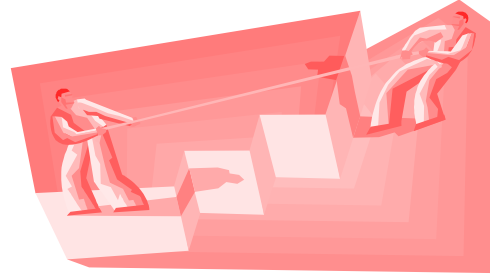


# PROBLEM SOLVING STEPS

## Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution

A problem is something you want changed. Conflict in a group can prevent positive, lasting change from happening. By treating conflict like a problem to be solved, a group can move forward. Easier said than done. Conflict is characterized by strong emotions, entrenched positioning, and adversarial relationships. If a group can strip conflict of those three elements and define what they want changed in nonjudgmental problems, then there is a problem to be solved. Always remember to be open to more than one way to solve a problem. Follow these tips on successful problem solving to help your group address conflict.



### Here's How:

The Beachwood Neighborhood Association has run into a lot of conflict and problems lately. The board members have been unable to agree on the top issues affecting their neighborhood. It is preventing the group from moving forward on developing an action plan to address these concerns.

#### *Awareness and Willingness to Address the Problem*

In a group, not everyone may see a problem at first, but eventually it becomes apparent something needs to be done. In determining a willingness to work on the problem, it is important to make sure the right people are participating. The people who need to be involved in the problem-solving process are those who know most the issue at hand, those who are significantly affected, and those can implement the solution.

#### *Gather and Share Relevant Information*

Community problems are best solved by a group of representative stakeholders in face-to-face meetings. Before any solutions to the problem are discussed, information should be gathered. It is not uncommon to loop back and forth from gathering information to defining the problem. The definition might require further information. After learning more, people may revise or fine-tune their problem definition.

#### *Define the Problem*

Frequently agreement on problem definition is much more difficult than agreement about a solution. For example: kids are playing basketball in the streets. Some people might define this activity as a safety problem, others see it as a nuisance, and still others see it as a lack of recreation for kids. How you define the problem shapes the types of solutions that people propose. The ideal problem definition is neutral,

# PROBLEM SOLVING STEPS CON'T

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nonjudgmental, and is framed as a question. By asking “What shall we do to provide safe recreational activities for our kids without annoying other residents?” Or, “How shall we ensure a peaceful, safe environment in our neighborhood?”

## *Propose Possible Solutions*

After the problem has been framed, participants are asked to brainstorm possible solutions. Reinforce the principle that an idea is just that – an idea – until everyone agrees and signs off on it. The more ideas to consider, the better the chances of coming up with a solution that will work.

## *Evaluate Solutions*

Weighing the various possible solutions is a separate step from generating them. Nothing zaps people’s energy more than negative comments about an idea as it is proposed. After there are a number of possibilities to consider, however, each one should be thoroughly evaluated. A deliberative evaluation looks at pros and cons, plays out consequences, asks who benefits, and surmises who might experience a negative impact of any one particular solution.

## *Choose a Course of Action*

Now it is time to make a decision about a solution. Often the solution is a synthesis of ideas. By holding back on solutions during the previous five steps, people have more understanding about the problem. They are more realistic about what might work and what won’t work. They have gained appreciation of other points of view and they have more than likely come up with the best possible solution.

## *Formulate an Implementation Plan*

Usually solutions do not happen on their own. They need to be carried out. Formulating an implementation plan pins down the details of who, how, and when the steps to a solution will be carried out.

## *Follow-through and Check Back*

In community work, anything can happen. It is a good idea to make sure the solution is working the way people intended. If not, adjust it accordingly. Does it build trust and commitment to common goals? Are people willing to take the time to work through the conflict? Is there someone perceived as objective who can help facilitate? Would using a problem solving process work in this solution?

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Remember that every group runs into problems and conflict. By working together as a team and following the problem-solving steps, the conflict can be resolved and a victory reached.

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### *Community Partnership Project*

Linking the University of Missouri-St. Louis, University of Missouri Extension, and the St. Louis community.