Solving Municipal Conflict

Trainer

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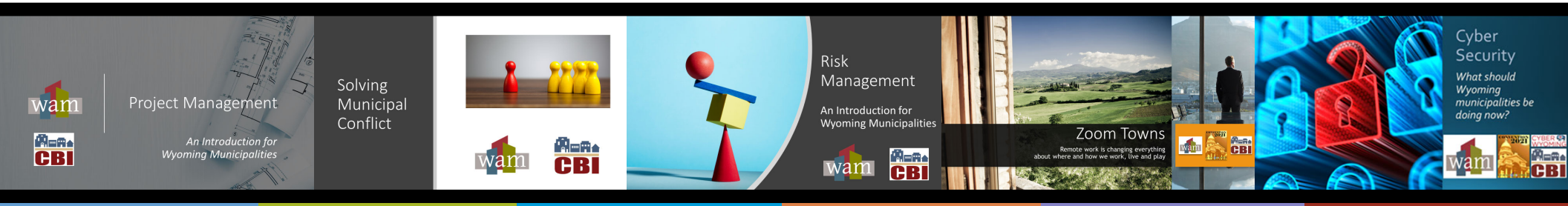

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Objectives

1. Learn to accept conflict
2. Understand importance of communication
3. Review strategies to resolve conflict
4. Examples of resolving conflict for Wyoming municipalities

Conflict is normal

- Every relationship has conflict – it is normal and even healthy
- Learning to deal with conflict is critical
- Managing conflict requires awareness, empathy, and communication skills
- Healthy conflict resolution leads to growth and strengthening of relationships, based on trust

Sources of conflict

Values

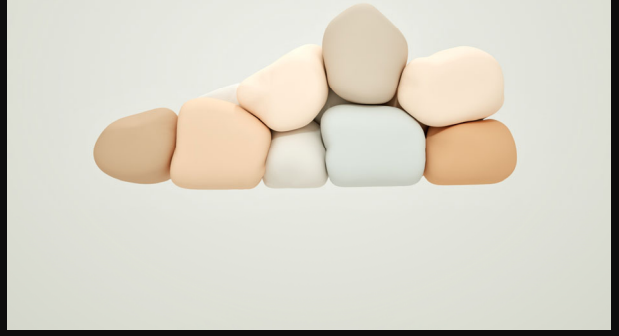
Motivations

Perceptions

Ideas

Desires

Fears



How do you handle conflict?

- Often, we humans end up destroying relationships instead of addressing conflict head-on
- Our natural reaction to conflict – fight or flight – is a very narrow set of choices to resolve conflict
- Controlling your emotions (and that kill or be killed instinct) is tough, but leads to solutions
- Once you are in control of your emotions, you can follow a conflict resolution process
- As leaders, others need to know we can be trusted to find those solutions

Conflicts happen – Embrace them

- Conflicts often bring change, which we resist
- Seek to use conflict to improve matters
- Avoiding or ignoring conflict will only allow it to worsen
- Address the problem as soon as possible

Check yourself

- Stay calm and alert
- Do not give in to the initial fight/flight reaction
- Control your emotions and behavior
- Pay attention to feelings, behaviors, and words being spoken
- Respect others' different perspectives, values, and experiences

You choose how to respond to conflict

UNHEALTHY RESPONSES

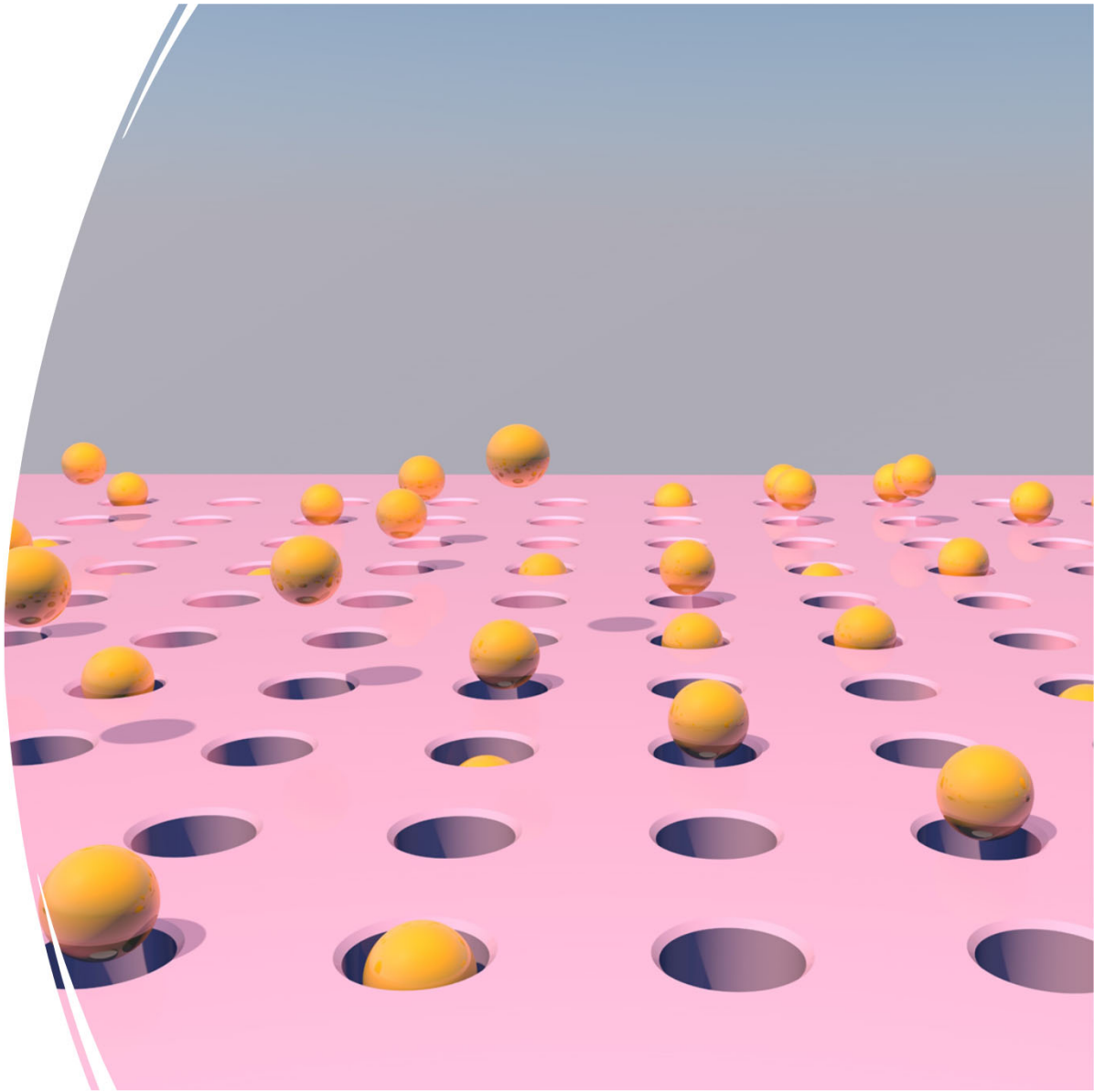
- Unable to recognize or respond to another's concerns
- Explosive, angry, hurtful, and resentful reactions
- Isolation, withdrawal, abandonment
- Expectation of bad outcomes
- Fear and avoidance of conflict

HEALTHY RESPONSES

- Recognize and respond to other's concerns
- Forgive and forget
- Seek compromise
- Avoid punishment
- Belief that problems can be worked out and everyone's needs will be met

Many dimensions of conflict

- Personal relationships – conflict can lead to arguments and break-ups
- Workplace – financial need for employment raises stakes
- Public – politics and transparency complicate the dynamics



The many colors of municipal conflict

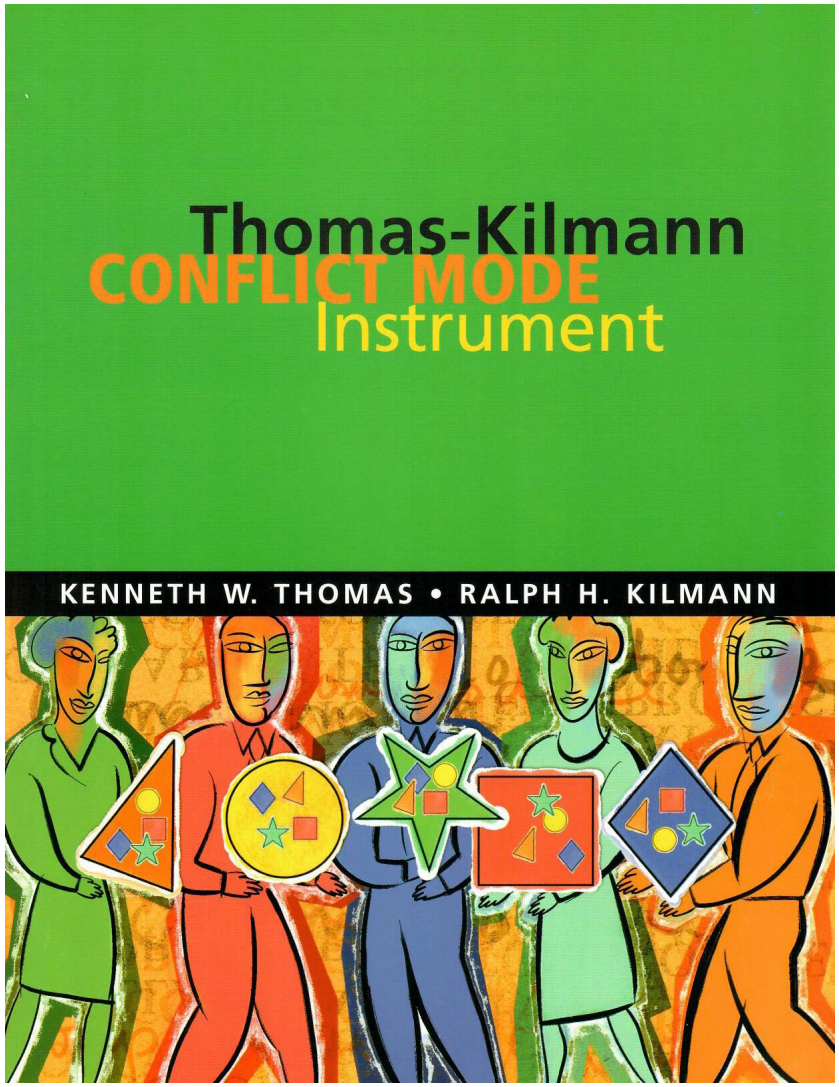
- Governments cannot be run like a business (legal mandate/constituents)
- Voters exercise control (accountability)
- Elected leaders and managers serve in stewardship role (ownership)
- Public decision-making process (transparency)
- Authority is distributed (teamwork)
- Resources are constrained (efficiency & effectiveness)
- Frequent interactions amongst leaders, managers, employees, taxpayers, contractors, vendors, customers, other governments, media, businesses, etc.

What can be done about conflict?

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann developed five conflict resolution strategies that people use to handle conflict:

- Avoiding
- Defeating
- Compromising
- Accommodating
- Collaborating

Based on the assumption that people choose how cooperative and how assertive to be in a conflict



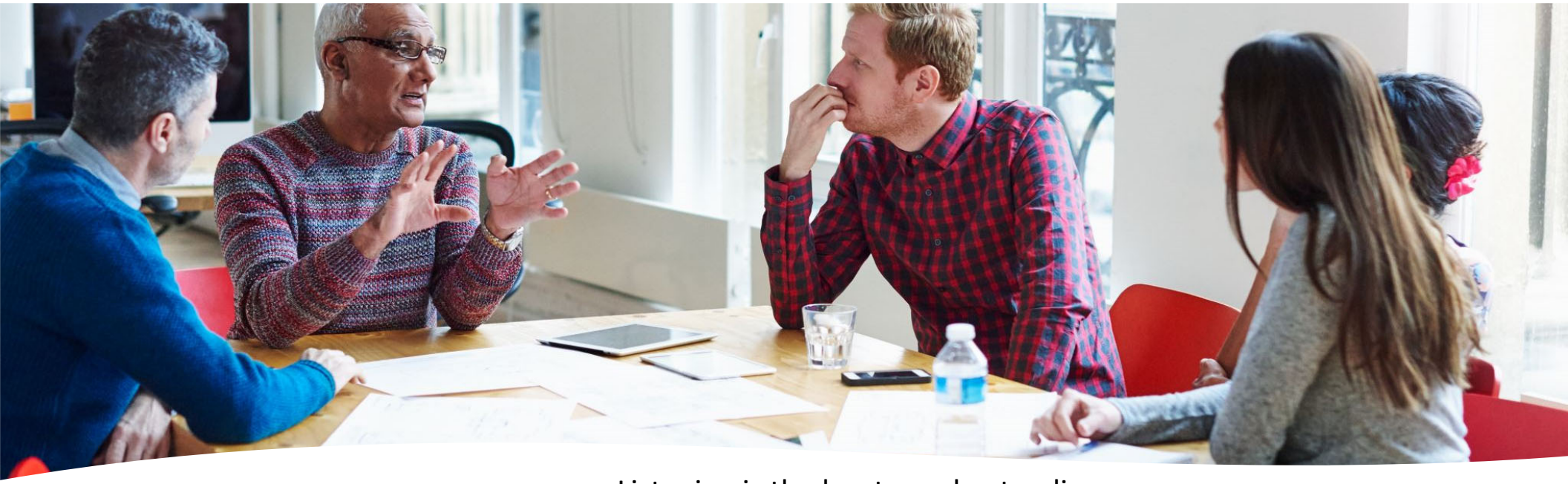
Steps to Conflict Resolution

Communication is the key to conflict resolution

- Do all you can to talk with the other person
- Make time – some circumstances require postponing conversation
- Each person should be able to share
- Focus on the problem, not the person
- Focus on the behavior or events, not on personalities
- Say “when this happens…” not “when you do this…”

Conflict resolution is often as simple as listening

- Conflict resolution starts with empathic listening – *put yourself in their shoes*
- Take the time to sit down and privately talk about the issue
- **The key to resolving conflict is in listening, not talking**
- You might start by saying, "What happened yesterday really bothers me. So, I'd like to hear where you are coming from to make sure we can work this out." And then you quietly *listen from the other person's perspective* – not yours



Active listening requires more than just hearing

- Listening is the key to understanding
- Give your complete attention to the person talking
- Do not interrupt
- Repeat back in your words what you are hearing
- Ask them to confirm your understanding
- Ask clarifying questions as needed
- The goal of listening is to **understand the other person**, not to react
- Don’t let yourself get distracted thinking about how you will respond!

Listen until you understand

- Try to repeat back to the person what you think they are saying, from their perspective. You can say something like, “Let me see if I understand you correctly. You are saying _____. Do I understand correctly?”
- Keep trying until they agree you understand
- A shared understanding can become the basis for resolution, but without understanding you have nothing to build on moving forward
- It is okay to disagree with someone (opinions), but disagreement without understanding only makes the conflict worse
- Understanding someone else’s perspective is a great way to show them respect; ignoring other’s values or perspective is disrespectful

Communication is the key

LISTEN

Seek first to understand

Only after understanding others should you seek to be understood (especially true for leaders)

Municipal leaders are leaders, not fighters

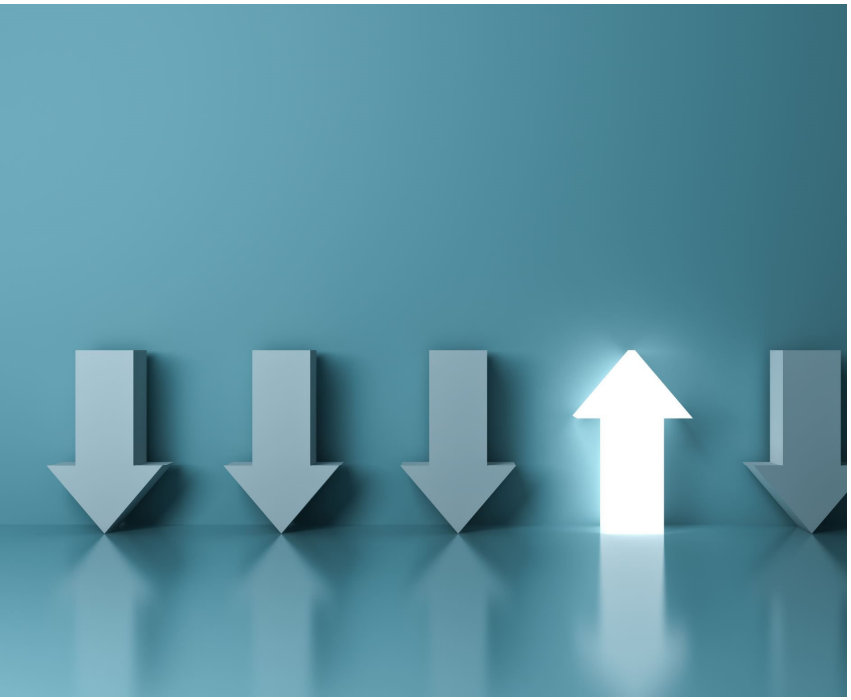
- As leaders, we should seek to resolve conflict without joining sides
  - Especially important in certain circumstances
  - Mayor must maintain decorum and follow agenda
  - Supervisor must help co-workers resolve their disagreement
- Guide the conversation
- Redirect to **focus on the problem**, not the people
- Create path for ongoing discussion process, if needed
- Focus on future

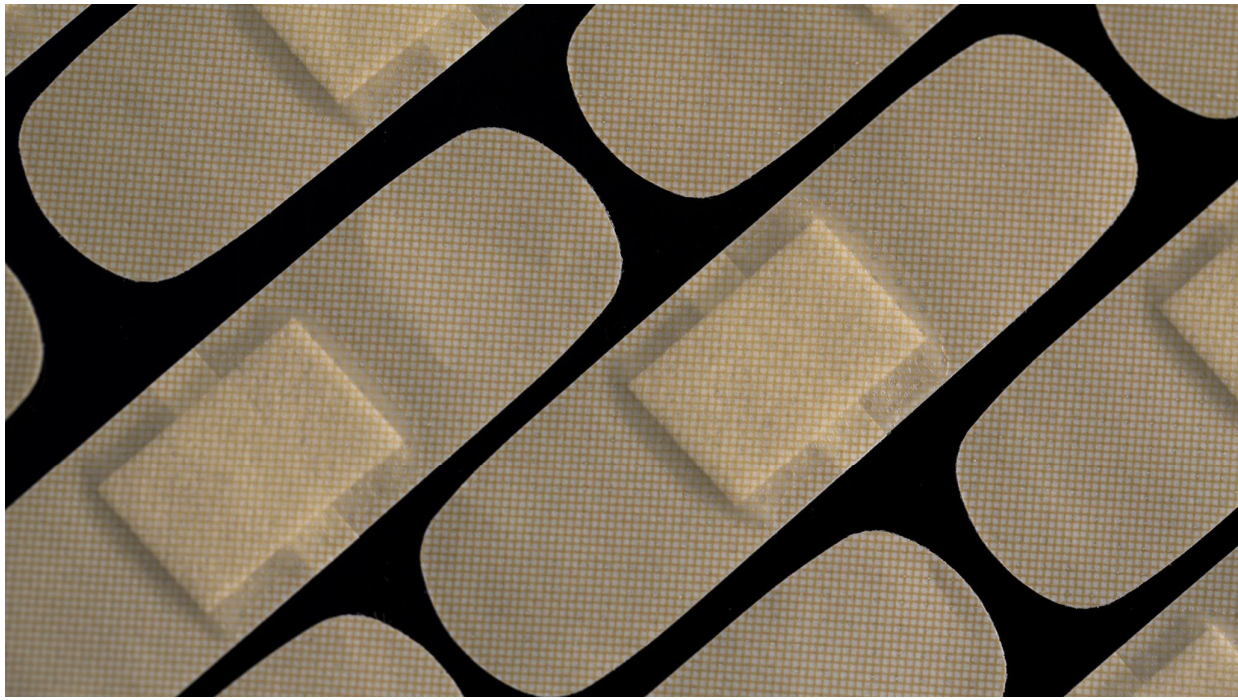
As you seek to understand, look for common ground

- While your conversation may cover many disagreements, don't let the negatives become your focus
- Find points of agreement, no matter how small, to start on a positive tone
- Be specific
- Identify common values, points of view, long-term vision, or even legal responsibilities that you can agree on
- Finding common ground allows the relationship to build trust
- Keep the conversation going

Identify points of agreement and disagreement

Leave room for different priorities and values



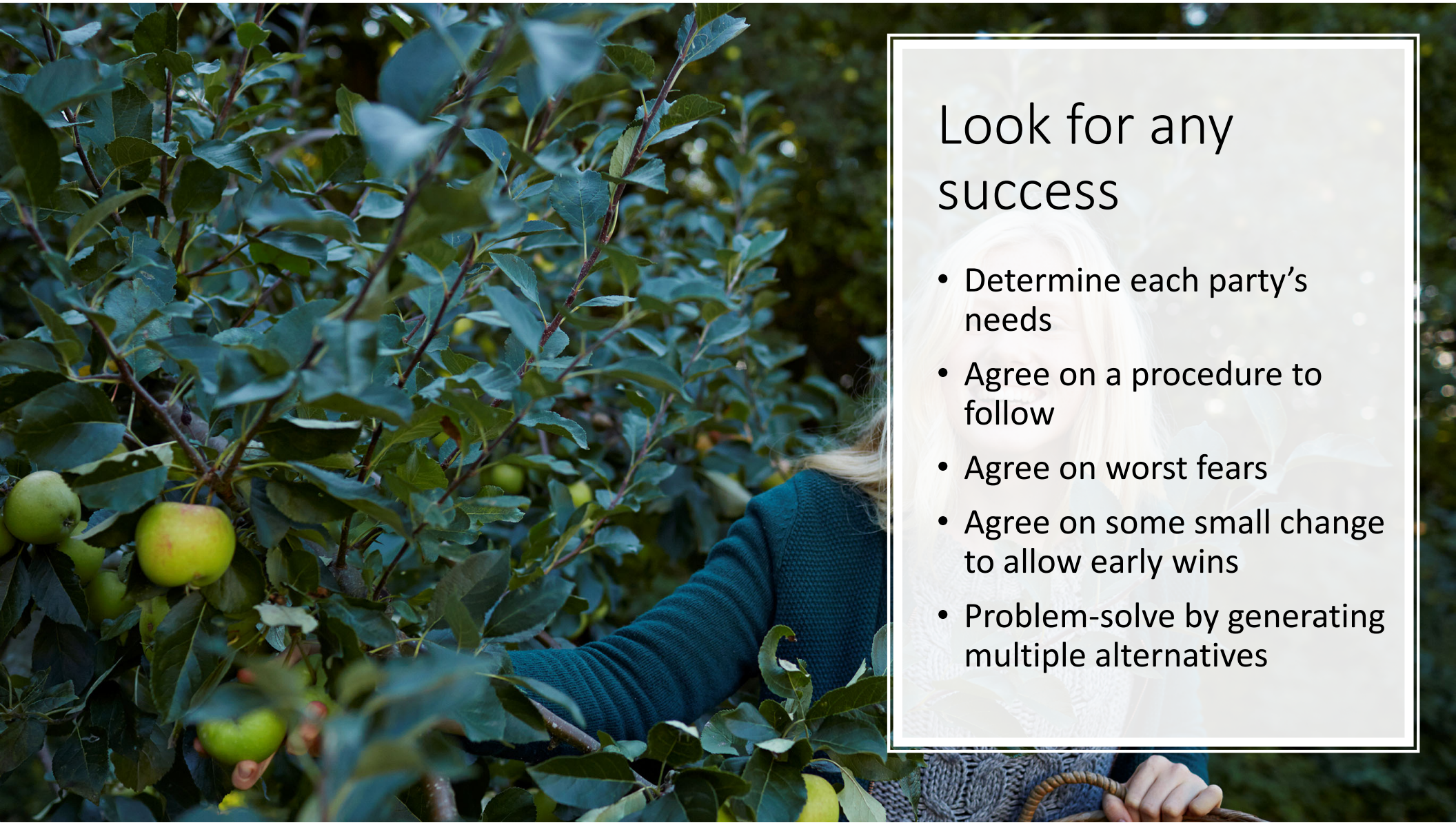


Set priorities

- There are likely many areas of conflict
- Priorities help by identifying values and a starting point
- Create a plan to work through each conflict

Follow through

- Keep talking until all the conflict is resolved
- Maintain a collaborative attitude to always “work it out”

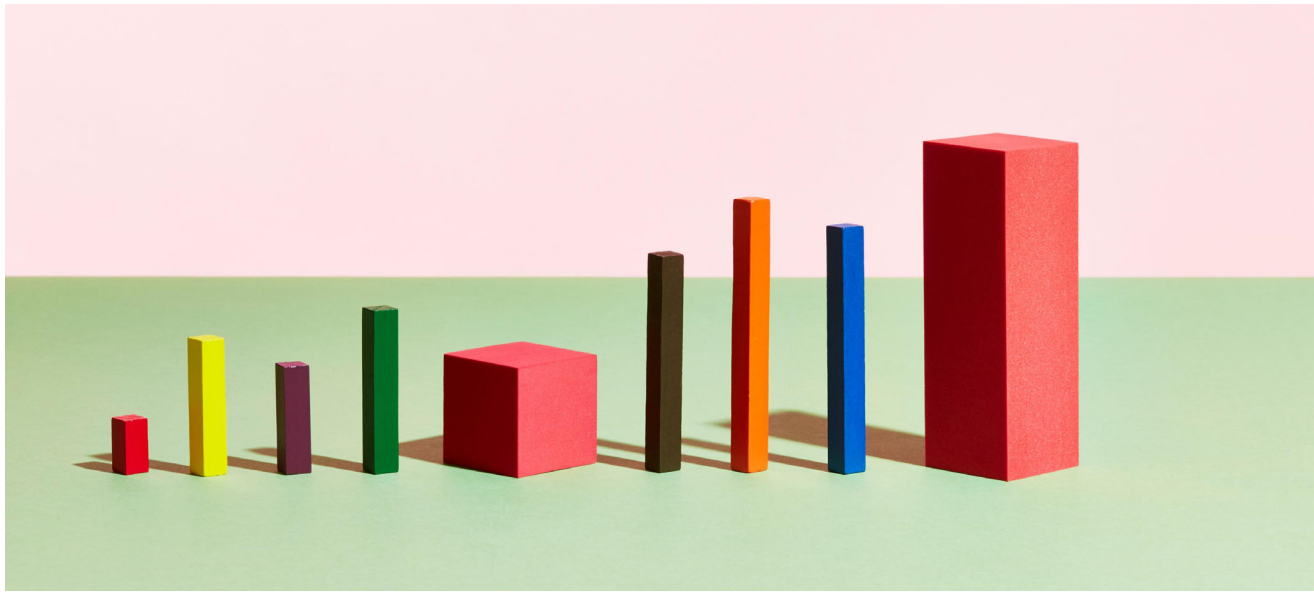


Look for any success

- Determine each party's needs
- Agree on a procedure to follow
- Agree on worst fears
- Agree on some small change to allow early wins
- Problem-solve by generating multiple alternatives

Build on every success

- Point out progress, even with small successes
- Compliment the other person’s efforts
- Share the congratulations and credit



Stay engaged!

- Solutions require everyone’s agreement, so watch out for silence or passive resistance as things proceed (real agreement comes from meeting their needs, which may change)
- Schedule follow-up to monitor actions
- Determine what you'll do if the conflict goes unresolved

Be genuine

- Conflicts cannot be resolved unless the hurt is acknowledged
- Genuine apologies go a long way to resolving conflict
- Own your words and actions, don’t gloss over with “if I said or did something that hurt”
- If you are not ready to apologize, keep talking with the other person
- Fake apologies do not work, and they can lead to grudges that never go away

Conflict amongst co-workers

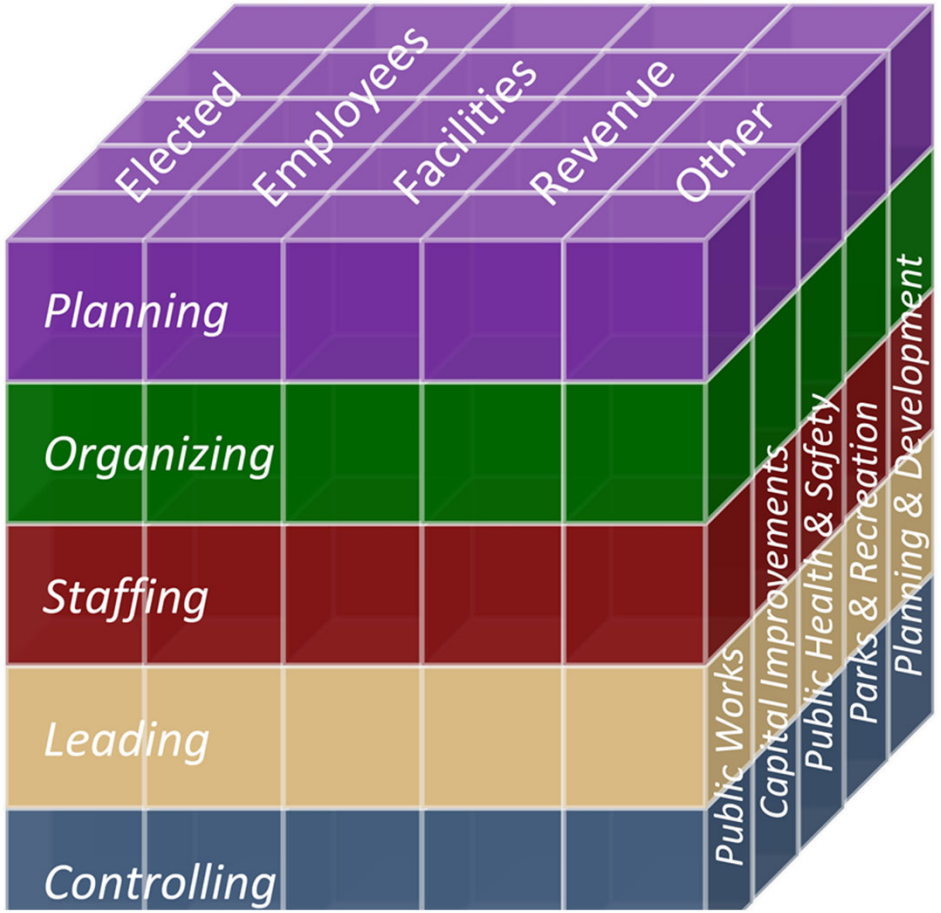
- Focus on your municipality's values
- Respect, Transparency, and Civility

A process to resolve employee conflicts

- Managers should create an open communication environment by encouraging employees to talk about work issues
- Make yourself available and listen to individual employee concerns
- Focus on the employee's perception of the problem and let them express their emotions
- Acknowledge the problem and the hurt
- Identify common ground and areas of agreement
- Define the problem in terms all parties can agree on
- Seek first to determine each party's underlying needs (what's in it for them that's worth fighting for?)
- Knowing each party's needs, solutions can then be created

Conflict amongst leaders

- Do not fight in public
- Councils must present a unified front with regard to process and final decisions, but that leaves plenty of room for disagreements and differing opinions
- Clarify roles & responsibilities
- Revisit strategic plan & mission



Written policies and standard operating procedures help

- Typical Personnel (Employee) Policies:
  - Drug Free Workplace – is it enforced?
  - Harassment/Discrimination – does it address politics?
  - Financial Management – compliance?
  - Use of motor vehicles – effective?
  - Safety – does it address masks or vaccines?
  - Employee handbook – current?
- Should review and update regularly
- Train employees
- Supervisors enforce, so discuss expectations

How can you improve your conflict resolution skills?

- Learn how to quickly control your emotions and relieve your stress
- Build your emotional awareness to understand yourself and others
- Improve your nonverbal communication skills that build trust (eye contact, calm voice, body language)
- Use humor to laugh *with* others (not *at* them)
- Prioritize relationships
- Focus on what you can do now to build a better future
- Learn how to let things go

Conflict Resolution Summary

- Conflicts are common – we need to be able to handle them
- Resolution often depends on controlling our own emotions, and also on our communication skills
- Listening skills are particularly critical to identifying the root of the conflict (needs)
- Proven conflict resolution processes are available as guides
- Municipalities can use written policies and standard operating procedures to manage and minimize conflict