Dispute Resolution Workshop

Agenda

Understanding Conflict

Personal Conflict Style (Exercise)

Managing Conflict

- Active Listening
- Positions/Interests
- Reframing

Meetings Tips

Drivers of Behavior

- Anger is often rooted in fear
  - Fear of change, loss, or harm
- Fear is amplified by a perceived lack of control over one's environment or future
- Emotional distress is real, even when the fear or anger appears unjustified
- Strong emotional expression may be a coping mechanism when individuals feel unheard or powerless
- Escalation is often driven by increasing vulnerability, not just hostility
- As fear intensifies, behavior may become irrational or even dangerous

Why Conflict Escalates

- People have different beliefs about right and wrong, justice and injustice
- Conflicting values and threatened core beliefs fuel division
- Clashing worldviews make mutual understanding difficult
- Old relationship patterns can keep people stuck in cycles of blame
- Some don't want resolution, they want revenge

Typical Escalation Pattern:

→ Problem emerges

→ Sides form

→ Positions harden

→ Communication breaks down
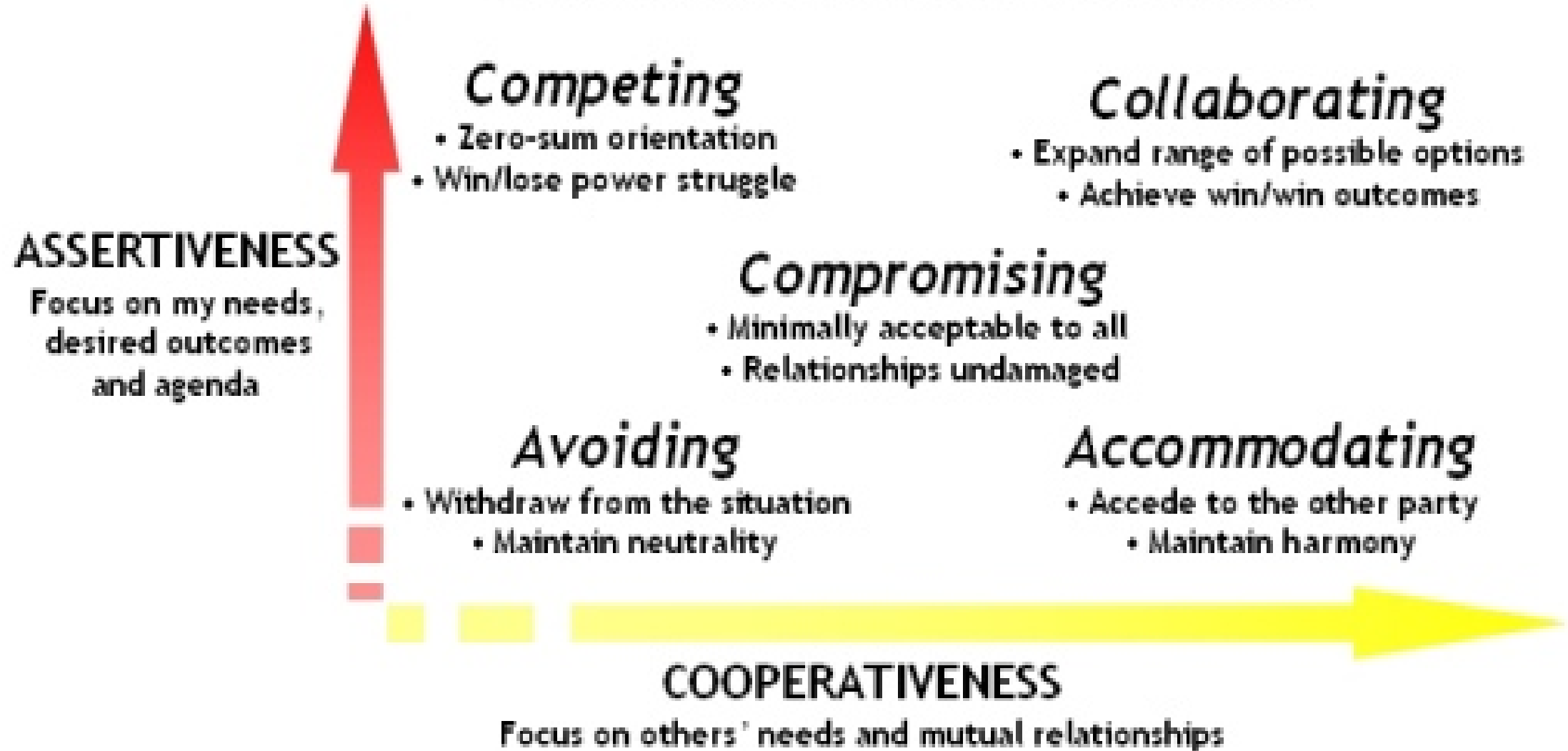
→ Perceptions distort

→ Crisis follows

Self-Awareness

Exercise: Conflict Styles Worksheet

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Modes

ASSERTIVENESS
Focus on my needs, desired outcomes and agenda

Competing
• Zero-sum orientation
• Win/lose power struggle

Collaborating
• Expand range of possible options
• Achieve win/win outcomes

Compromising
• Minimally acceptable to all
• Relationships undamaged

Avoiding
• Withdraw from the situation
• Maintain neutrality

Accommodating
• Accede to the other party
• Maintain harmony

COOPERATIVENESS
Focus on others' needs and mutual relationships

Communication Styles

Is it harmful or just different?

- Is someone being disrespected or demeaned?
- Are needs or concerns being ignored?
- Is the communication style preventing progress?
- Have others expressed discomfort too?
- Is there power imbalance that makes it hard to speak up?
- Is this a pattern, not a one-time thing?

Managing Conflict

IT'S **NOT** ABOUT THE NAIL

Active Listening

Listen Calmly
Avoid logic, pleading, or reacting as it often escalates things.
Be present. Help label and validate their feelings.

Empathize
Show empathy, even if you disagree.
Validate emotions, not behavior:
→ *"It sounds like you are really discouraged and that this really matters to you."*

- **Find Honest Agreement**
Don't reinforce conflict. Agree where you genuinely can.
→"This new housing development is just going to destroy our neighborhood."
→ "I agree that change can feel disruptive, especially when it affects the character of a neighborhood."

- **Acknowledge Their Perspective**
Reflect their concerns, feelings, or values to help them feel heard.

How to Look at Active Listening

Attitudes (ideally):

- I care what this person has to say
- I'm sincerely curious about how this person sees things
- I'm willing to withhold judgment and accept this person's reactions, perceptions, feelings as legitimate

Validating Emotion

- Research Study: Participants were shown images of an angry face and a scared face.

- MRI scans showed increased activity in the amygdala, the brain's danger detector, linked to the fight-or-flight response.

- When participants verbally labeled the emotion, brain activity shifted to the right prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with emotional regulation and behavioral control.

What Does This Mean for Us?

- When someone is emotional, validate it by labeling it. This helps people feel heard and begin to process their emotions.
  - *"You seem really angry about what happened."*
  - "I get the sense that you're feeling overwhelmed."

  - **Validating ≠ Agreeing**

Handling Intense Emotions

- **What Not to Do**
  - Don't shut the person down
  - Don't tell them to calm down as it usually backfires
  - Don't try to prove they're being irrational
  - Don't dismiss or minimize their concerns
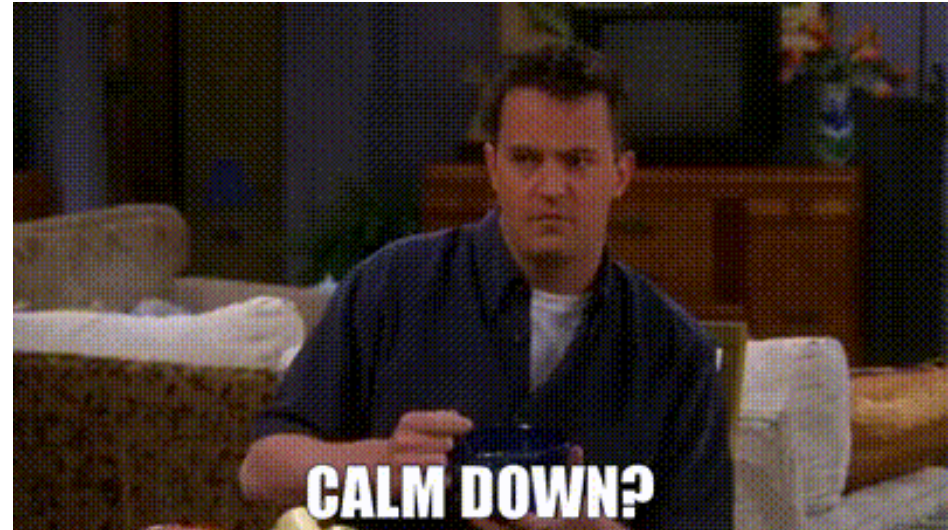
Underlying Dynamics

Positions/Interests/Issues

Position- A demand or a statement of what the outcome/solution should be

A solution to something

The "what"

Interest – What the parties need (or what drives or motivates the position)

The problem

"The why"

Can ask the question "why are you concerned about the problem" to get at interests

Issue – Matter or question that must be addressed if a conflict is to be resolved.

Negotiable items

Disputing parties have issues to share

Values

- Values tell us how the world should be.
- Shaped by family, friends, school, and life experiences.
- Asking someone to change their values is like asking them to change their sense of reality.

Key Points on Values and Conflict

- Differences in values do not have to cause conflict.
- Conflict arises when someone tries to force their value onto another.
  - *"It must be this way, not that way."*
- Never negotiate on the basis of values.

Values

What to Do:

- Listen for what is behind the words.

- Acknowledge differences in values:
  - "It is quite likely that we will all look at things differently from time to time, and that's okay. What matters is finding a solution that works for everyone as much as possible."

Differences in values can sometimes make cooperation seem unthinkable, but that doesn't mean progress is impossible.

Breakout Activity: What's Beneath the Position?

UpSide 413

Instructions:

1. Read the statement (position) on the right.

2. Ask yourself:
   1. What might this person really care about?
   2. What are they trying to protect, express, or achieve?

3. Identify:
   1. **Possible Interests** – their concerns, fears, needs, goals
   2. **Possible Values** – core beliefs or principles driving their views

- **Tip:**
  You don't have to agree with the position. You should instead try to understand where it's coming from.

Example #1
Community Member Position: "Every time a new housing development is proposed, it is in the least affluent parts of town. Why are just our homes impacted?"

Example #2

Board/Committee Member Position: "Our housing plan shows a need for more local housing, but people try to block every housing proposal without offering other solutions."

Reframing

When sitting on boards and committees, the public may express concerns in emotionally charged, accusatory, or distrustful ways.

Reframing allows you to:

- Honor the underlying concern without amplifying conflict
- Reduce defensiveness and re-center shared goals
- Build trust in emotionally complex, historically fraught conversations
- Move from blame to actionable collaboration

Reframing

- "Framing" refers to the manner in which a person describes the way they see a conflicting situation, goal, concern (interest) or issue
  - Conflict is often described in a negative manner
  - Usually accompanied by emotional content
- Reframing is a technique to re-word or re-state what the person has said more constructively

- **Reframing changes the way a thought is presented so that it maintains its fundamental meaning but is more likely to support resolution efforts.**

Reframing Strategies

De-escalate and calm

We, as listeners, can remove: Finger-pointing, blaming, single solution focus

Use neutral language

Describe the speaker's feelings, not the other person's character

Move from positions to interests

Reframing interests- what they would like to happen

Examples:

What you need...

So, it is important to you that...

What's helpful...

What you're looking for..

You would like to feel...

Turn concerns into solvable problems

Change a list of past wrongs into future goals

How to Reframe?

Instead of...

Blame ("you did this")

Accusation of past harm

Cynicism or resistance

Hostility

Personal attack

Reframe Toward...

Shared concern or unmet need

Future commitment, repair, or accountability

Desire for authenticity and results

Passion about the issue or urgency for change

Concern about power, trust, or fairness

Loaded Statement	Reframed Version
"This developer is only in it for profit. They don't care about our community."	"It sounds like you want assurance that projects genuinely serve the community and balance financial interests with local needs."
"Every time we approve a housing project, traffic and noise get worse."	"You're concerned about maintaining a safe, livable neighborhood while accommodating new housing."
"You're just rubber-stamping whatever the applicant submits."	"You want a decision-making process that feels thorough, transparent, and accountable to the community."
"The process is too complicated. Ordinary residents can't participate or understand it."	"You want a process that is clear and accessible so everyone can meaningfully engage."
"Every time we raise concerns, the board ignores them. Why should we trust you now?"	"You want a process where concerns are truly acknowledged and acted upon, so your trust can be rebuilt."

Putting Everything Together

Speaker: "Every time we raise concerns, the board ignores them. Why should we trust you now?"

Responder:

- **Reframe:** "It sounds like you are looking for a process where concerns are truly acknowledged and acted upon so that your trust can be rebuilt."

- **Check:** "Did I get that right?"

- **Acknowledge/Shared Value:** "That's a fair concern. Feeling ignored can make anyone hesitant to trust the process, and community voices should be genuinely heard and influence decisions."

- **Curious Q:** "What would help you feel confident that your input is being taken seriously this time?"

Breakout Activity

Reframe the following comments you might hear in your discussions:

1. "This funding decision is just politics. It's not about what's best for the community."

2. "You're making decisions that benefit newcomers, not long-time residents."

3. "Nothing has improved in our area despite all the promises."

Group/Pair Activity: For each, reframe it in a way that:

- Removes blame or negativity

- Names the core value, concern, or need

- Pulls out the interests and moves away from positions

What to Do When Hostility Continues

Set Boundaries Respectfully

Acknowledge the Emotion + Set Limits

- "I want to keep hearing you, but we need to speak respectfully."
- "Let's keep this safe for everyone."

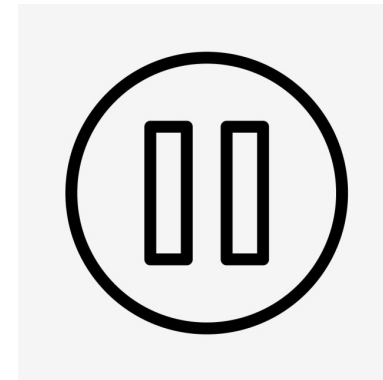**If Needed:**

- Offer a break
- Suggest a one-on-one
- Name that continued hostility may pause the conversation

Know When to Pause

If It Becomes Unsafe or Unproductive:

- "This isn't productive right now. Let's pause and return to this later."
- Have a plan: support person, follow-up process, or cooling-off period

Reality Test

- Gently test whether their perception aligns with reality.

- Ask open-ended questions to help them see the bigger picture without challenging their beliefs directly.

- Spell out the risks of avoiding the issue, rather than pressuring them.

✓ *"Are you satisfied with how things are going right now?"*

💬 *"Is this way of communication working?"*

🔄 *What might happen if this keeps going the same way?"*

🧍 "How do you think the other person sees the situation?"

⏱ "Has something like this happened before? How did it turn out?"

👥 "What would be your ideal outcome here?"

🔭 "Is there anything that might be getting in the way of seeing this clearly?"

💬 "What would someone you trust say about this situation?"

👞 "If you were giving advice to someone in your shoes, what would you say?"

Meeting Tips

Before & During

Mediation Support

What is mediation?

- A voluntary, confidential process where a neutral third party helps people talk through their conflict and find a solution that works for everyone.
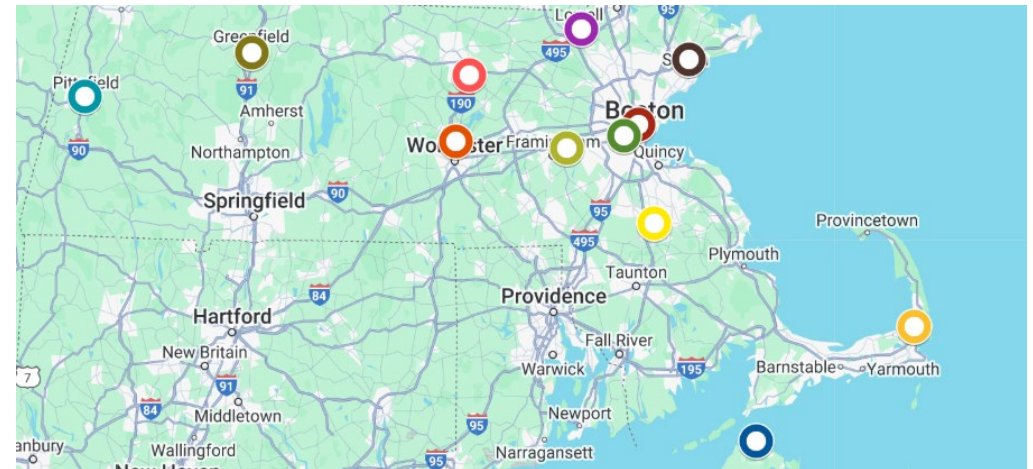
Who is it for?

- Neighbors

- Friends

- Family members

- Tenants and landlords

- Anyone in conflict who wants help resolving it

Where can I find it?
There are 12 community mediation centers across Massachusetts that offer these services, often free or low-cost.

- Learn more or find a center near you: www.resolutionma.org

Q&A