

Guide to Conflict Resolution at BU

Purpose

This guide is designed to assist individual staff, faculty or students to clarify whether what they are experiencing is interpersonal conflict, discrimination or harassment. Individuals can use the guide to determine if their situation rises to the level of discrimination/harassment, and where it does not, to give them some general guidelines of how to attempt to resolve the situation positively. Managers and others who may play a facilitating role can also use this guide to better understand the dynamics of conflict, and what options are available to them to solve it.

This guide is a tool for resolution and prevention. Unresolved conflict can escalate to become harassment, bullying or even workplace violence. The more comfortable every member of the university community is with resolving conflict at its early stages, the more harmonious the work environment can be.

Guiding Principles

Conflict is unavoidable. Conflict itself is neither good nor bad, but its outcome can be either positive or negative depending on the way it is handled.

Each person involved in a conflict contributes to the situation, and can choose their actions and reactions.

We cannot know someone else's intentions without asking them. Likewise, others cannot know their effect on us unless we tell them.

Pure discrimination/harassment is rare. Unless the behavior is severe or imminently dangerous it is recommended that you initially treat situations as conflict. If the offending party does not cease the behavior when asked to, this is proof that there is choice and intention behind it, and may point to discrimination/harassment.

Brandon University expects students, staff, faculty and visitors to conduct themselves in a professional and respectful manner. This means recognizing when your words or actions have offended someone, and taking steps to correct this. It also means communicating with others when they have offended you, and giving them the chance to change future behavior.

In almost every situation, conflict is best resolved directly by the parties in conflict. This means that a face to face discussion should take place where the involved parties agree to communicate in a respectful way, with an aim to resolve the problem between them.

Where individuals are not confident in their ability to resolve conflict on their own a supervisor, Dean, Human Resources personnel or Student Services personnel may assist them with the process – it is still the responsibility of the parties involved to find a workable resolution.

Solutions to conflict are possible and should aim to give each party at least some of what they need.

Both parties must be present at the table in order for conflict to be resolved. Conflict cannot be resolved if one party wishes to remain anonymous, or does not participate in solving the issue in good faith.

What is Interpersonal Conflict?

Conflict is normal and unavoidable. We work with people who think and respond differently from ourselves.

Conflict is often a result of poor communication, misunderstandings or assumptions.

Conflict is often a result of loss of emotional control.

Conflict is usually isolated and happens only occasionally.

Both parties in the conflict contribute to the situation.

Often one or both parties are unaware of the effect they are having on the other.

What is Discrimination/Harassment?

Discrimination/harassment is not “normal” everyday behavior.

In discrimination/harassment there is sometimes an imbalance of power.

Usually discrimination/harassment is intentional. It is designed to humiliate, threaten, insult, control, intimidate...

Discrimination/harassment is often repeated and purposeful behavior.

The harasser/bully may derive satisfaction from hurting the other person.

Bullies show no remorse and don't attempt to resolve the situation.

Is it Discrimination/Harassment or Conflict?

When we are offended or hurt by another, it is human nature to assume that it was the intention of the other person to offend or hurt us. By taking a step back from the situation and asking ourselves a few questions we can often gain a different perspective on the situation which can allow us to approach it as a problem to be resolved. If you agree with most of the statements in the left hand column below, chances are you are experiencing conflict. If you are unsure, it is often productive to treat the situation as conflict until it proves to be discrimination/harassment.

For some suggestions on how to respond to conflict see the applicable section:

“Responding to conflict (for the offended party)” if it is you who has been hurt or offended

“Responding to parties in conflict (for facilitators)” if you are trying to help someone else navigate conflict

If you agree with most of the statements in the right hand column below, you may be experiencing discrimination/harassment. See the section on “Responding to discrimination/harassment”.

Conflict	Discrimination/Harassment
I have not told the other person the effect they are having on me.	I have shared with the other person the effect their behavior is having, and the behavior continues.
I am reacting to this behavior differently because of who it is – if this was coming from a friend I would react differently.	The behavior is completely unacceptable and I would not tolerate it from anyone. (Violent, sexual, discriminatory or otherwise extreme)
The behavior only happened once.	The behavior is repeated and possibly intensifying.
The behavior only happens in emotional situations.	The behavior seems to be very controlled and calculated.
My reactions to the behavior have been less than respectful or professional.	I have maintained a respectful and professional response to the behavior at all times.
I have some power to change the course of this relationship.	I feel powerless to change the course of this relationship.
When I ask the other person to change a behavior they are open to it and make an honest attempt to change.	When I ask the other person to change a behavior they show no interest in working with me.

Responding to conflict (for the offended party)

In most cases conflict is best dealt with directly between the parties in conflict. At times there may need to be some support from a third party who is skilled in conflict resolution. It is NOT recommended that parties in conflict communicate via email or other electronic or written means, as these formats often lead to misinterpretation. Some ways to deal with conflict include:

- a. Speak directly to the other person (face to face)
- b. Seek coaching from supervisor, next level supervisor, Human Resources , Student Services personnel or BUSU prior to speaking directly to the other person (face to face)
- c. Request support from supervisor, next level supervisor, HR, Student Services personnel or BUSU to facilitate a face to face meeting (perspective check)
- d. Request support from supervisor, next level supervisor, HR, Student Services personnel or BUSU to mediate.

- e. Request support from supervisor, next level supervisor, HR, Student Services personnel or BUSU to act as arbitrator

Responding to parties in conflict (for facilitators)

It is important that supervisors, Human Resources personnel, Student Services personnel and some members of BUSU be comfortable facilitating conversations in order to resolve conflict in its early stages. Remember, it is for the parties in conflict to resolve the issue, not you.

Some important things to remember if you are asked to take on this role:

- a. Timing is important. You should allow emotions to subside, but avoid leaving the conflict for too long as it may escalate, or the parties may decide they don't need to resolve it.
- b. Sometimes it is okay for the parties to decide they don't need to resolve it, but only when both are truly prepared to let it go.
- c. It is best to speak with each party at least once individually prior to bringing them together:
 - Prepare each party to share the **behaviour** (specific instances) and how it has affected them personally. They should avoid attacking the **person** and using blaming language or making assumptions about the other person's intentions.
 - Prepare each party to take ownership of their part in the conflict. Remember that in true conflict both sides play a role.
 - Prepare each party to speak to what they can do differently going forward.
- d. Do not document the discussion/mediation. This is solutions-focused, so the only documentation should be any agreements the parties come up with about future interactions.
- e. You cannot force the parties to sit down and have a discussion. If either or both are unwilling to meet, the appropriate administrator (a supervisor, director or Dean) should do their best to gather information from both parties prior to determining next steps.

Responding to discrimination/harassment

Where initial information suggests that:

- there have been attempts to resolve the conflict in the past and one party has not followed through on their commitment,
OR
- no attempt has been made to resolve the conflict, but the behavior is so egregious that any reasonable person would know it is unwelcome,
OR
- the behavior is repeating and/or escalating,
OR

- the offending behavior is linked to one of the grounds for discrimination under the Manitoba Human Rights Code,
- OR
- the offending behavior is violent in nature,
- OR
- the offending behavior is sexual in nature,

the behavior should be documented and referred to the Diversity and Human Rights Advisor, Sexual Violence Education and Prevention Coordinator or Student Services for investigation and action. Where the offending behavior breaks a law, the appropriate authorities should be contacted.

This document is available in PDF and Microsoft Word format on the Brandon University website. A printed copy can be attained from the Diversity and Human Rights Office, Room 333 Clark Hall. Persons involved with the processes outlined in this policy (complainants, witnesses or respondents) may conduct their involvement verbally or with the assistance of an interpreter upon request.