



Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Sport: A Coaches' Practical Guide

This guide aims to :

- 1) Defining conflicts, risk factors and potential outcomes,
- 2) Understanding controlling and violent behaviours in conflict,
- 3) Debunking myths on conflict prevention and resolution,
- 4) Sharing individual and relational strategies for conflict prevention and resolution.

2nd
edition

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Foster understanding of conflict in sport

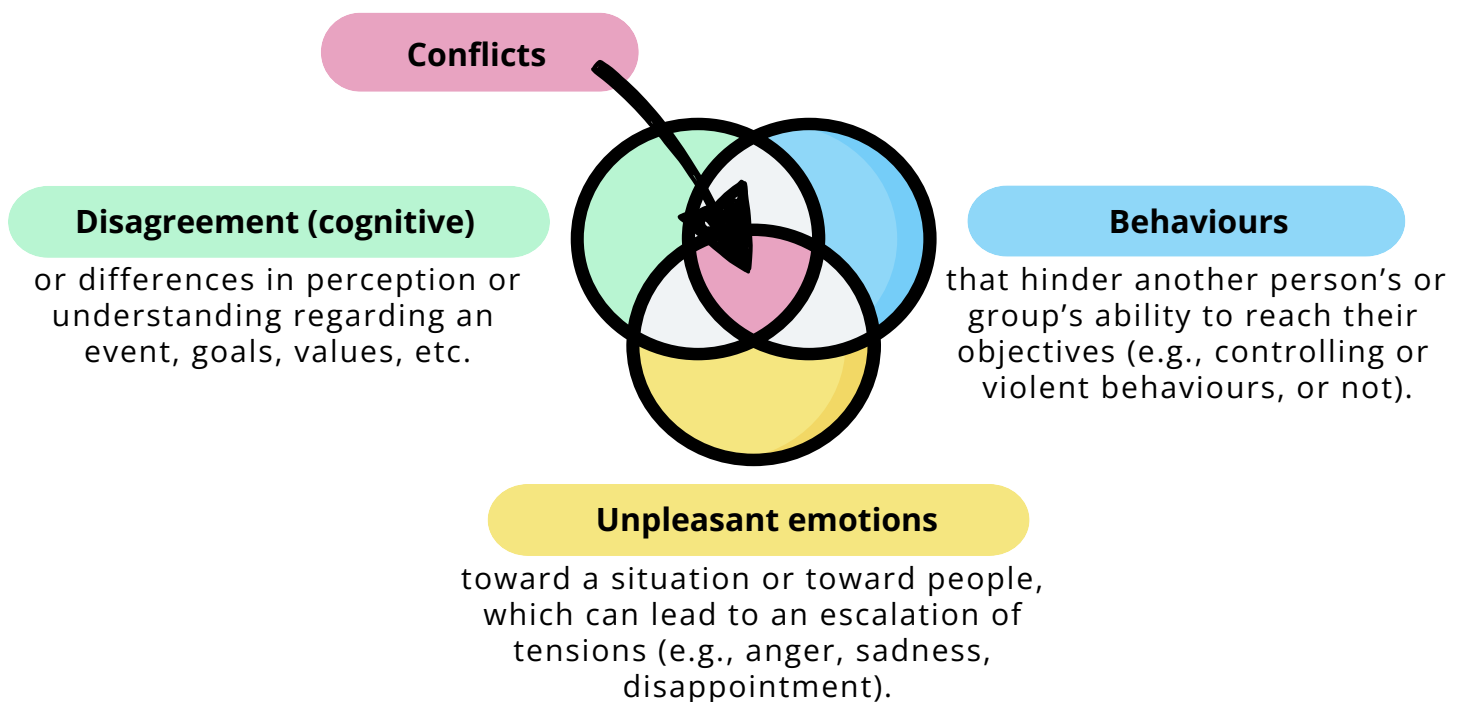
The sport environment involves **stressful situations** (e.g., team selections, qualifications, or championships). These **can lead to tensions and conflicts** between the individuals involved (e.g., athletes, coaches, parents, officials) or between groups of people (e.g., sports teams).

This guide will focus on managing conflicts within teams, particularly those arising between athletes and between athletes and their coaches.

What is a conflict in sport?

Conflicts can arise in a variety of sport contexts (e.g., training, tournaments) or outside of sports (e.g., social activities, transportation, social media).

Conflicts occur when **three conditions are met**: a **perceived disagreement** that elicits **unpleasant emotional** reactions and **behaviours** that interfere with the achievement of personal or shared goals.



Behaviours that occur during conflicts are **not automatically controlling or violent**. Sometimes, behaviours that were not intended to harm another person, or behaviours that were well-intentioned, can still harm another person, for example:

- 1) during a close game, an athlete changes positions and takes a teammate's position to help their team, or
- 2) an athlete wanting to be helpful by going to the coach to talk about something concerning another athlete without their consent.



Conflicts may evolve (**dynamic process**), meaning they can change over time, recur (frequency), and vary in intensity.

Conflicts are generally related to a:

- **task or performance:** differences of opinion about objectives, ways of achieving objectives, training programs, punctuality at training sessions, dissatisfaction with results,
- **interpersonal tension:** power and responsibility relationships between the people involved, personality clashes, communication styles, clique formation within a team.

Unresolved conflicts can lead to **physiological reactions** (e.g., physical pain, increased heart rate, skin reactions).

Bullying or conflict? Two ways to differentiate between them:



1) Bullying behaviours are part of the violent behaviours that can occur in a conflict, but they do not constitute a conflict in themselves. For a conflict to exist, three essential elements must be present: disagreement, negative emotions, and behaviours that interfere.

2) Bullying reflects one person's power over another (unidirectional), while conflict involves the actions of at least two people or groups (bidirectional).

Factors that may influence conflicts

Conflicts do not arise in isolated situations; they are often influenced by a combination of **individual**, **relational**, and **organizational** factors.

1- Individual factors

They refer to the person's characteristics, such as education, personality, temperament, beliefs, skills, etc.

Some factors are stable (e.g., gender, personality, attachment style), while others vary depending on the situation (e.g., sense of efficacy, self-confidence, perceived competence, fear of failure, previous experience with conflict).

2- Relational factors

They represent interactions between people and affect the quality of relationships (e.g., misunderstandings, communication, power dynamics, adversity, rivalry).

In the case of **conflict between coaches and athletes**, the following may be observed:

- 1) Low and negative engagement in the relationship, possibly accompanied by detachment, distance, frustration, or rejection,
- 2) Power struggles and oppositional behaviours instead of complementary behaviours,
- 3) Disagreements or misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities may arise when there is a lack of clear direction or when it is insufficiently defined.



For more information on **coach-athlete relationship**, [view this guide](#).

Healthy communication is essential to developing and maintaining a relationship, as well as improving closeness, commitment, and complementarity. Conversely, communication can also reflect power dynamics, which can contribute to the emergence of conflicts (e.g., shouting, distance, expressions of anger or blame). Conflicts are often caused by a lack of communication, followed by a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities.

An **authoritarian coaching strategy** (e.g., performance-focused approach, encouraged rivalry between athletes, punitive exercises after mistakes) can hinder the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and social affiliation), which can affect the relationship between coach and athlete. This type of leadership can generate resistance, defiance, or disengagement among athletes.



For more information on **motivational climates**, [view this guide](#).

3- Organisational factors

They take place in the context where individuals are involved in the conflict or their interactions with each other (e.g., sports culture, group cohesion, sports calendar, athletes' selection process, sports administrator management).

A climate that focuses more on individual interests or athletic performance can influence the quality of relationships between athletes. It is often associated with a more negative perception of interactions, less harmonious integration of individuals within the team, as well as greater sensitivity to conflict, more pronounced rivalry and greater power issues.

Conversely, good cohesion (staying united to achieve a sporting goal or to support each other as a team) contributes to conflict resolution.

The potential outcomes of conflicts

Unresolved conflicts may have negative consequences, whereas conflict resolution may be beneficial for both the people involved and the group.

Recommendations for preventing and resolving conflicts are presented later in this guide.

Outcome of unresolved conflicts

- ↑ Feelings of distress, anxiety, frustration, isolation, self-doubt,
- ↓ Satisfaction, well-being and self-confidence,
- ↑ Transfers to another team, another sport or sport dropout.

Individual (People involved)

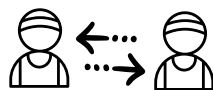


Beneficial effects of resolved conflicts

- ↑ Motivation and problem solving (link to the guide on motivational climate),
- ↑ Resilience,
- ↑ Interpersonal skills.

- Relationship breakdown,
- Bullying,
- ↓ Respect and trust towards others, etc.,
- Presence of subgroups (cliques),
- ↓ Team cohesion.

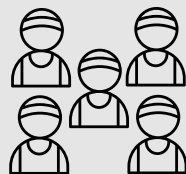
Relational (On the relationship between people involved)



- ↑ Cohesion between people,
- ↑ Communication,
- ↑ Openness to others,
- Shared vision.

- ↓ Quality of the sport culture and sporting,
- ↓ Performance of the group,
- ↓ Stability within the group.

Organizational (Context of the people involved)



- ↑ Sports culture,
- ↑ Healthy and safe sports environment,
- ↑ Overall sports performance

Controlling and violent behaviours in conflict

During conflicts, **behaviours aimed at preventing a person or group from achieving their goal(s) can become controlling or violent**. Such behaviours, whether committed in person or online, can cause, prolong or intensify a conflict:

- **Psychological** violence (e.g., shouting, excessive criticism, spreading rumours, derogatory remarks, ignoring someone, negative body language),
- **Physical** violence (e.g., shaking, hitting, striking with the hand or an object).



For more information on **forms of violence**, [view this guide](#).

In situations of conflict between athletes

In situations of conflict between athletes, certain behaviours may take the form of banter or escalate into bullying:

1- Banter:

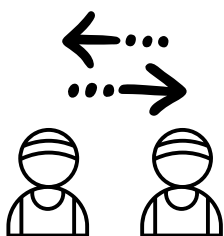
- Reciprocal (bidirectional) behaviours involving **gestures, insults or teasing jokes**, such as two athletes giving each other nicknames,
- These tend to be tolerated because they are **presented as jokes**.



However, when these are one-way, repetitive, used to maintain social status or avoid punishment, it is more a case of bullying.

2- Bullying:

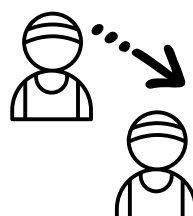
- A series of intentional, aggressive and **repeated** behaviours towards a person, in the event of a **real or perceived power imbalance**, and when that person feels vulnerable and powerless to defend themselves:
 - **Physical** (hitting, kicking and destruction of property)
 - **Psychological**, such as verbal (teasing, insults and threats) or relational (spreading rumours and exclusion from a group).
- Bullying can be committed **in person or online** (cyberbullying).



Banter

Bidirectional

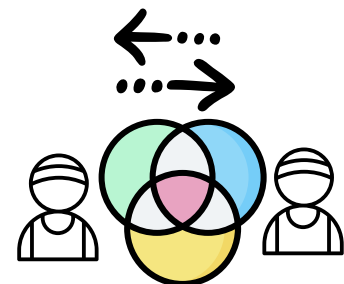
Insults or jokes presented as teasing



Bullying

Unidirectional

Intentional, repeated, aggressive behaviour showing a power imbalance



Conflicts

Bidirectional

Presence of disagreement, unpleasant emotions, and controlling or violent behaviours

Debunking myths on conflict prevention and resolution

Myth: Conflicts are caused solely by personality issues, so there is nothing that can be done about them.



Although conflicts can be caused by **individual factors** (e.g., personality and temperament), a combination of **relational** factors (e.g., communication, leadership, relationships) and **organizational** factors (e.g., sport culture, sport calendar, selection) is often at the root of conflicts.

It is possible to promote the creation of a **sporting climate that encourages respect** between individuals in a group and **healthy, constructive communication**. This helps to prevent conflicts from arising.

Myth: In a united team or club, there are never any conflicts.



Even in the most cohesive sports teams, conflicts can arise. Group cohesion does not guarantee that there will never be disagreements, but rather that the team will find it easier to manage them in a healthy and constructive manner.

Myth: Conflicts are necessary for athletic performance because it puts athletes in opposition to one another and pushes them to improve.



Athletes already experience adversity in sport, which can lead to conflicts. There is no need to create situations that can cause conflict, such as promoting competition between athletes.

Unresolved conflicts can harm those involved (e.g., feelings of anxiety, isolation, decreased self-confidence, decreased individual athletic performance) and **the group** (e.g., lack of group cohesion, lack of respect, broken relationships).

Resolved conflicts can have beneficial effects for a team and its members. **Non-violent conflict resolution** leads to greater openness to others, better communication and, as a result, greater cohesion within the team.

Myth: Conflicts are resolved through harsh, and punitive measures.

Authoritarian coaching strategies (e.g., punitive measures, shouting, blaming) may directly target individuals, which may escalate and fuel conflicts.

Authoritarian strategies may also create a sporting performance environment in which power differences are amplified and trust and openness are diminished. This affects the ability to find mutually acceptable solutions.



To resolve conflict, it is preferable to adopt open communication, active listening, and identify the object of the conflict (i.e., rather than targeting the person(s)) through non-violent communication (detailed in the following section).

Myth: It is not the coach's job to intervene in conflicts between athletes.

The behaviours present during conflict between athletes may be committed by athletes, but it **can also be influenced, perpetrated or maintained by people in authority behaviours** (e.g., favouritism, punishing mistakes, interfering in athletes' lives).

It is important for coaches to intervene in conflicts to **defuse issues and prevent escalation** (e.g., enforcing a zero-tolerance policy or code of conduct for controlling or violent behaviour).



Coaches have a **role to play in establishing a sport culture** that teaches what is acceptable and unacceptable within the team, even outside of sport.



A sport culture is a set of values, beliefs and attitudes that determines what is acceptable and influences behaviours and interactions between people.

For more information on **sport culture**, [view this guide](#).

Guidelines for conflict prevention and resolution

To effectively prevent and manage conflicts, it is essential to take action at two stages: before a conflict arises (prevention) and during a conflict (resolution).

Prevention: working on climate and interpersonal relationships

You can act before conflicts arise by promoting a **climate** of openness and healthy **interpersonal relationships**. This makes it easier for people to commit to constructive behaviours. The following strategies can be implemented at any time, but it is best to do so at the beginning of the season.

Act on team cohesion and climate (targeting the group)

Set up **team activities** to promote team cohesion focusing on:

- **Objectives and tasks** to rally people around the group's goal:
 - activities related to team rules (e.g., expected behaviours),
 - roles and responsibilities (e.g., coach and athletes),
 - a common goal (e.g., sporting goal for the season),
 - a group identity (e.g., team or club values),
- **Interpersonal relationships** to strengthen cohesion between individuals through formal or informal social activities (e.g., team dinner).

Daily, build trust by promoting **open and positive communication**, being available and transparent, and creating a community where people can support each other.

Acting on interpersonal relationships (targeting behaviours):

Adopt **supportive and reassuring behaviours** towards athletes (e.g., encouragement, support during an injury).

Focus on behaviours to be changed, not the person. Feedback should include a specific description of the behaviour, the reasons why it is not acceptable, and how to respond to meet expectations.



"During the last training, I noticed that you made negative comments to others when they were experiencing difficulties. Comments like these can undermine team cohesion and hurt your teammates. I encourage you to support them when they are experiencing difficulties instead."



For more information on **feedback**, [view this guide](#).

Be open to others by sharing personal concerns and being **empathetic** (e.g., active listening, sharing perspectives).

Guide athletes to manage adversity and improve their resilience to help them adapt to the demands of the sporting environment, which can increase with age and sporting experience.

Resolving conflicts: taking action during a conflict

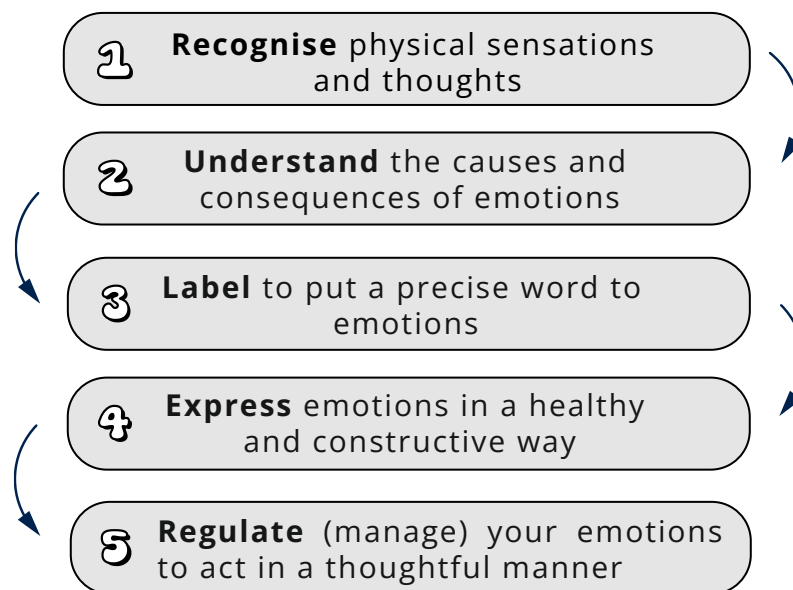
Conflicts can arise in any group. Knowing how to resolve them is therefore an essential skill. To do so, individual and relational strategies are possible.



A golden rule is to intervene quickly to prevent the conflict from escalating.

1 *Individual strategies: step back to deal with your emotions*

Before resolving conflicts, it is important to apply the **5 steps of emotional regulation**:



Coaches can **promote this emotional regulation** by:

- Helping athletes recognize, understand and label their emotions (e.g., validating athletes' emotions, asking open-ended questions),
- Fostering a safe and positive environment (e.g., demonstrating commitment, providing clear and constructive feedback, allowing athletes to express themselves),
- Taking action to help athletes with emotional regulation (e.g., providing a place to calm down and setting technical, strategic or effort-related process goals).



For more information on **emotional regulation**, [view this guide](#).

Each person reacts differently to conflict and manages it in their own way. Some prefer to avoid it, while others seek to negotiate or confront the situation directly. It is important to know:

- 1) **your usual reactions** to conflict to identify what can trigger emotions. This promotes emotional regulation,
- 2) **other possible styles of conflict management** to adapt to different situations and anticipate possible impacts (e.g., athletes' reactions).



Some strategies are generally recommended, while others may be useful in very specific situations. It is therefore essential to be aware of the **different types of conflict management** to choose the most appropriate approach ([Thomas-Kilmann method](#)).

Conflict-handling strategies	Objectives	Situations in which these strategies can be applied	Disadvantages
Competing	To gain from a conflict at the expense of another. <i>I win, you lose.</i>	Acting in urgent situations, or when boundaries are crossed (e.g., an argument between two people involving violent behaviours).	Create tension if used too frequently or in non-urgent situations.
Avoiding	Sidestepping the conflict. <i>I loose, you lose.</i>	During minor conflicts or to take a step back if emotions are running high (e.g., choosing not to intervene when people are talking to each other during instructions if it is not causing too much disruption).	The conflict may persist or worsen.
Accommodating	Avoiding escalation of the conflict and preserving relations. <i>I lose, you win.</i>	Show goodwill or when the other party has clear expertise on the subject of the conflict (e.g., when an athlete or coach realises they have made a mistake or taken a wrong decision).	Possible frustrations if personal needs are neglected.
Collaborating	Finding a win-win solution, a consensus. <i>I win, you win.</i>	Promote lasting relationships, find new solutions (e.g., a team review of a game to discuss a conflict and find a solution together)	Requires time, communication and trust from those involved.
Compromising	Make compromises (accept concessions or agree on common ground). <i>I gain a little, you gain a little.</i>	Equal power between individuals, temporary solution or when running out time (e.g., a coach who disagrees with the referee's decision and decides to discuss it after the match).	Lose some of one's personal interests.

Relational strategies : adopting a non-violent communication approach

To resolve a conflict, you can engage in a one-on-one discussion with the other person involved or plan a structured conflict resolution meeting.



In any case, it is important to adopt a **non-violent communication** approach. To facilitate discussions, it is advisable to prepare the following points in advance:

Observation : Describe facts without judgement.

Focus on the reason for the conflict (e.g., defeat, inadequate warm-ups) with the people involved. Although this can be unsettling, it is the first step in conflict resolution.



- Athlete to athlete: *"In the changing room yesterday, I heard you criticizing my performance in front of the whole team, shouting that it was my fault we lost"*.
- Coach to athlete: *"During warm-ups, I noticed that you were disturbing your teammates by making them laugh instead of preparing yourself"*.

Feelings: Describe your emotions.



- Athlete to athlete: *"I was angry and sad, and I felt humiliated"*.
- Coach to athlete: *"I was angry and stressed"*.

Needs: Express your needs.



- Athlete to athlete: *"I need to be respected even if I make a mistake or have a bad game"*.
- Coach to athlete: *"I need to be confident that athletes are warming up properly before a game"*.

Request: Make a clear request and show openness to the other person's requests.

This helps to resolve conflict together (agreement on common goals and behavioural expectations).



- Athlete to athlete: *"I would like you to refrain from shouting at me. This is true even if I make a mistake. Please speak to me privately if something is bothering you"*.
- Coach to athlete: *"I would like you to do the planned warm-up routines to avoid injury during a game"*.

In non-violent communication, it is important to **communicate using "I"** statements, describing how you feel (emotions, needs and requests) rather than blaming others.



The "I" communication method encourages listening rather than confrontation and helps to resolve conflicts collaboratively.

Organising a five-step **conflict resolution meeting** helps to ensure clear, effective and respectful exchanges (see p. 17 for an example):

- 1 Prepare for the meeting:**
Identify the people involved and find the best setting for the meeting (place, time, etc.),
- 2 Open the meeting :**
Clarify the subject of the conflict and the rules of the meeting,
- 3 Give people space to express themselves:**
Take turns speaking, encourage listening to others,
- Work together to find a solution:**
Find a mutual solution or compromise, which prevents conflicts from escalating. If the parties cannot agree, it is possible to suggest another meeting (to allow them to take a step back) or to call on citizen mediation resources*,
- 5 Conclude the meeting:**
Summarise the meeting and define the expected behaviour going forward.



During these meetings, it is essential that everyone feels listened to and respected. If the **conflict escalates or controlling or violent behaviour occurs, the meeting must be interrupted**. Continuing the meeting despite controlling or violent behaviour can send the message that such behaviour is tolerated, which is detrimental to the safety, atmosphere and resolution of the conflict.

*If necessary, for structured conflict resolution meetings, it may be preferable to call on a mediator. **Citizen mediation or alternative justice** services can help in cases where the conflict cannot be resolved.

Anyone facilitating such a meeting must **respect and enforce two principles:**

- Promote non-violent communication (observe, feel, express a need and a request),
- Adopt a neutral approach (do not take sides with any person or group).

The **presence of an external person** (e.g., captain, veteran athletes, staff members, sports manager, sports psychologist, and parents). This person acting as can:

- Provide **emotional support to the athlete in managing the stress** that this type of meeting can cause,
- **Vent unpleasant emotions,**
- Reduce friction, and temper discussions.

In the case of a minor athlete, the presence of parents is not automatically required. However, it is recommended that parents be informed that this type of meeting will take place.

Want to learn more?

Find some useful resources below to help you learn more about conflict prevention and resolution.

Practical guides for coaches



[Click here](#)

Conflict-handling strategies

[Click here](#)

Non-violent communication

[Click here](#)

Fact sheet on communication and interpersonal relations

[Click here](#)

Citizen mediation

[Click here](#)

Putting it into practice

Structured meeting framework for conflict resolution



1 Prepare for the meeting

Examples

- Identify the people involved and a third party if necessary,
- Determine the optimal meeting framework.

Find a neutral location that allows for confidential discussions.

Determine a time and duration that suits both parties.

2 Open the meeting

Examples



- Welcome everyone and thank them for attending,
- Specify the purpose of the meeting,
- Identify the subject of the conflict related to a task (e.g., defeat) or related to a social conflict (e.g., incompatibility),
- State the rules of the meeting and non-violent communication.

"Hi, and thank you for being here today."

"The goal is to allow everyone to express themselves and work together to find solutions."

"We are going to discuss the events that took place in the locker room after last Sunday's defeat."

"To ensure that the meeting runs smoothly, please respect the speaking order such as listen when others are speaking. I also ask that you speak in the first person, share facts without judgement, and remain calm."

3 Give people the opportunity to share their views

Examples



- Let people share their version of events,
- Invite people to share their emotions and needs,
- Identify the repercussions for people,
- Identify common ground.

"What happened? What did you observe?"

"How did you feel? What are your needs?"

"What were the consequences of this conflict for you?"

"I notice that you experienced unpleasant emotions (e.g., anger, sadness) related to the event (e.g., defeat)."



Seek a solution

Examples

- Invite people to share possible solutions,
"What solutions could help resolve the conflict? What can each of you do to resolve the conflict? What do you want?"
- Check whether people are comfortable with the proposed solutions,
"What compromise are you comfortable with?"
- If people cannot reach an agreement:
 - another meeting can be scheduled to give those involved time to step back and reflect,
"I can see that this is a tough discussion. To allow everyone to take a breath, I suggest we reschedule the meeting and come back to it with a clear head."
 - It is also possible to seek out specialised mediation resources.
"I can see that this is a tough discussion. To facilitate communication and find a solution, I suggest that we consult a mediator. This impartial person will be able to identify possible solutions. Would you be open to this option?"



Conclude the meeting

Examples

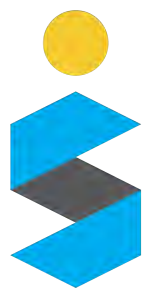
- Summarise the meeting,
The subject of the conflict, facts, everyone's emotions, accepted solutions
- Define the expected behaviour going forward and schedule a follow-up meeting if applicable,
"From today onwards, I ask that you talk to each other when you disagree, and that you do so with calm and respect. If a situation arises, take a moment to step back and let the tension subside."
- Thank the participants for their involvement.
"Thank you for participating in the meeting. I know it is not an easy meeting, and I appreciate your commitment and efforts."

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