

Conflict and Complaint Resolution Policy¹

The _____ is committed to creating and maintaining a work environment characterized by constructive, productive and supportive relationships. Such relationships are often subject to contrasting styles of understanding and acting, and to different points of view. It is essential that we all recognize that human interactions are complex, often difficult, and that we all can contribute to their success.

All persons involved with _____ have an obligation to communicate openly and respectfully with one another and to provide reasons for particular decisions or actions. When disagreements arise, greater understanding by all is needed. The presence of conflict, if dealt with effectively, offers an opportunity for individual and organizational learning including the identification of policies and practices that need to be improved.

The executive director is ultimately responsible for ensuring that conflicts involving staff and volunteers are resolved in a satisfactory manner. He/she has a duty to inform the board of any conflicts that impinge on the organization's ability to function or may damage its reputation.

Conflicts should be addressed at the earliest possible opportunity as unresolved conflict can lead to a stressful, and in the worst cases, a poisoned work environment.

In the event that any person or group is experiencing a work-related conflict or has a complaint about the actions of another person, the following guidelines will apply.

1. Communicate directly with the person or persons whose actions is the cause of the complaint. People should reasonably expect to know if their behaviour or their decision is a problem for another person or group.
2. If the circumstances are such that the person with a complaint is unable or unwilling to communicate directly with the persons or persons whose actions are the cause of their complaint, either for fear of it going badly, or of reprisal, the help of one other trusted person in the organization should be sought.
3. The executive director will resolve complaints and conflicts that cannot be resolved by those directly involved or their supervisor.
4. In circumstances where it is the action of the executive director that is reason for the conflict, the Board may address the complaint.²
5. Communication of the complaint or conflict shall first be made verbally to the respondent or supervisor. If this does not lead to a resolution that is satisfactory to the complainant, the nature of the complaint should then be communicated in writing. If this fails to result in a resolution the written complaint should be sent to the executive director.

6. Third parties, acceptable to all those involved, may be of assistance in helping resolve the conflict in a (1) facilitation or mediation role where the goal is to help the parties restore a positive working relationship in the future, or (2) a decision-making /arbitration role where they investigate what happened and make a determination of who is responsible for the situation and what the consequences for the parties should be. The choice of these two approaches should be offered to the parties. If a mediated approach fails to resolve the matter, an arbitrated approach can be undertaken.
7. The parties will refrain from drawing others not directly involved into the process as a way of garnering support or gaining attention. Such actions include “copying” the written complaint by e-mail to others.
8. Complaints and conflicts shall be dealt with in a confidential manner. Meetings to resolve a complaint shall be open only to the parties and those attempting to resolve the complaint. The parties may have an advocate or supporter present. Meetings may be with the different parties individually, together or both. In the interest of openness, no minutes or written record of what is said in these meetings shall be recorded although, if the parties agree, the outcome of the meetings or a resulting agreement may be documented.³
9. Where the board is involved in a conflict resolution role, communication with it should be directly with the Chair not with the whole board. It is the chair’s duty to inform the entire board of the existence of the conflict but the board may appoint one of their number, or an impartial party to help resolve the matter.
10. The parties, and those helping to resolve the conflict, should avoid communicating the details of a complaint, making or responding to allegations or giving advice by e-mail. Face-to-face communication, as difficult as it is, should be relied upon. E-mail messages can be used for arranging meetings or communicating details of the resolution process.
11. Either the Executive Director or the Chair of the Board have an obligation to act immediately in addressing a complaint if the physical and mental health and safety of any of the parties is perceived to be at risk. In doing so one of the parties may be granted a temporary leave of absence with pay until the issue has been satisfactorily resolved or for up to two weeks, which ever is shorter.⁴
12. If threats to persons are made, or the Executive Director or Chair of the Board perceives a possible danger to a party or to other employees, including the possibility of one party being a danger to themselves, external professional assistance must be sought immediately.

¹ This policy blends a formal grievance procedure that one might find in a unionized setting and a more general approach to conflict resolution. This policy is also not strictly an operational policy since the board as a role to play in this example. Policies on this subject often are put in place following a bad experience with a workplace conflict.

² This policy, despite its length, is oriented to smaller organizations. Larger organizations with departments would want supervisors involved in conflict resolution at levels “lower” than that of the executive director. This could be reflected in a separate point following number 2.

³ Confidentiality in dispute resolution processes is generally thought to be a good practice. A case can be made for having some documentation, at least of the fact that a conflict resolution meeting took place and that a resolution was found or not, to put in personnel files. Indeed, in a situation where it is determined that the conflict is tied to the executive director’s failure to follow or implement board policy, the fact of incident ought to be documented in order to be employed as a piece of evidence in the his/her’s evaluation.

⁴ The leave with pay idea here is just an example.