

How to use this document

This document is designed to help reframe your view of conflict and give you practical suggestions, helpful tips and trusted resources to learn more.

The sections covered in this companion guide are:

- How to tell the difference between a miscommunication conflict and unsafe behaviour
- A reminder that conflict can be health
- Tips to prepare for the conversation
- 8 steps to address the conflict:
 - Considerations when you're arranging the conversation
 - How to start the conversation
 - Listening and emotional intelligence
 - Identifying agreement and disagreement, including causes of conflict
 - Prioritising what matters most
 - Creating a plan
 - Do what you've said in your plan - and revisit it
 - Use the plan for progress

Ultimately, we want people to feel confident to address issues with volunteers in the early stages. The earlier conflict is named, the earlier it can be resolved. Not only is this kinder to all the individuals involved, but it also creates less stress and potentially less work for you. Practicing these skills on 'smaller' issues may also be less daunting or feel less challenging.

This document can be read in full and we encourage volunteer managers to do so before they have a conflict situation, so that you feel prepared to manage this. However, each section can be read on its own, making it easy for you to dip in and out for the information that will be most helpful for you.

TOP TIPS



This document can be read in conjunction with:

- Volunteer Handbook
- Top 10 links for Volunteering
- Volunteering Role Profile
- ... and more!

The full suite of documents will help those assessing their offer to volunteers and ensure best practice. They are available for free on the Spark Somerset website.

Managing Difficult Conversations and Reframing Conflict

Conflict is inevitable and unavoidable, in all areas of life. It happens in every team, role and organisation.

This guide is a practical companion to help volunteer managers handle difficult situations with confidence, clarity and care. It's not about winning arguments or fixing people.

Dealing with conflict is all about understand behaviour, improving working relationships and protecting the common purpose. The more we practice these conversations, the less uncomfortable they become and the easier it is to address issues early. Not only is it kinder, it is more effective than waiting until they escalate.

Miscommunication or behaviour that needs to be managed?

Sometimes, what looks like conflict is actually miscommunication - differences in:

- Understanding
- Expectations
- Communication styles or
- Perspective

These situations are often resolved through clarity, discussion and shared understanding.

At other times, the issue is not a misunderstanding but behaviour that creates risk or harm. This may include unsafe or inappropriate behaviour such as:

- bullying
- discrimination
- safeguarding concerns or
- not following agreed procedures (such as health and safety)

In these situations, the focus is not just on improving communication, but on maintaining safety, standards and organisational values.

While both situations require calm, clear conversations, behaviours that pose a risk to others or the organisation must be addressed more directly and consistently, with reference to policies and clear expectations. In volunteer settings, this may still require a supporting and proportionate approach - but it should not avoid accountability or necessary action.



The NSPCC have provided some resources on common safeguarding scenarios and how to respond to them. This advice is designed to be used when designing services, in order to keep young people safe. However, it provides helpful, real world examples of when behaviour may cross a boundary from miscommunication to creating risk or harm.

[NSPCC - Safeguarding example scenarios: examples and concerns](#)

Reframing conflict - an introduction

Conflict is not failure, it's information and communication. It is also inevitable and completely normal where people are working together.

In volunteer settings, conflict often arises from:

- Different communication styles
- Unclear expectations or boundaries
- Pressure, stress or emotional investment
- Different values, backgrounds or experiences

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Watch this TEDxAtlanta talk by [Chris White that talks about how conflict can be healthy.](#)

Avoiding conflict may feel kinder or easier, but over time it creates a culture of conflict avoidance, where issues build quietly and become harder to resolve. The healthiest teams don't avoid conflict - they handle it well.

Conflict can sometimes feel big and scary. When it's managed constructively, it can - and should - be a healthy part of working life.

When conflict becomes a conduct or safety concern

Not all conflict should be managed in the same way.

Where behaviour creates risk, harm or a safeguarding concern, this moves beyond a difference in perspective and requires a more structured and consistent response.

In these situations:

- The priority is safety and wellbeing, not just resolution
- Conversations should be clear, direct and grounded in policy
- Expectations and boundaries should be explicit, not implied
- You may need to seek advice, escalate, or follow formal processes

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When in doubt, refer to:

- Safeguarding procedures
- Health & safety guidance
- Volunteer agreements
- Other organisational policies
- Support from managers or colleagues

Volunteer management can feel more complex because people are giving their time freely. However, this should not lower expectations where behaviour puts others at risk.

You can still approach these conversations with empathy and respect - but accountability remains essential.

Before addressing the conflict - useful considerations

Preparation makes a significant difference. Being clear on the facts, the purpose of the conversation and the outcome you are hoping for, helps keep the discussion focused and constructive.

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Watch this video to [see the EPIC framework explained](#)

The EPIC framework helps to capture brief thoughts when preparing - it doesn't have to be something you spend hours on.

Explain - What's happening? What behaviour is the issue?

Predict - What could happen if it continues

Influence - What might help improve the situation?

Control - What behaviour can I control?

8 steps to address the conflict

Step 1 - Talk with the other person

When thinking about dealing with conflict, how and where you have the conversation matters.

Practical setup tips

- Ask the other person for a time that works for them
- Choose a private, neutral space where you won't be interrupted
- Sit side-by-side rather than opposite (where appropriate)
- Allow enough time - don't be tempted to rush

Check in with yourself

- What is the actual issue?
- Is this about the person - or the behaviour?
- What outcome am I hoping for?

The conversation is not designed to be you vs the other person, it should be framed as us vs the behaviour.

Step 2 - Focus on behaviour and events, not personalities

Knowing you need to talk to someone is great, but how can you start the conversation without prompting defensiveness, instead encouraging exploration and not accusation?

It IS possible to have a calm conversation. It's also possible to be compassionate without avoiding accountability.

If behaviour raises concerns about safety, safeguarding or organisational standards, refer to appropriate procedures and do not rely solely on informal resolution

Helpful conversation starters

- "Can we talk about something that's been difficult recently?"
- "I'd like to understand your perspective on..."
- "I've noticed [behaviour] and want to talk about how it's being perceived"
- "How can we improve how [example] works?"
-

Focus on behaviour and events, not personalities. It is very likely that the issue is with a behaviour, not the person. The person is not their behaviour.

- Say "When [this] happens..." instead of "When you do..."
- Describe specific examples instead of generalising

A helpful tool: the SBI model

To keep feedback clear and non-judgmental, you can structure examples using:

Situation - when and where did it happen?

Behaviour - what did you observe? (factually)

Impact - what was the effect on others, the team or the work?

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A useful question to ask yourself ahead of time is:

is this worth the fallout/stress?

This may help you approach the conversation with a different perspective and consider what is important

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Further reading: [Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most \(2023\)](#)

Resource: [ACAS - Challenging conversations and how to manage them](#)

Resource: [University of Ioaw Sentence Starters and Scripts for Difficult Conversations](#)

Step 3 - Listen carefully

Listen to understand, not to respond.

- Avoid interrupting
- Rephrase what you've heard to check understanding
- Ask clarifying questions
- Slow the conversation if emotions rise

Ask yourself:

- Do I understand my behaviour and theirs?
- Am I reacting, or responding?

Use open questions to explore perspective or gain clarity or understanding:

- "Tell me..."
- "Can you help me understand..."
- "What was your thinking at the time?"

This is behavioural intelligence - building perspective before trying to influence.

Step 4 - Identify agreement and disagreement

Many conflicts escalate because people are arguing about different things. Pause to:

- Summarise areas of agreement and disagreement
- Check the other person agrees with your summary
- Adjust until you both agree on what the conflict actually is

Common causes of conflict: (adapted from Christopher Moore)

- Relationship conflicts - based on communication or trust
- Structural conflicts - based on unclear roles or responsibility
- Value conflicts - based on background, beliefs, experiences
- Interest conflicts - based on pressures and stress tolerance
- Data conflicts - based on information gaps and assumptions

Step 5 - Prioritise the areas of conflict

Not everything needs equal energy - and you may have different ideas about what is important. Creating a list of shared priorities, so you both feel listened to, helps frame the next steps.

- Discuss which issues matter most to each of you
- Decide what genuinely needs resolving first

Ask yourself again:

- Is this worth the fallout or the stress?
- How can we both compromise or work together to get what we want?

Sometimes solution finding might require reflecting on how things are normally done vs how this situation needs things to be done. It should be okay to flex and adapt responses to meet people where they are and may make it more likely that they show flexibility in response.

For balance, it is also important not to over-promise and under-deliver - especially in situations where you know a certain resolution is not possible or does not fit with your organisation's values. Being honest and realistic gives the best chance of success.



A useful resource to learn more depth is [Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Framework](#)



[This blog post](#) gives more details about conflict causes and how to manage them

Step 6 - Develop a plan

Once you're clear on what matters most, agree what will change going forward.

- Focus on the future, not re-litigating the past
- Start with the most important issue first
- Be clear about who will do what, how and when
- Check understanding - don't assume agreement means clarity

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Further guidance can be found on the [NCVO website - Solving volunteer problems](#)

A good plan feels realistic, shared and achievable, not perfect. The priority here is that all involved feel listened to and part of the steps forward.

Where appropriate, make brief notes or a record of what has been discussed as well as any actions or key agreements. Share this with the volunteer. This helps provide clarity, supports follow up and ensures consistency - especially important if the conversation needs to be revisited.

Where behaviour involves risk or repeated concerns, agreed actions may need to be more structured, clearly documented and linked to organisational expectations

Step 7 - Follow through

Agreements only build trust if they're followed up.

- Stick with the conversation until actions are tested in practice
- Revisit the plan if things don't go as expected - add to your actions or decisions as the situation develops
- Conversations may need many 'revisits' as you learn what works - or doesn't - this is an important part of the process. Again, this is not failure!
- Maintain a collaborative, "let's work this out" approach
- Use your notes to reflect on any patterns that emerge over time, or where behaviour needs to be monitored - then translate this into action

Following through is about consistency, not control - unresolved issues often resurface if they're left half-addressed.

Patterns of behaviour, repeated concerns or escalating risk should be reviewed in line with organisational procedures and may require additional support or escalation

Step 8 - Build on success

Conflict doesn't end with agreement - it ends with progress.

- Notice and name what's improving
- Acknowledge effort, insight and change
- Celebrate small wins, even when things aren't fully resolved yet

Over time, handled well, difficult conversations often lead to stronger relationships, clearer expectations and more open communication.

Using structured conversations often gives way to more open, friendly communication. The earlier we can have those conversations, the less conflict we will have.

Remember...

- Conflict is not something to fear
- You won't get every conversation perfect
- Keep returning to common purpose
- Setting and managing expectations clearly, helps prevent future conflict
- Conflict handled well strengthens teams
- Conflict avoided, weakens teams