**Tips for minimising conflict in a forum committee**

**1. Create an atmosphere of trust and openness in the forum committee**

a. Lead by Example

If you want to build trust within your forum, then [**lead by example**](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_60.htm) , and show people that you trust others. This means trusting the co-chair, treasurer and secretary as well as other committee members and local authority. Never forget that committee members and your wider parent members are always watching and taking cues from you – take the opportunity to show what trust in others really looks like.

b. Communicate Openly

Open communication is essential for building trust. You need to get everyone in the committee talking to one another in an honest, meaningful way, and you can use several strategies to accomplish this.

c. Know Each Other Personally

One way to build trust is to encourage people to see other committee members as individuals. Think about creating situations that help them share personal stories, and bond. Use ice breaker exercises or build in a round circle and closing circle exercise at every meeting to help people get to know each other better e.g. one thing that’s inspired you this week, something positive that’s happened. Use these to help people to focus on positivity and creativity for the tasks ahead in the meeting.

d. Don't Place Blame

When people work together, honest mistakes and disappointments happen, and it's easy to blame someone who causes these. However, when everyone starts pointing fingers, an unpleasant atmosphere can quickly develop. This lowers morale, undermines trust, and is ultimately unproductive.

Instead, encourage everyone in the committee to think about the mistake in a constructive way. What can you all do to fix what happened, and move forward together? And how can you make sure that this mistake doesn't happen again?

e. Discourage Cliques

Sometimes, cliques can form within a committee, often between people who share common interests or tasks. However, these groups can – even inadvertently – make others feel isolated. They can also undermine trust between the committee as a whole.

Start an open discussion about this within the committee, and see what they think about cliques and their effect on other people and the meeting as a whole. Only by addressing the issue openly can you discourage this damaging behaviour.

f. Discuss Trust Issues

If your committee is an established group that has trust issues then it's essential to find out how these problems originated, so that you can come up with a strategy for overcoming them.

Consider giving committee members a survey to fill out anonymously. Ask them about the level of trust within the committee, as well as why they think there's a lack of trust. Once you've read the results, get everyone together to talk about these issues (but make sure that you respect the anonymity of the survey!)

**2. Build a group agreement**

Using flipchart ask the group what’s important to them about how they work together. If you have a large group, split them into smaller groups giving them flipchart to work on so that everyone has a chance to contribute. Bring the ideas together and get the group to agree each point. Don’t make it too long a list, but enough to cover key points. Ensure that the ground rules respect individual’s rights and responsibilities and include rules about behaviour such as:

* one person to speak at a time
* no one to criticise any other person
* don’t personalise differences of opinion
* Don’t put other people’s ideas down
* Value differences
* It’s ok to make yourself comfortable, take comfort breaks when needed
* Mobile phones on silent and don’t use in the meeting – go outside to take a call.

**3. Assume the role of a facilitator**

Believe the group can make good decisions, ensure that you maintain a neutral position and ensure equal participation. Clarify the purpose of the discussion, keep people on track and clarify views, options and decisions. Don’t assume more power than other people and use the meeting to get your ideas taken on board. This is a misuse of power and likely to generate conflict.

**4. Use different techniques for different purposes**

Try out different ways of having discussions or getting the group to think about different agenda items. If you need to generate ideas, use break out groups and the Think Storm technique – with all ideas welcome to generate creativity. Use whole group discussion when you want to keep everyone together and need decisions. There are many different techniques to draw on and different tools to use – buy a facilitators handbook to build your experience and own toolkit.

**5. Ask good questions to draw on group intelligence**

Clever use of open and closed questions can help to focus people’s thinking to either the problem and conflict or towards the solutions and outcomes people want as well as areas of agreement. Read books about coaching to build your range of questions – good facilitators have the questions to ask and not the answers.

**6. Pick up on areas of difference**

It’s good to pick up on points of difference and bring into the open any disagreements. Differences are positive and helpful when they are handled well. Use flipchart to acknowledge differences and bring in other people’s thoughts and ideas – ask other people to come up with more ideas and options – the more options you have, the better decision making you’ll make together.

**7. Bring Clarity to the situation**

Conflict can arise when there is confusion about goals, vision, values, roles and responsibilities, meaning, purpose, resources etc. The facilitator needs to gain group consensus about these elements on a regular basis and ensure that everyone is clear. The facilitator also needs to pick up on times when there is a lack of clarity about an area and help the group to discuss and agree.

**8. Re-focus people towards solutions and positive outcomes**

Use questions to refocus people’s thoughts and energies into solutions and the outcome wanted – make sure the outcome is specific, realistic and achievable and is built on a win win model**.**

**9. Give credit and praise**

Acknowledge what people have done well and praise openly. Encourage everyone to praise each other and notice what specifically people have done rather than general praise.

**10. Criticise in private**

It’s fine to have a session when you look at what went well and what didn’t go well about your activities, but if you’re going to give someone personal criticism then do it privately and not in front of the committee or others. Develop a no blame culture in your forum so that people find it easier to admit mistakes and learn from each other. No-one is perfect!

**11. Venue is important**

The right venue can make a real difference to the dynamics of meetings – think about the neutrality of the venue – avoid people’s homes if possible – it can start a competition about who has the most lovely home or making others feel uncomfortable if they don’t want to invite people to their home, temperature of the room can impact on the temperature between people, are chairs comfortable for a long meeting? Is it a church or a pub where people don’t feel comfortable going but are too polite to say, too far for some, not on a bus route. Is it in a public space where people can’t talk openly? Ask your committee how they feel about where you meet.