who needs help brainstorming before they can generate ideas?
-   Who needs help with excel formatting?
-   Who is good at planning and keeping people (respectfully) on track?
-   Who is good at details and proof-reading?
-   Etc.

# Communication tools

-   **Plan** your discussion
    -   Which approach fits the situation?
    -   What are the issues to be resolved for you? For the others?
    -   What would be a good time, a good place to discuss this?

-   Identify the **joint problem** to be resolved
    -   e.g. How to get assignment two done together and more effectively?
-   Focus on **interests** (needs, priorities, strengths, fears, constraints,…) rather than positions
-   **Separate** the people from the problem.
    -   e.g. **Rather than blaming**: "You didn`t show up at meetings!", **try problem-solving**: "What is a good time to meet? How else could we stay in touch about progress?"
-   Ask **open-ended questions**: What? How? When?
-   **Listen** carefully
-   Keep your **mind open**
-   Be **creative** (while respecting the professor`s instructions!)
-   Identify options for **mutual gain**