

Resolving conflict

Approaches to resolving a conflict between members

Conflict is a natural part of human interaction. Conflict about differences in opinion and approach can bring fresh perspectives and ideas that strengthen the team or organisation. However, when conflict becomes destructive, it can feel challenging and even draining, especially in an environment where everyone is passionate. This resource offers practical insights and steps to help you manage conflict with fellow members in a way that fosters understanding, respect and a supportive environment.

Conflict can be defined as a situation in which people or groups are involved in a serious disagreement or argument.

During times of conflict, review your organisation's formal conflict resolution protocols for guidance. If these protocols don't suit your specific situation or your organisation doesn't have a formal process, you can refer to the steps provided in this guide for general advice on managing conflict constructively.



Step 1: Evaluate the situation

Acknowledge emotions

We all handle emotions differently and this can sometimes get in the way of effective conflict resolution. For some, conflict can cause a physical response, such as an elevated heart rate, shaking or a quivering voice. For others, their reaction can be to shut down or shy away from a discussion. Either way, it is important to acknowledge your feelings and those of others involved. Remember that emotions are natural. Emotions can run high in a sporting environment and they don't necessarily define the people experiencing them.



Separate the problem from the people

Aim to be self-aware, as this will help you better manage conflict. While you can't control others' actions, you can control your behaviour in response to their actions. Take time to understand the other person's perspective, personality and strengths. This will help you communicate more effectively. Once you've acknowledged everyone's emotions, try to separate the issue from the emotions surrounding it. Define what matters to you in this conflict and focus on your goals. By being clear about your priorities, you will better express your concerns and work toward a solution that addresses the real issue.

It takes **courage** to admit if you might be contributing to the problem. Approach the situation with **honesty and openness**.

Define the issue and set goals

Take a moment to reflect on why the issue bothers you and why the event resulted in conflict. This extra clarity will help you define the issue and set goals. When defining an issue, try using 'I' statements. Starting sentences with 'I,' such as 'I feel...' or 'I think...', helps focus on your own experience rather than assigning blame. This approach allows you to express your perspective more effectively while reducing the likelihood of the listener becoming defensive or disengaged. To help identify your goals, ask yourself:

- Why do I want to resolve this conflict?
- What is a good resolution for me?
- How important is it to me that I reach this resolution?
- How do I want to be viewed by the other party when the conflict is resolved?
- How does this situation affect the way I view myself?

Decide on the next action

Decide whether addressing the conflict is necessary. If yes, consider your relationship with the other party, past interactions and the risks associated with addressing the conflict when determining what action to take. If you choose to proceed with addressing the conflict, these options can help you decide on the most appropriate course of action¹.

Option 1: Self-management

Self-management is often effective for lower-level or unintentional issues and can quickly restore harmony without formal escalation. This involves resolving the issue directly with the other party.

Option 2: Obtaining information and support

If self-management is unsuccessful or you are unsure how to handle the situation, you can seek assistance from a Member Protection Information Officer (MPIO) or another designated authority in the organisation. These individuals can:

- Listen to the concern
- Provide an explanation of your options in line with the organisation's policies and procedures

This step is particularly helpful if:

- You need clarity or reassurance about next steps; or
- The issue persists after initial efforts to address it fall short

Note: If a complaint involves allegations of child abuse or other reportable conduct, immediately contact:

- **Local child protection authorities or the police to ensure compliance with mandatory reporting laws; and**
- **Sport Integrity Australia via 1300 027 232 or sportintegrity.gov.au**

Option 3: Informal resolution

Following a discussion with a MPIO or an authorised representative within the organisation, you may choose to:

- Let the matter go if it is minor or no longer an issue
- Seek informal mediation with the help of a neutral third party, such as a mediator or trusted member

This process aims to achieve resolution without formal investigations.

Option 4: Formal internal process

For more serious or unresolved conflicts, you may choose to submit a formal written complaint. A formal process may be suitable when:

- Informal efforts have failed to resolve the issue
- The matter involves serious allegations or breaches of conduct
- The person accused denies the allegations
- The issue involves individuals in higher authority than the complainant

Formal complaints typically involve an internal investigation, with findings and outcomes provided to both parties.

Option 5: An appeals process

If either party is dissatisfied with the process or outcome of the formal internal investigation, they may pursue an appeals process. An appeal usually involves:

- A review of the complaint by a different decision-maker, such as an appeals tribunal
- Reassessment of the initial decision

It is common that a person has the right to one internal appeal.

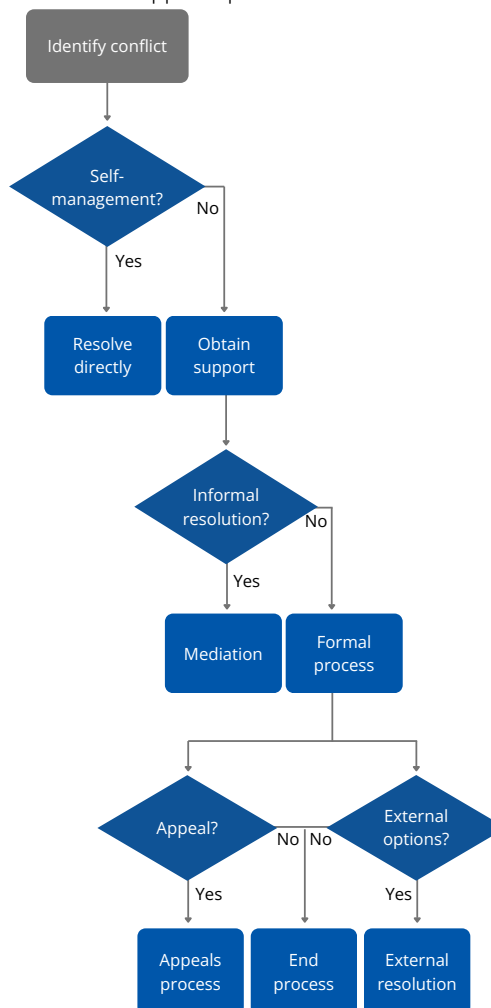
Option 6: External options

If internal procedures fail to achieve a satisfactory outcome or if impartiality is a concern, you may choose to approach an external body (such as a dispute resolution centre).

You can also seek guidance from an MPIO. An MPIO provides confidential information and support, explains available options under relevant policies and can help you understand appropriate external resolution pathways.

For further information and support, refer to the *Sport HQ Safeguarding and integrity* resource.

In some cases, you may also wish to contact your State Sporting Organisation as they can provide advice on next steps and relevant external support options.



¹ Play by the Rules (n.d.). Resolving complaints: A step-by-step. Retrieved 16 December 2024, from <https://elearning.sportintegrity.gov.au/course/view.php?id=550§ion=1>

Step 2: Communicate effectively

Arrange a meeting

Approach the other party privately to set a time for a conversation. Be clear about the meeting's purpose to give them a chance to prepare and consider their emotions, issues and goals.

Choose the right medium

Meeting in person is preferred as emails can be misinterpreted and may even worsen the conflict.

Clear your head

Clear your mind before the meeting and go in ready to listen. Remember that heightened emotions are perfectly natural. To help manage your emotions so that you can focus on working through the issues with the other party, take a few slow, deep breaths before you begin and take regular sips of water during the conversation. Taking a walk together while having your discussion can also help both parties focus on the issues in a less confrontational setting.

During the meeting

- Start by thanking them for their time, then restate the issue and your goal
- Practice active listening by seeking to understand the other person's point of view before responding. Avoid listening only to reply. Focus on genuinely hearing their perspective
- Explore solutions together by discussing potential solutions that meet everyone's needs
- Consider the full range of options, aiming for a positive outcome for both of you

Conflict management is **not about winning**. It's about understanding and managing differences constructively.

Communication mediums

Best: In-person meeting

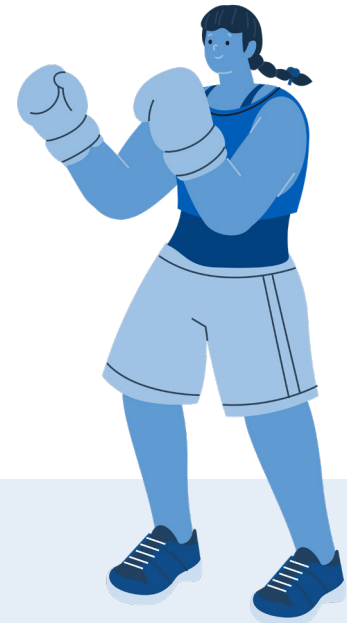
Meet in person (or online, but only if an in-person meeting is not possible) to manage the conflict

Avoid: Email

Avoid trying to resolve conflicts via email. You can exchange emails following your in-person meeting to summarise outcomes and set out agreements and next steps, if any

Acceptable: Phone call

A phone discussion is acceptable, but it's best if this phone call is to arrange your in-person meeting



Quick tips for conflict management

Empathy and understanding

Recognising and acknowledging emotions of all parties

Clear communication

Conveying messages calmly and clearly

Rules or policies

Referencing guidelines to clarify expectations

Active listening

Engaging attentively without interruption to fully understand

Utilise support

Involving neutral parties when necessary



Step 3: Resolve or escalate the conflict

A successful resolution should:

- Be clear and mutually understood
- Focus on voluntary behaviour moving forward
- Be written down if necessary, especially if past agreements haven't been met

If no agreement can be reached, consider escalating the issue through the following pathways:

1. Management committee
2. Your national or state peak body
3. External assistance (e.g. mediation or legal intervention)

Step 4: Follow through

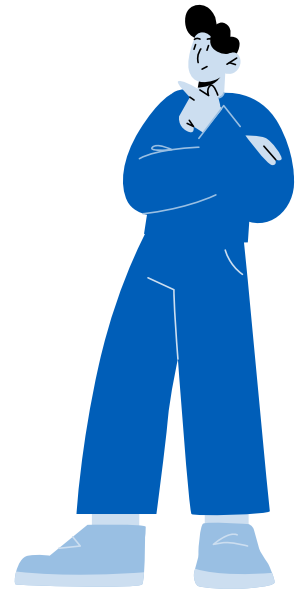
Once you have reached an agreement, stick to the terms, monitor compliance and offer positive feedback when both parties adhere to the resolution. If challenges arise, revisit the terms or escalate if necessary.

When to escalate a conflict

Escalation might be necessary if:

- There is a risk that the conflict could become harmful i.e. physically, mentally, culturally, etc.
- Initial attempts to resolve the conflict have failed
- The issue impacts organisation operations or member safety

By following the practical steps in this guide, you can navigate conflict positively. You don't need to avoid conflict. When managed well, constructive conflicts can strengthen your organisation's operations and relationships.



Common pitfalls to avoid

Seeking revenge

Focusing on past conflicts instead of present behaviour

Confrontation

Aggressive behaviour that escalates conflict

Overreaction

Harsh responses that exacerbate issues

Ignoring the problem

Neglecting issues that worsen over time

Taking sides

Bias that damages trust and authority

