

Conflict Resolution: Community and the Environment

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INTRODUCTION

The dictionary defines conflict as a sharp disagreement or incompatible behaviour.

When individuals or groups have differences of opinion about catchment management, or compete for the use of natural resources it usually ends up with conflict.

Conflict can occur over all sorts of things such as the validity of data and information or it may involve friction based solely on personality differences. Conflicts are often territorial over who controls what. It certainly occurs between government agencies and sections of the community when it comes to environmental management.

Yet conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. It's a natural by-product of the strength of our feelings and our passion about an issue. For effective management these conflicts should not be suppressed or ignored. However, it takes great skill to handle conflict well and achieve an equitable outcome.

It is clear that natural resources are limited and rival claims for their use or conservation are going to be common. Conflict can occur as a result of the differing values people place on the environment. It may involve vested interests or credibility. Even our differing level of awareness can cause conflict.

Examples, and there are many, include:

- development versus conservation;
- extractive industries versus habitat protection;
- competing demands for access to resources;
- acid sulphate runoff from farms causing fish kills;
- commercial versus recreational fishing;
- the allocation and cost of water supplies;
- logging versus national parks.

So what is happening that's leading to all these conflicts? Why is it that decision makers always seem to be involved in bitter disputes with the community over the environment?

Perhaps we should look at some of the things we can do to create chaos, and then try and avoid them.

Playing with misinformation

Putting out misleading facts or interpretations of the data. The community grapevine can create chaos in a very short time with the wrong information.

□ area of overlap



Taken Direct from DAY
Answer 'Waste' tapes 45
without acknowledgement
in text.

Don't talk to the community, and keep a few secrets

If you hear something of value to your 'enemies'. don't tell them. Keep it to yourself. You will succeed in being alienated and left out of everything.

Establish multiple groups

Get several teams working on the same thing and don't tell them about each other. Keep them in the dark.

Allow personality conflict to develop

Put two people who hate each other on the same team. Allow the friction to grow and worry about it later. Let disputes drag on and let festering wounds develop.

Deliver overnight decisions

Release an overnight policy strike and then see who loves you. Newcastle increased the price of water overnight and caused a major public outcry. In the long run it worked itself out.

Neglect the Environment in the 90's

Do lots of cursory stuff and hand out brown paper bags filled with glossy brochures. Don't mention the environment in any of your strategic plans or annual reports.

Play with the media

Let anyone talk to the media, especially if you are in a delicate political position. Encourage multiple press leaks. Attack ministers through the media.

Be indecisive

Don't make hard decisions too quickly, or don't make them at all! Let community groups complain about an issue for years. Show some healthy indifference. Sit behind your desk and decide not to worry about it. Make sure you indicate all sorts of possibilities to everyone and see what happens.

Encourage Ministers to sit on controversial reports

Hide everything and believe that the media won't find out. No-one would possibly leak it; they all love you, don't they?

Raise expectations and don't deliver

Ask the community what they want, raise their hopes and then say they can't have it because it costs too much.

Stick to antiquated legislation and procedures

Don't amend them, and hide behind all their complexities.

These are just a few. I'm sure we can all think of lots more. If you pursue just a couple of these, you can usually end up with a bun fight in no time at all and a very disgruntled community.

WAYS TO AVOID UNNECESSARY CONFLICT

So, what can be done to avoid or minimise conflicts?

You could avoid creating chaos in the first instance.

The main thing appears to be communication. Talking to people, even if it's an informal yarn, with or without a beer. Develop informal networks and strike up a friendly association with your opponents before war breaks out.

The other thing is listening. It's no use setting up a community network or liaison group if you are not going to listen to what they are saying.

The third is to take notice of what is being said and take action.

Other ways include:

Appropriate structures

Adopting clearly stated policies and procedures which have the support of all concerned.

Climate

People are much more likely to agree with a decision if they have been involved. Open communication should be practised all the time to avoid misunderstandings and address conflicts before they become entrenched.

Wider Involvement

It is important to involve all the stakeholders and facilitate wider community participation.

Awareness

Awareness campaigns can provide valuable information about the problem and the solutions being considered

These are just the basics. I'll talk about some of these approaches in more detail later with a case study example.

THE REALITY

Let's be realistic about conflicts and admit that they are still going to occur no matter what we do. There are always going to be those wildcat conflicts that no-one could pre-empt and that are likely to go on and on, no matter what.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLES

Let's look at some of the different styles of conflict resolution and consider their appropriateness for different situations. Some people may want to share their experiences with these styles. Simplistically, there tend to be five common approaches described in the literature.

1. **Competition**

People often adopt a blind competitive approach. They want to win at any cost. Often they don't care that their needs are met at the expense of others. This lack of co-operation is usually very assertive and is often seen as being aggressive. It usually ends up in a win-lose outcome. Relations between the people usually

become embittered and everyone ultimately loses out. It requires a great deal of strength not to respond in kind to someone else's competitive approach.

2. Avoidance

Avoidance is unassertive behaviour. It's also unco-operative. It is where people avoid the issue rather than seeking to resolve it. It can sometimes be used as an approach when emotions are running high, as it can allow tempers to cool down. However, as a permanent strategy, ignoring the conflict often increases it. Instead of helping it to go away, it makes matters worse. Avoidance often leads to ineffectiveness.

3. Accommodation

Merely giving in to someone else's solution is co-operative but unassertive. It means putting the other party's needs above your own even when your own are important. If the other organisation happens to be a government department with a great deal of power then you may have no other choice.

On the other hand, if we are less concerned about the outcome than the other party is, it may be an approach that provides long term goodwill that may make the sacrifice worthwhile.

4. Compromise

If both parties are committed to mutually exclusive goals, they can at least partially fulfil their needs by coming to some sort of compromise. This is where each side gives a little bit and gets a bit in return. It can be a useful temporary solution to a very complex or lengthy conflict.

5. Problem Solving

Problem solving is generally the most appropriate approach to adopt for resource management conflicts even though it often requires assertiveness to ensure that all the needs and concerns of the stakeholders are addressed.

Problem solving can avoid unnecessary compromises if the time resources and level of commitment permit. It involves generating more creative solutions that people will be more likely to implement because they have been involved in their development.

Problem-solving includes:

- admitting that a conflict exists
- identifying the values, interests and needs of all parties involved
- developing options with the other party and identifying the likely consequences both positive and negative
- selecting the options that best meet the needs of those involved
- co-operatively implementing the options chosen and evaluating the results

Each of the five different styles have their place. Each can be useful in particular situations. The skill involves knowing which one is the more appropriate.

The problem solving approach is optimum for generating creative solutions that best meet the needs of all concerned. However, in some situations it can be useful to compromise so that you can reach an agreement that is mutually acceptable as well as partially satisfying.

Avoidance also has its place, particularly if time and resources are not available to reach a permanent resolution. Even competition and accommodation may be appropriate if power or politics are major unresolvable issues.

The real objective is to stretch and expand our capacity to handle conflict by being flexible and adopting whatever style best suits the situation.