

from conflict to co-operation

a handy illustrated guide for community enterprises



1 Conflict - where it comes from and how to deal with it



Foreword

In order to achieve their goals and be sustainable, community enterprises need to know how to work as a team – communicating effectively, making good decisions, dealing with the inevitable conflicts and coping with growth and change. **‘from conflict to co-operation’** – a series of handy illustrated guides – is invaluable. It includes useful hints and tips as well as signposting to further resources.

The accessible and entertaining content is based on co-operative working concepts and has been written with community enterprises in mind, but it will be useful for any group trying to work together to achieve common goals.

The author, Kate Whittle, has over twenty-five years experience working in and with co-operatives and community enterprises of all kinds, both in the UK and overseas. Angela Martin, the illustrator, is a well-known cartoonist – with experience of illustrating a range of communication and group dynamics guides and handbooks.

I’m sure you will find these booklets a useful and fun resource – enjoy reading them, put their recommendations into practice and harvest the fruits of good teamwork!

Gillian Bober,
President of the East of England Co-operative Society



**Don't be afraid
of opposition.
Remember, a kite
rises against,
not with, the wind**

Hamilton Mabie


Introduction

This is the first Booklet in the series '**from conflict to co-operation**'. The series aims to help community enterprises not only deal with conflict when it arises (Booklet 1), but also avoid unnecessary conflict by:

- improving communication (Booklet 2)
- improving meetings and decision-making (Booklet 3)
- managing change caused by organisational growth and development (Booklet 4)
- clarifying the role of the Committee (Booklet 5)

The content is derived from co-operative working concepts but will be useful for any group of people trying to work together effectively. We believe that good governance can help community enterprises avoid many of the conflicts which can arise when a group of people work together.

There are a wide variety of food-based community enterprises, so the issues and problems we describe here may not apply to your community enterprise now, but they are highly likely to emerge eventually.



Governance:
the systems and processes
concerned with ensuring
the overall direction,
supervision and
accountability
of an organisation

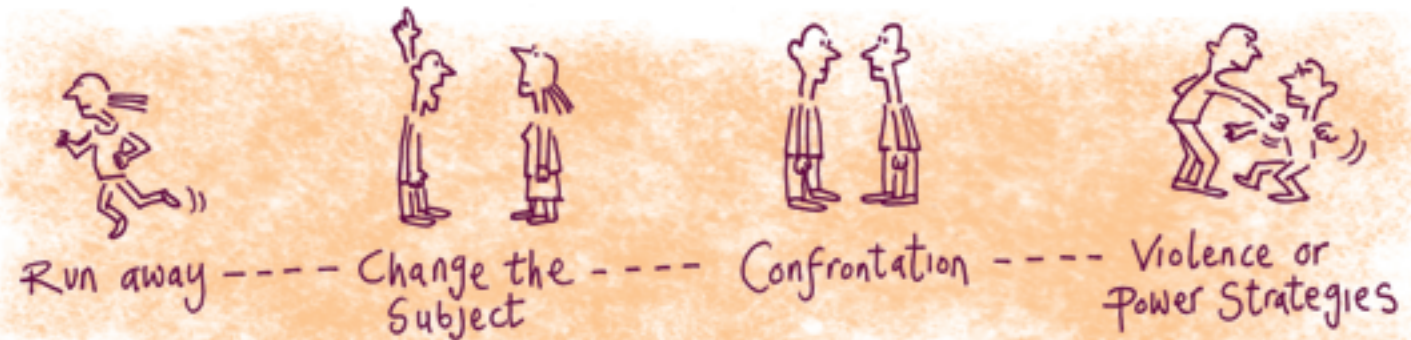
Conflict can be a tricky subject to deal with.

We mostly shy away from it, afraid that it will damage our relationships with others or our confidence in ourselves. This is mainly because we learn strategies for dealing with conflict as children, perhaps in the school playground, and rarely have the opportunity to revisit or review those strategies, which may not be effective in adult life.

One way of looking at different responses to conflict is to see them along a continuum leading from "run away" (the Monty Python conflict strategy..?) to confrontation, usually based on violence or power relationships. Somewhere in the middle are strategies based on changing the subject – such as comedy or confusing the issue.

None of these approaches is really satisfactory – if we run away we know we have not solved the problem, we have learned nothing and the next time we will probably run away too. The "changing the subject" strategy can work for a while – comedians sometimes say they learnt to be funny in the school playground as a technique for dealing with the school bully - but such a strategy is not always successful and can be unreliable. Violent confrontation also has its downsides, such as a bloody nose or, if you win, enemies that may try to bring you down later.

However, confrontation does not have to be violent. It can be based on an assertive approach: "I know I have rights

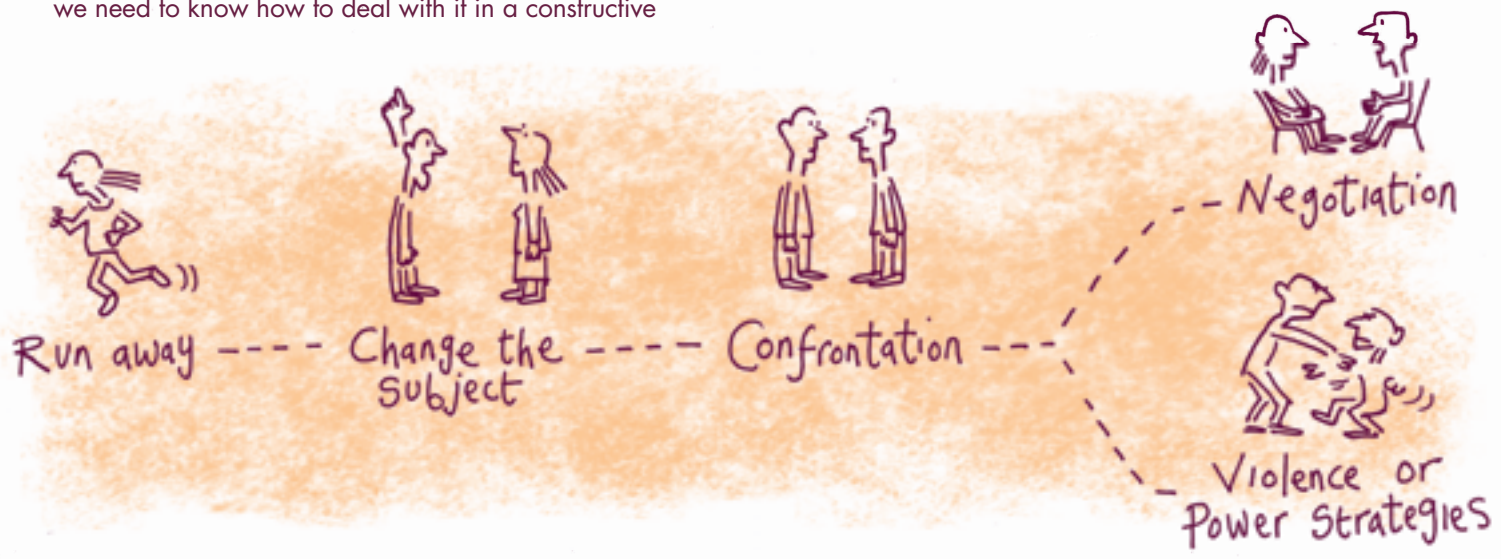


and I acknowledge your rights – so let’s negotiate a settlement to this dispute that will suit us both”.

In this booklet we will review different conflict resolution approaches – and we will find that this assertive, co-operative approach is the most satisfactory way to deal with major conflicts, since it involves people working together to find a solution everyone will commit to.

Conflict is part of life. It is evidence that there is a wealth of experience, knowledge and ideas in the group. Within the community enterprise some conflict is inevitable and we need to know how to deal with it in a constructive

way when it arises – that’s what this booklet is about. Some conflict is preventable and in the other booklets in the series we look at how to reduce the likelihood of conflict by improving communication (Booklet 2), improving decision making and holding effective meetings (Booklet 3), managing change caused by organisational growth and development (Booklet 4) and by clarifying the role of the Committee (Booklet 5).



Conflict in a community enterprise - why does it happen?

Conflict in your organisation arises for the same reasons it happens anywhere – people have different views about what to do or how to do it, they are subject to different pressures, they suffer emotions such as jealousy, fear and anger and they compete to get their ideas accepted by the team. In a community enterprise, the organisation is simply the relationships between the participants, so maintaining mutual and respectful relationships is the basis for avoiding conflict.

Below we list the main areas in which conflict can arise, with details of where to find tools, tips and techniques in the other booklets for reducing the potential for unnecessary conflict.

a) Competition over resources – People and Money

It's probably the first issue that comes to mind when thinking about conflict within an organisation – there will always be conflict over how best to use the different kinds of resources you have available. Let's look at two examples – people and money.

People

Your project has got a new volunteer. You need more help pricking out carrot seedlings, but it is a bank holiday and the farm shop is heaving with people buying produce. If the carrot seedlings are not pricked out today, they will start suffering from overcrowding, but the two shop assistants are run off their feet and desperate for help. How do you decide where the volunteer would be most useful? You need to decide quickly.

Money

You have agreed to initiate two new projects this year, and you have set aside £5,000 to pay for them. However, on revisiting the budgets you find that costs have increased and you can now only afford to develop one of the business ideas. Support for the two projects is evenly divided between everyone. How will you decide which project to implement? This is not so urgent, but it is important.

There are no easy answers to these situations, but there are tools and techniques that will ensure that whatever decision is taken it will benefit from the support of all or most people. If everyone has been engaged in developing a strategy in

which certain activities are prioritised, and which everyone understands and supports, it will be easier to come to a decision on where the volunteer should be working or which project is a priority. Also, if the people taking those decisions do so in a transparent way, and if there are opportunities for others to give feedback, what might be a controversial decision becomes more acceptable.

See Booklet 3 on different decision-making approaches and Booklet 2 on participative strategic planning for more detailed help on dealing with these types of conflict.

b) Personalities, working style

Some people's personalities or working style can make them challenging to work with. Many words have been written about "dealing with difficult people", people who are hostile or aggressive, unresponsive or silent, negative about everything, complaining all the time, know-it-alls or, that supreme irritant, the person who says yes to everything but never delivers. Behaviours such as these are often symptomatic of other underlying causes, which need to be identified and dealt with by the individual themselves. However, by improving communication skills – including

assertiveness – and understanding how to deal with tension in the workplace, you will be able to get along with even the most difficult people.

See Booklet 2 for more on communication skills.

c) Poor communication

Sometimes a lack of communication or poor communication is the source of the conflict. If people aren't told what is happening, rumour and imagination will fill the gap. A game of 'Telephone' demonstrates what happens when people aren't kept 'in the loop'.

See Booklet 2 for more on communication skills.



**Two people facing
each other cannot
pull a rope**

Bembe Central Africa

d) Ineffective meetings and inappropriate decision-making methods

For a community-based enterprise – where group decision-making is an important management tool – holding effective meetings is key. If an inappropriate decision-making method is adopted or if a decision is agreed but not implemented for some reason, conflict may ensue. It is important that everyone understands different decision-making methods and under what circumstances they are useful.

Meetings are your key management tool in a community-based enterprise and they need to be effective: decisive, short and amicable. A meeting that goes on for over two hours is unlikely to be productive unless there is a clear structure, lots of breaks, different ways for people to participate and a variety of presentation methods. Your regular team meetings should not be longer than two hours. Different decision-making methods are appropriate under different circumstances and the choice of an inappropriate method can result in conflict.

There are three key tools for an effective meeting: (1) encouraging participation (2) the role of the Chair (3) the agenda, minutes and papers. Understanding how to use these tools will help you achieve more effective meetings.

For more information on how to run effective meetings and different decision-making methods see Booklet 3.

e) Differences in skills, knowledge and work experience

It's useful if people are aware of each other's skills, knowledge and experience relating to the work of the enterprise. You may have done a skills audit once, but perhaps people have moved on since then. What skills, experience and knowledge are there in the team now? Your employees' and volunteers' skills are a vital resource and can be an asset for the enterprise as well as the individual – but only if they are recognised and acknowledged. If someone feels their skills are not recognised or valued it can generate resentment which could result in conflict.

f) Cultural and gender differences

The people we meet within an organisation can be very different from us. We may be born and brought up in different communities, or in different towns or cities or different countries. We inherit different concepts about lifestyle, acceptable behaviour, relationships, education, work and so much more. All these differences are reflected in the language we use to communicate. Words can be quite a crude means of communication. When I use a word it is weighted with my experience – how I heard my family,

teachers or school friends use it. When someone with a different life experience to mine hears that word, it will be weighted with a different meaning, so they will hear something slightly different (or even very different) from what I intended. Such misunderstandings can lead to conflict. Techniques such as active listening or asking for feedback can minimise the “noise” produced by cultural differences.

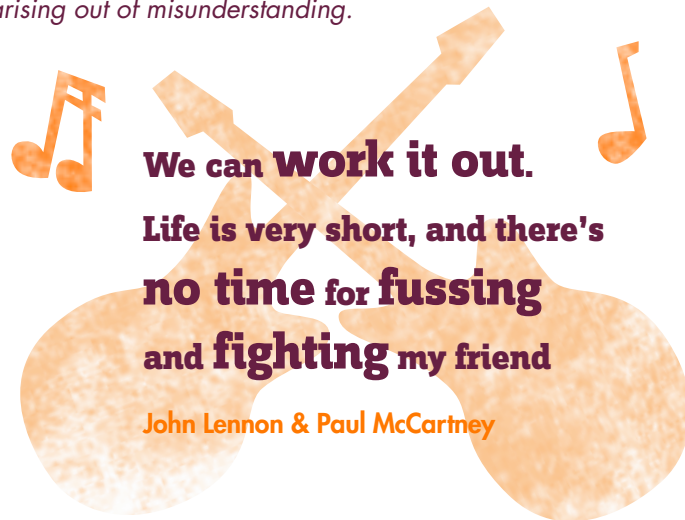
It's important to recognise people's different cultural backgrounds. Cultural rituals around religion and hygiene can be misunderstood and prove controversial if everyone is not made aware of the needs (such as a quiet place for prayer at certain times of the day). The impact of culture on communication can also lead to conflict. For example, in some cultures saving face can be more important to an individual than owning up to a mistake; different cultures assume different amounts of personal space, so someone might stand nearer to you or further away than you are accustomed to. It helps if you understand why!

Even though there may be very different people engaged in a community enterprise, everyone needs to be treated with respect in order for a good team-working culture to develop. Sexist and racist language, stereotypes or behaviour have no place in a community enterprise, and your equal opportunities policy should make it clear that such behaviour will not be tolerated and that direct or

indirect discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, disability, sexuality, religion or age is illegal.

Deborah Tannen has done some interesting work on men's and women's different conversational rituals, such as men's banter and playful put-downs and women's avoiding boasting and downplaying authority. Tannen makes the point that neither set of rituals are superior, but that conflict can ensue when people don't recognise a ritual and respond inappropriately.

See Booklet 2 for much more about how improving communication skills can reduce the likelihood of conflict arising out of misunderstanding.



We can work it out.

**Life is very short, and there's
no time for fussing
and fighting my friend**

John Lennon & Paul McCartney

g) Unclear roles and responsibilities

A common source of conflict is a lack of clarity between the role of the Committee and the rest of the enterprise. This is especially so when, in a fledgling enterprise, it is the same people fulfilling both roles! It's important to differentiate the role of the Committee from that of the day-to-day running of the enterprise. Depending on your legal structure this body may be called The Board of Directors or the Management Committee. For the sake of simplicity we have called it 'The Committee' in these booklets.

See Booklet 4 on Organisational growth and development and Booklet 5 on Role and responsibilities of the Committee.

h) Lack of written policies and procedures

How will a new recruit know what action to take under certain circumstances, if policies and procedures are not written down and clearly available? In the early days, it will all be in someone's head, or people working in close proximity can ask each other what should be done. But eventually, when the enterprise grows and new people are taken on, the whole team must have easy access to this information. Policies also need to be reviewed and

updated regularly and everyone should have an input into this process.

See Booklet 4 on Organisational growth and development.

i) Power relations – them & us

When a small enterprise grows from two or three people to a group of six or more, it is very easy for the founders to assume that the way they have always done things will be adequate and appropriate for the larger group. In a small group information is shared informally, maybe outside work in a social setting, but problems will arise if systems are not formalised so that new recruits can access information easily. An effective induction programme will help new recruits feel part of the enterprise more quickly.

See Booklet 4 on Organisational growth and development.

i) Ignorance, insecurity, fear

Finally, conflict can arise out of people's ignorance and fear. If people are not made welcome, if they do not understand what is required of them or if they find themselves in a situation where they feel exposed or vulnerable, they may act in ways which can generate conflict.

See Booklet 2 on Communication and Booklet 4 on Organisational growth and development.

How to manage the inevitable conflicts within an enterprise

The following five different approaches to resolving conflict show the dynamic relationship between achieving personal goals and maintaining good relationships with others:

Competition

Aiming only to achieve my goals

Accommodation

Aiming to maintain a good relationship with the other person

Avoidance

No aims at all

Compromise

Aiming to balance achieving my goals and maintaining good relationships

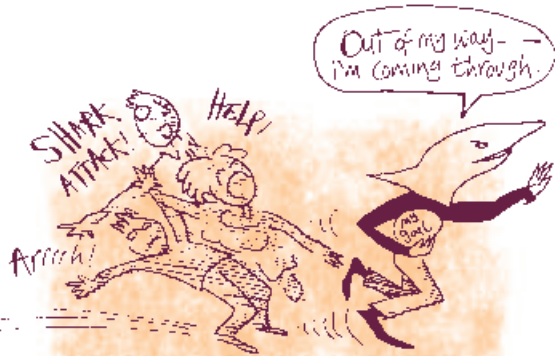
Co-operation

Aiming to achieve my own goals at the same time as maintaining good relationships



Adapted from conflict strategies game in 'Johnson, D & Johnson, F; 2000; Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills' Allyn and Bacon.

Competitive: When we focus entirely on achieving our own ends at the expense of our relations with others. This approach is aggressive and unco-operative, but in extreme situations may be called for to protect the vulnerable.



Accommodating: When we believe that good relationships with others are more important than our own needs. This approach is unassertive and powerless, but could also be described as selfless and focusing more on your responsibilities than your rights.



Avoiding: When we are neither achieving our own goals nor building good relationships. This approach is passive and unco-operative but could also be described as a tactical withdrawal.



Compromising: When we work out ways in which we can achieve our own goals without confrontation, using techniques such as splitting the difference, rolling a dice or taking it in turns.



Co-operating: When we work together with the other party, investigating ways in which we can both win, thus achieving our goals at the same time as building good relationships. This approach works towards win/win solutions, it is assertive and co-operative.



There are situations in which each of these styles is appropriate and they all have their advantages and drawbacks. However, we all have our habitual responses to conflict situations, so it's helpful to identify what they are, and to recognise that other styles may be more appropriate.

Techniques of principled negotiation

Of all these attitudes towards conflict resolution, it is the co-operative approach which provides the most satisfactory solutions – the solutions which most people will feel able to commit to, because they have been consulted and involved. However, it is time consuming, so may not be appropriate for more trivial or short term conflicts, and it is not always easy. A useful set of techniques for resolving conflict using a negotiated approach has been developed by a team based at Harvard University. In their book “Getting to Yes” authors Fisher and Ury describe the “Techniques of Principled Negotiation” based on four steps:

1. **Separate the People from the Problem**
2. **Focus on Interests, not Positions**
3. **Invent Options for Mutual Gain**
4. **Insist on Using Objective Criteria**

A good half of the book focuses on the “Yes, but” questions – What if they are more powerful? What if they won’t play? What if they use dirty tricks? – providing useful examples and illustrations of the techniques in action. “Getting to Yes” is published in paperback by Arrow Business Books and should be on the bookshelf of every community enterprise!

5 tools for dealing with conflicts:

1. Listening skills

Sometimes conflict arises simply because people do not feel heard, so just making the time for them to speak, and actively listening to them, can take the sting out of a situation and help you to more easily negotiate a resolution.

Active listening involves just listening and nothing else. Normally there is an overlap between listening, thinking and speaking and we are often trying to do all three at once! However, this means we are not really paying attention to the person we are listening to and we may miss some of the meaning of what they are saying. Also, we often focus more on what our response will be rather than on what the other person is actually saying.

Active listening is more easily described than done, so Booklet 2 includes an active listening exercise if you would like a bit of practice!

2. Assertiveness

In a community enterprise, where management is more likely to be democratic and where good teamwork is essential, it is vital for people to understand how to behave assertively – i.e. knowing their own mind and standing up for themselves and their own opinions, without being pushed around by others – and without pushing others around.

In contrast, people often behave in ways which are either:

Aggressive – trying to get their own way by bullying or other power strategies

Passive – accepting other people's opinions or decisions without thinking for themselves

Manipulative – using underhand or devious strategies to get their own way.

Assertive behaviour is much less likely to lead to conflict and indeed there is a technique for giving criticism assertively which will help to bring about the changes you want without causing hurt or offence to the recipient.

Here are some simple steps to getting someone to change difficult behaviour such as habitual lateness or missing deadlines in an assertive way, assuming that it is appropriate for you to address the issue (in different organisational structures it may be more appropriate for you to refer the problem to a supervisor, see *Booklet 4 on organisational growth*).

1. First you need to be clear yourself about the behaviour that you would like your colleague to change. Do not use this as an opportunity for a put-down. It's important that you address the behaviour and not attack the person.
2. Remember that you both have rights – you have the right to expect colleagues to deliver to a standard you have all agreed and your colleague has the right to be treated with respect.
3. Find a time and a place where you can speak to the person privately.
4. Be specific about the change you want and talk about behaviour you can see - talk about facts and your feelings, not your opinions.



5. Do this as soon as possible after realising the impact your colleague's behaviour is having on your work. Don't let it build up until you are angry and resentful.
6. Ask your colleague how they see the situation and try to get them to work with you to bring about the changes you want.

Following these steps means you're more likely to get the change you want. You have been assertive and it's more likely that you'll get a response which isn't aggressive or passive from your colleague.

Booklet 2 includes a guide to giving and receiving criticism assertively.

Accentuate the positive.

Eliminate the negative.

Latch on to the affirmative.

Don't mess with Mr. Inbetween

Bing Crosby

3. Dealing with tension in the workplace

It's sometimes helpful to use a well tried and tested formula for dealing with tensions between individuals in the workplace. The following guidelines can be used by the protagonists or by other members of the team. The aim is to be constructive and to seek changes that will make both of you happy rather than attempting to "win". Again, it's important to be specific, talking about actions not opinions, facts not accusations, examples not generalisations. Talk about how you feel (i.e. angry or disappointed) and be clear about what you want to change. Be positive – i.e. ask the person to start or increase doing whatever it is you want (not to stop doing what you don't want). Explain why, as it helps if they understand your reasons. And here's the famous script:

'When you do (or did).....' (concrete example)

'I feel.....' (acknowledge your feelings)

'and I want you to.....' (specific concrete request)

'because.....' (your reasons)

4. Reframing

Mediators use a technique known as reframing which can help people communicate in stressful situations. Basically it involves restating what the other person has said, in a way which illuminates their intent while not losing the essence of the message. This can help both listener and speaker clarify the issues.

We describe the technique in more detail in Booklet 2 on Communication.

5. Mediation

If the techniques listed above have not helped, we recommend using mediation to resolve the conflict. Mediation is where a mediator helps two or more people to reach an agreement to change behaviour. Any agreement comes from those in dispute, not from the mediator. The mediator does not judge or tell them what to do (beyond making suggestions). The mediator is in charge of the process of seeking to resolve the problem but is not responsible for the outcome.

You can find more information about mediation and how to find a mediator here:

www.acas.org.uk/mediation

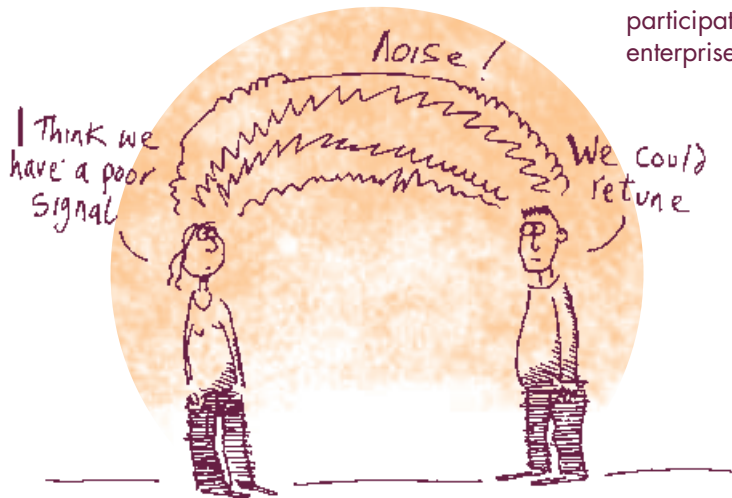
Smooth seas do not make skilful sailors African Proverb



How to avoid unnecessary conflict

This is the subject of the other booklets in the series. We aim to give you the tools and techniques that will improve communication, make meetings more effective, smooth the stresses and strains of organisational growth and development and enhance the effectiveness of the Committee. We believe that paying attention to the process of working together to achieve your aims will reduce conflict and improve team-working. We also believe that this will make your experience of working together more enjoyable and more fun!

Booklet 2 focuses on improving communication skills. It talks about communication as a process of sending and receiving messages through media that can be subject to "noise". We think that the essence of good communication is minimising noise and we suggest some ways in which you can do that. We talk more about the importance of assertive behaviour and about the impact of different cultures and gender on communication. We include some exercises and a communication audit so you can find out for yourself if your communication skills need attention. Finally, we talk about the all-important issue of participation – how to encourage it in your community enterprise and especially how to achieve it in meetings.



Booklet 3 is all about meetings – different kinds, how to organise a meeting, the role of the Chair, the Agenda, the Minutes. Booklet 3 also talks about decision-making – the pros and cons of different ways of taking decisions, a word about consensus and “group think” and the difference – yes, there most definitely is one – between consensus and compromise!

Booklet 4 looks at organisational growth and development and the way the stresses and strains of growth can erupt into conflict. We take in a discussion about power – and the familiar “Us and Them” situation that we too often get stuck in. We refer to an influential paper written back in the 80s by feminists that first identified the “Tyranny of Structurelessness”. We recommend induction programmes for new recruits and discuss how to deal with the perennial “founders’ syndrome”. We finish this booklet by pointing out that, if your social enterprise has written policies and procedures and they are clearly accessible and available, then life becomes much easier and individuals can take action alone in the security of knowing it is the agreed policy of the community enterprise.

Finally, **Booklet 5** will address the vital role of the Committee. We will look at the different roles that Committee members can adopt, the relationship of the Committee with management and what to do if you are

a Committee member as well as an employee or volunteer – which hat do you wear when?

We believe that if you are willing to try some of the techniques described, these booklets will go a long way towards helping you reduce conflict in your community enterprise. In addition, you won’t be fazed when conflict does arise, but will recognise it as a symptom of the wealth of ideas, experience and knowledge you have around you.

However, we know that you will need more resources and some of the skills that you will find useful cannot be developed by reading a book. Chairing meetings, for example, cannot be learnt from a book – you need to practice, perhaps by shadowing your existing Chair for a while or rotating the chair at meetings.

At the end of each booklet you’ll find a Signposting page, listing further resources, including books, papers and websites which may be of interest.

Above all, we know that these co-operative working techniques will help you work and help you enjoy your work!

To download a pdf copy of this booklet go to www.fromconflict2co-operation.uk.coop

www.uk.coop



Making Local Food Work (MLFW) is a Big Lottery funded partnership of seven organisations: Co-operatives UK, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Country Markets, FARMA, The Plunkett Foundation, Sustain and the Soil Association. MLFW is rooted in the belief that the needs of consumers, producers and the land are interdependent, and that community enterprise can renew and strengthen these links to the lasting benefit of all.

Community enterprises can be organised in a variety of ways – from an informal group getting together to purchase food in bulk, to a professional trading organisation – but they all involve people working together to achieve a common goal. Examples include farmers' markets, community owned pubs and shops, community energy projects and car pools. The way in which activities are organised and decisions made is called governance, and the group of people who come together to organise activity and make longer term decisions is called the Governing Body – or Management Committee or Board of Directors – according to the type of organisation.



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CO-OPERATIVES UK

Co-operatives UK is the national trade body that campaigns for co-operation and works to promote, develop and unite co-operative enterprises. Co-operatives UK aims to bring together all those with a passion and interest in co-operative action.