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 checked assumptions. Ask open-ended questions. You will find common interests, separate interests that don`t conflict, and some competing 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**