

New South Wales  
Department of Water Resources

**C O N F L I C T :**  
**CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS**

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CONFLICT: CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS\*

	PAGES
WATER PROBLEMS	1
CAUSING CONFLICT	2
AVOIDING OR SOLVING CONFLICT	4
THE REALITY	6
REFERENCES	7

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## CONFLICT: CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

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Conflict can be seen as any incompatible behaviour between government agencies, sections of a department, between state governments or between individuals at a personal level. People or groups frequently have different interests.

Conflicts can be over the validity of data or indeed comprise friction based on personality differences. Conflicts can also be territorial, over which agency controls what. Conflicts certainly occur from time to time between an agency and its clients or stakeholders.

### WATER PROBLEMS

For example the national water industry is a multi-billion dollar social investment and it deals with a number of problems. Here are some of them:-

- ◆ Unpredictable hydrology. We get floods, droughts, pollution events and can't really predict these. So we get into hot water with people who want more water, or much less, better water or water at a different place or time.
- ◆ Thirsty clients. Most of our clients are thirsty - they want water, usually as much as they can have. And we get more calls for water every day. Conflicts arise here. People don't like not getting water.
- ◆ Catchment control aggressions. Sometimes there are little inter-departmental scuffles about who has jurisdiction over catchments or land uses or land rehabilitation.
- ◆ Water allocation. This is always a problem - some farming communities want more water and more security of supply. Metropolitan consumers expect water whenever they need it, a high security supply. Conflicts arise immediately when water gets shut off.

- ◆ Cost and quality crises. All water management organisations have ongoing worries about contamination accidents and problems as well as river, lake and estuarine water quality. Cost fights break out now and then especially as prices for water rise.
- ◆ Multiple water use demands. This means that conflicts occur regularly as new users want part of the water action.
- ◆ Efficiency purges mean less money to achieve agency goals, also less staff. This creates friction as water programs are curtailed. Increasing accountability to central government and infrastructure deterioration costs cause the jitters in many a boardroom.
- ◆ Riverine resource degradation is one area of concern to water agencies along with sewerage and industrial pollution mega issues particularly related to Sydney but as well to other coastal and inland cities.

### CAUSING CONFLICT

Now let us see what might have caused conflicts in managing water. These examples can apply to many non-watery management environments:

- ◆ Play with mis-information. Put out misleading facts, intentions or interpretations to another agency, another manager or to your teams. You can use a network/grapevine to really create chaos in a short time.
- ◆ Never talk to other parties. Keep a few secrets too! If you hear something that has value to your enemies don't tell them. Keep to yourself and don't interact with others. You will end up successfully being alienated and left out of just about everything.
- ◆ Have multiple unconsulted groups in your agency. Get a few teams to work on the same project, but don't let them know about each other for a long time. If another department has a similar team, do not make contact.
- ◆ Allow internal dissension and personality conflicts. Put two people who hate each other on the same project. Get discordant personalities to

work together and allow friction to grow unabated. Worry about it later. Similarly, let inter-section disputes drag on and let fester ongoing wounds with a closely related agency.

- ◆ Deliver overnight policy strikes and see who loves you then. Newcastle increased the price of water overnight and created a major public controversy.
- ◆ Neglect the environment in the 1990's. Inside the agency, or corporation, make no mention of environment in annual reports. Do lots of cursory stuff. Hand out brown paper bags but don't bring environment anywhere near your corporate plan. Strategically plan without considering environmental ramifications.
- ◆ Play with the media all the time, especially if your group is in a very delicate political situation. Let all staff chat to the media. Encourage multiple leaks to the press. Attack your own minister through the media. Do not waste money training staff on media liaison.
- ◆ Be indecisive. Don't make hard decisions quickly. Don't make them at all! Allow community groups to complain for years about their local concerns. Show a bit of healthy indifference. Put your corporate head in the bucket - or sit at your desk and decide not to worry about it. Indicate possibilities to everyone.
- ◆ Encourage your Minister to sit on controversial reports. Hide everything you can and believe the media won't get it. It won't be leaked by your staff. They all love you - don't they?
- ◆ Leave your guiding legislation on the shelf. Do not amend it - let it sit in all its old complexity. Do not refine or enhance. Allow tangles to develop.

If you pursue some of the above either corporately or individually you may get a few bun fights, interpersonal conflicts or even sackings.

## AVOIDING OR SOLVING CONFLICT

So, now to some tried and tested avoidance and fixing approaches to conflict - proven by the water sector in a number of contexts but also relevant to other situations.

- ◆ You could reverse the above causes where relevant.
- ◆ Communicate.
- ◆ You could bluff the opposition. It can work, but not always. For example you could tell two warring clients that unless they patched things up your group would no longer be able to assist or give future support. Even though you are bound by legislation and policy to support them.
- ◆ Have an informal yarn with or without beer. Chat to your disaffected staff member. Have an informal afternoon tea discussion with the other agency. Ring up your opposite number and strike up a friendly association before war breaks out. Develop many informal friendly networks at all levels in your organisation and others.
- ◆ Now and then call your working team together for a 10 minute impromptu discussion or information sharing session. Make people feel involved.
- ◆ Get your Minister to intervene or set up a Ministerial Review. Direct ministerial intervention can work wonders. It may not be in your agencies favour - but suited to your scallywag clients. A Ministerial Review can appease community groups, initially. It can bring all interests together and extend the dialogue between them, and, it might fix the problem.
- ◆ Establish a peak forum of agencies with a common interest. For example the NSW Water Resources Council brings all water interests together to exchange information and co-operate on new policy development.

- ◆ Use multi-player workshops for key problems. Bring in all agencies and community groups relevant. Even ask the few hidden but relevant specialists left inside your organisation along to the workshop. Dig them out and use them - not the vociferous linear thinkers you usually do. It must be well run.
- ◆ Devolve power/responsibility in your office. Bring your work teams together to own the project outcome. Give more information to community groups and let them become more responsible for their own streams, catchments, soil etc.
- ◆ Make sure you have all the right data for your project or policy. Have all relevant information at hand and be familiar with it. Get it right - or you will be shot down.
- ◆ Communicate more frequently.
- ◆ Put out early discussion papers to the public or affected groups. Make the papers available and seek out those who might be interested. Spread the word. Circulate material to your staff or other colleagues (unless you want more conflicts or to pander to your self serving agenda).
- ◆ Listen.
- ◆ Increase your community consultation programs. Really involve the community. Establish some structures that see that this happens. Start thinking about social impact assessment in relation to your agency projects. Find out what it is first. Allow public consultation to feed into your management decisions. Ask your colleagues/staff about their views before you act. Find some good sounding boards. Even rotten enemies may be good sounding boards in the right circumstances.
- ◆ Recognise the wider self interest of all those you interact with. Everyone has their own wheelbarrow piled up with problems. Acknowledge some of these and half their problems will disappear. It helps everyone.

- ◆ Bring some conflict resolution expertise into the fabric of corporate life. Not smarty technical consultants who wouldn't know a fight if they saw one. Upgrade your skills in communication and those of others. This is a vital precursor and associate of resolving conflict.

## THE REALITY

Let's be honest though. Not all conflicts can be solved. Non-soluble and 'wild horse' conflicts still occur and keep going on and on. So there are anomalies here - as there are in all walks of life. Public participation exercises would have killed the introduction of some 'good' policies - later seen by all as vital - such as in the Newcastle water pricing case. Too much public consultation may also be a flop. Sometimes if the public sees its interests as being served it doesn't want to contribute to the process.

It would seem that the informal approaches to resolving conflicts pay high dividends - but of course these are high risk investments. A solution here is to possibly formalise the informal in dealing with other people, departments or groups. Management must indeed be more vigilant in terms of its legal and moral responsibility to the community. Slippages will be paid for sooner or later.

Increase your preparedness for implementation of management plans. This will be helped by thorough checks on data credibility and on consultative processes. Always recheck those consultative processes for changes in the wind as everything involves dealing with people. Gaining confidence and co-operation is vital to success.

FURTHER MORE SERIOUS REFERENCES

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