



Chapter Connection

Managing Board Conflict

Contributed by Raymond C. Davis

By Webster's definition, conflict is something you would **want** to shy away from. Webster defines conflict in this way:

1: fight, battle, war 2a: competitive or opposing action of incompatibles: antagonistic state or action 2b: mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes, or external or internal demands.

Having read the definition, I'd avoid someone who has a difference of opinion because I'd expect an argument. Throughout the definitions are negative terms like "fight," "incompatibles," "antagonistic state," and "mental struggle." It sounds like it's going to be an uphill battle before it starts. So why start in the first place?

But if we take a proactive approach to solving our differences, those negatives may never come to fore. Let's change our perception of conflict by changing its definition. How does this sound?

"Conflict is when two or more people have a difference of opinion, of which a resolution can be achieved if a calm, respectful, "volume controlled" discussion can take place. If tempers flare or anger is present, we walk away. Once we calm down, we return to find the solution. In the end, opinions can be changed or not, but regardless, a collaborative decision can be made to move forward."

If you think about conflict in that manner, you're more likely to get involved.

According to Webster's definition, conflict is 100% negative because there's an assumption we've reached a point of no return and there's no chance of resolution because of incompatibility. In my definition, we understand it's okay to think differently, that there can be multiple solutions, and that all sides can agree on a solution if they stay calm and discuss things.

The Roads That Lead Directly to Webster's Conflict

Many paths lead to the negative side of conflict. Listed below are some of them:



Chapter Connection

1. **Assuming you're always right.** Confidence is fine, but no one is right 100% of the time.
2. **Assuming the other person is always wrong.** No one is wrong 100% of the time either.
3. **Believing there is only one solution.** After discussing the issue, you may choose your solution or you may choose the other person's solution. Through compromise, you may find a solution that blends both. OR you may decide on a solution that had not been previously discussed. Successful alternatives don't stop at the number 2!
4. **Not including the entire board.** The entire team must be kept up to date. Excluding someone can give the impression of hiding something. Guess what that promotes.
5. **Thinking the person who yells the loudest is right.** People who yell the loudest just alienates themselves from the team.
6. **Hoping it will go away if you ignore it.** The cliché "time heals all wounds" does not refer to reconciling a difference of opinion between people in an ARMA chapter. In this case, time only makes it worse and people drift farther away from finding a solution.

Tips to Solving Conflict Without the Negativity

Resolving conflict is a process. Here are positive steps to eliminate the chance of negativity arising;

1. Be proactive and address differences quickly
2. Respect everyone's opinion
3. Include the entire board
4. Walk away and take a break if anger arrives
5. Give a fair amount of time to review and resolve
6. Make the decision
7. Move on
8. Let it go

Examples of Board Conflict Within a Chapter



Chapter Connection

I've been a member of ARMA International for 20 years; a chapter board member for many years as well; and a member of the region team for the ARMA Mid-Atlantic Region. I've had a chance to witness and participate in many situations of conflict. Sometimes the situation was handled well and sometimes it wasn't. Listed below are situations and topics that often lead to conflict:

1. **New board member opinions being dismissed by seasoned members.** When I was new and made suggestion at our meetings, some seasoned members automatically thought I was wrong and chose not to discuss them. Remembering this treatment helps me be more open and respectful to new board members today.
2. **New board members thinking seasoned board members are past their prime.** Some new members want to make their mark right away, but it's a mistake to dismiss the views of the "seasoned" members.
3. **Trouble selecting meeting and seminar locations.** Could it be the food, the location, the time of day, and associated costs? They're all good questions worth discussing, but nothing worth arguing about.
4. **Spending chapter money.** Pick the solutions that benefit the members the most.
5. **Board members going beyond the scope of their positions.** Don't get angry at them; their intentions are usually good. Talk about it with them.
6. **Board members not performing.** There can be surprising reasons for non-performance. For example, once our webmaster was not getting some important updates done and was not returning our calls. Meanwhile, another member wanted to become the new webmaster and freshen the site. Finally, once we all sat down to talk, the issue was resolved easily, and with some laughter. The current webmaster had been afraid he'd "hurt our feelings" by saying he didn't have the time to update the site. Likewise, we didn't want to hurt his feelings by saying we wanted someone else. It's a solution that could've come a lot earlier if we'd have confronted it without such delay.

So allow me to make one final request. Strengthen your chapter board by working on the positive side of conflict. When presented with a difference of opinion, address it quickly, treat each other with respect, listen to the options, and make the best decision for the members. You and your members will be glad you did.