

CONFLICT RESOLUTION: UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTS

5-C



Job Performance
Situation 5:
Promoting the Vision of
Head Start

HEAD START
MOVING AHEAD
COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING PROGRAM



Developed under delivery order number 105-97-2043, the Head Start Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Revised in 2000 by the American Institutes for Research under contract number 105-94-2020.

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REFERENCE

This activity develops skill competencies in *resolving unnecessary conflict*. Participants will learn how to describe the elements of conflict and how to recognize a range of personal styles for handling conflict. They will learn how to use strategies that build on their natural style for handling conflict. In addition, they will develop skills for preventing and resolving conflict, and they will apply conflict-resolution skills to a hypothetical Head Start case.

Related skill activities include 3–D, Decision-Making: Building Consensus; 3–E, Communication: Effective Spoken Communication; and 5–D, Presentations: Developing Effective Presentations.

Sources. Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community, *Partners in Decision Making*, 1997, and *Leading Head Start into the Future*, 1997. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Bellard, J., *Getting Unstuck: A Consumer's Guide to Collaborative Conflict Resolution*. 1996. Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service and the National Association for Community Mediation. *Community Partnership Training Program Conflict Resolution Workshop*. November 1994. Washington, DC: U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. *Facilitator's Skills Development Process, Personal Conflict Styles Toolbox Activity*. September 1994. Washington, DC: U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

Other resources. Additional information on conflict resolution can be obtained through the Head Start and Community Mediation Partnership from the National Association for Community Mediation, (202) 467-6226, and in "Enhancing Head Start Communication," *Head Start Bulletin*. (Spring 1997).

OVERVIEW

Conflict Resolution: Understanding the Elements

Outcomes. Participants who complete this activity will be able to

- recognize symptoms, sources, and stages of conflict
- recognize their personal style for handling conflict
- expand their repertoire of conflict-resolution skills
- use a sequential process for assessing and resolving conflicts
- apply conflict-resolution skills to Head Start cases

Materials. Newsprint and markers

Components

This activity can be done by one person, an informal group, or a formal workshop. We have provided suggested times, but participants and facilitators may wish to adjust these to their own timetables.

Step 1. Worksheet: A Matter of Style	25 min.
Step 2. Background Reading: Understanding Conflict	15 min.
Handout: Conflict-Prevention Skills	15 min.
Step 3. Worksheet: Putting it all Together	25 min.
Step 4. Background Reading: Conflict-Resolution Skills	20 min.
Handout: Reaching a Win-Win Solution	10 min.
Handout: The Demoralized Team	10 min.
Step 5. Worksheet: Applying Conflict-Resolution Skills	45 min.
Step 6. Summary	10 min.
Suggested total time	2 hrs. 55 min.

This activity contains 23 pages.

STEP 1. WORKSHEET: A MATTER OF STYLE¹



Suggested time: 25 min.

Purpose: This worksheet will help you reflect on your feelings and thoughts about conflict.

Part I (15 min.) Answer the following set of questions. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers.

1. What messages did you get about conflict when you were growing up? (Examples: “It’s impolite to disagree in public.” Or, “You better stand up for yourself.”)
2. When you hear the word *conflict* now, how do you feel? (Examples: “Conflict makes me feel nervous.” Or, “Conflict makes me feel powerful—I love a good debate.”)
3. When someone disagrees with you about something important or challenges you in front of others, how do you usually react? (Examples: “When there’s a conflict, I usually get very quiet and back off.” Or, “When there’s a conflict, I usually jump right into the conversation.”)
4. Working as a team means learning to work through conflict together. What would you like the other team members to know about how you deal with conflict? (Example: “When I’m under stress, I usually get defensive.”)

¹ Adapted from Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community, *Partners in Decision Making*. 1997. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, pp. 42-43.

5. Think about a time when you felt you handled a conflict effectively. What made this experience effective?

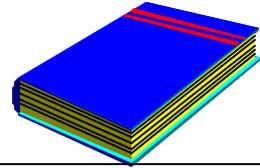
6. Think about a time when you felt you could have handled a conflict more effectively. What could you have done to improve the process and outcomes?

7. If you could change two aspects of how you handle conflict, what would they be?
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Part II (10 min.) If you are working in a small group, pair up with another participant to discuss your answers and compare notes.

STEP 2. BACKGROUND READING: UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT



Suggested time: 15 min.

Study the following reading. Feel free to highlight sections or write comments in the margins throughout these activities.

I. WHAT IS CONFLICT?

Conflict can be thought of as differences in perspectives, which are inherent in every organization. The diversity of perspectives within organizations helps generate ideas and facilitate change. If it is managed wisely, conflict is an opportunity.

Effective leaders often see conflict as a source of vitality and as an impetus for change. They recognize and accept disagreement. By doing so, they not only find ways to analyze the conflict but also to manage and resolve it.

Even effective leaders, however, require a safe and supportive organizational climate in which relationships are based on trust and mutual respect. Only in a supportive organizational environment can staff feel safe to express differences of opinions, and work toward “win-win.”

Symptoms, Sources, and Stages of Conflict²

How do Head Start leaders recognize conflict? Symptoms include increased tensions, disagreements and complaints, and blaming among staff, as well as avoidance among staff members.

Sources of conflict may include

- misunderstandings or failures to communicate
- differences in values and goals
- differences in approaches to work
- job roles and responsibilities that seem to be at cross-purposes
- lack of cooperation
- authority or noncompliance issues
- differences in the interpretation of rules, policies, or standards

² Adapted from *Facilitator's Skills Development Process, Personal Conflict Styles Toolbox Activity 6b*. September 1994. Washington, DC: U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

Conflict can be thought of as a continuum of tension, with escalating stages. At one end of the continuum are differences; at the other end is a battle.

<i>Differences</i>	Even organizations that seem to be homogeneous are diverse, and not only in terms of culture and country of origin. Diversity also exists in terms of learning style, gender, problem-solving approaches, philosophy, values, circumstances, and temperament. Differences in and of themselves do not cause conflict, but they can turn to conflict if they are not respected, valued, and understood.
<i>Disagreement</i>	Disagreement begins when people compare their preferences and priorities with those of others and find that they differ. Disagreement can be harmless, with no need for resolution. Sometimes people agree to disagree.
<i>Problem</i>	When disagreements or differences result in negative consequences for at least one party, they become problems. Unresolved problems may escalate into a dispute or a battle.
<i>Dispute</i>	In a dispute, more than one party acknowledges the differences and the problem. At least one party expresses a desire to solve the problem.
<i>Battle</i>	A dispute escalates into a battle when the parties feel that their goals are incompatible. None of the parties is committed to solving the problem. Instead, the parties invest their energies separately to “win.”

During each stage of the continuum, individuals have choices:

- They can come to terms with their differences before the differences become disagreements.
- They can handle their disagreements before they become problems.
- They can address their problems before they become disputes or battles.

II. CONFLICT: A PERSONAL DEFINITION

Conventional definitions of conflict are important to understand, but how we think about and respond to conflict on a personal level is just as important. After all, our style influences how we interpret and manage conflicts not only in our personal lives, but in our work lives as well—when we sit at the table for staff meetings, supervise staff, and develop agreements with other agencies.

How people handle conflict depends on their upbringing, experiences, values, culture, and temperament. Some members of your team may shy away from conflict and give in rather than explore differences of opinion. Others may feel it is impolite to disagree or argue with another person in public. Others may thrive on jumping into the hot seat.³

Styles of Handling Conflict⁴

As you read this section on different ways of handling conflict, think about how you would characterize your own style, as well as the styles of one or two particular people you work with.

Competing characterizes an individual who pursues her own concerns, sometimes at another person's expense. This is a power-oriented mode in which the individual may use her power and skills to “win “ (ability to argue, outrank, etc.). A person with a “competing” style does not often shy away from conflict. Rather, she uses the situation to “stand up for her rights,” defend a position that she believes is correct, or simply win.

Accommodating is the opposite of competing. An accommodating person often neglects her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of others. Accommodating may take the form of complying with another person's request (even when preferring not to) or yielding to another person's point of view.

Avoiding characterizes a person who does not want to address conflict; she will take whatever steps she can to pretend the conflict does not exist. Avoiding may take the form of diplomatically sidestepping or postponing an issue, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation.

Collaborating characterizes a person who makes every attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies the concerns of all persons. She

³ Adapted from *Partners in Decision Making*. 1993, p. 20.

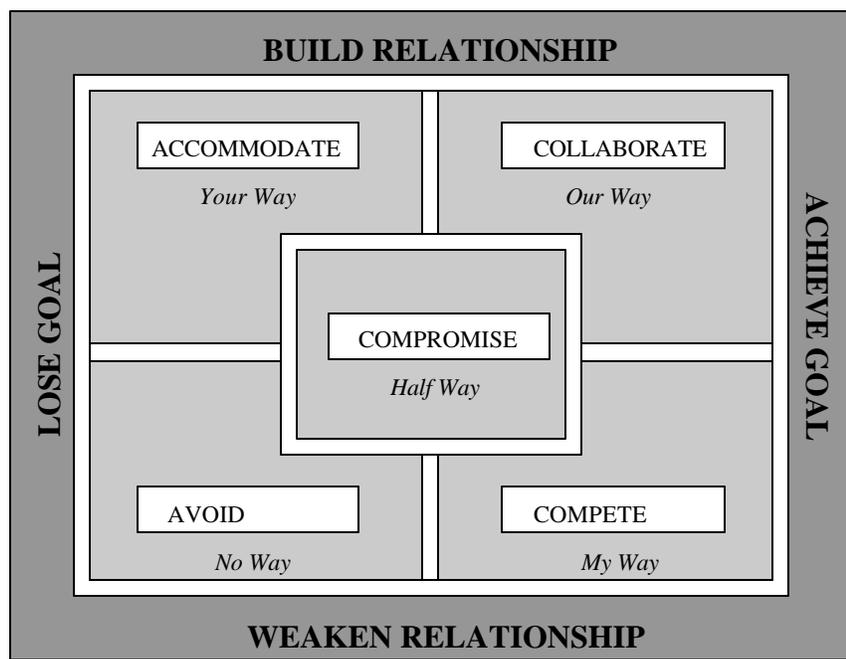
⁴ Adapted from *Personal Conflict Styles Toolbox Activity* 6b. 1994.

carefully examines the issues to identify the underlying concerns of all involved, and to find an alternative that meets everyone's concerns.

Compromising characterizes an individual who falls between competing and accommodating. A person who is compromising wants to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies the parties involved.

Compromising might involve splitting the difference, making an exchange or concession, or seeking a quick middle-ground position.

CONFLICT-RESOLUTION STYLES⁵



How to Take Advantage of Your Natural Styles

People with different styles bring complementary strengths to the table. Knowledge about your preferred style can provide you with valuable insights and help you strengthen your skills in managing and resolving conflicts. Once you have identified your style, consider the following strategies to improve your conflict-resolution practices.

⁵Bellard, J. *Getting Unstuck: A Consumers Guide to Collaborative Conflict Resolution*. 1996. Washington, DC: Corporation for National Service and the National Association for Community Mediation, p. 2. Reprinted with permission of the National Association for Community Mediation.

If you are competing:

- Let go of your position for a moment. Think about what the other person needs and wants.
- Work with others to identify underlying concerns and issues.
- Consider all the options, and how all the parties stand to benefit from each one.

If you are accommodating or avoiding:

- Focus on your own concerns. What are your needs and goals?
- Give yourself time to gather data that support your case—your goals and the reasons they matter.
- Take a deep breath; calmly state your concerns and why they are important.
- If you sense that a confrontation is brewing, don't just give up. Objectively present your point of view while providing data to support it.

If you are compromising:

- Slow down. Don't always choose the fastest solution. Take your time to find alternatives that really work for everyone.

If you are collaborating:

- Make your thinking explicit when you're at the table. Help your colleagues understand how you work with others to find solutions that benefit everyone.



HANDOUT: CONFLICT-PREVENTION SKILLS

Suggested time: 15 min.

Study the following reading. Feel free to highlight sections or write comments in the margins. In the space next to “Other,” note any additional skills that you feel are important for building collaborative relationships.

As local program leaders, you set the stage for building collaborative working relationships with families, staff, and partners in your community. As federal staff, you set the stage for collaboration between local programs and the federal office and among review team members.

The following skills can help you *prevent* conflict or assist you and your team in *managing* or *resolving* conflict:

- Help the team focus on the task and stay on track
- Be mindful of other people’s styles
- Make sure everyone has a chance to participate
- Defend others from personal attacks
- Make suggestions on how to proceed
- Help negotiate
- Ask questions to clarify expectations, issues, and possible directions to take
- Help find needed resources
- Provide constructive feedback
- Share observations
- Coach other staff
- Help team members plan how to implement their agreement
- Help team members evaluate their efforts and make needed changes

List other skills that you think can contribute to preventing or managing conflict:

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-
-

STEP 3. WORKSHEET: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER



Suggested time: 25 min.

Purpose: This exercise will help you reflect on your style of handling conflict and ways you can take advantage of that style to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts.

Part I (15 min.) Answer the following five questions after you complete the Step 2 Background Reading: Understanding Conflict, and the Step 2 Handout: Conflict-Prevention Skills.

1. How would you characterize your style(s) of handling conflict (competing, accommodating, avoiding, collaborating, compromising)?
2. How is your style of handling conflict similar to the styles of your team members? How is it different?
3. How do these different styles affect the ability of your team to handle conflicts?
4. Identify two strategies that would help you improve your style of handling conflict. (You may wish to refer to the Background Reading in Step 2.)

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5. Review the information presented in the Conflict-Prevention Skills Handout. Then identify two skills you currently practice and two new skills you would like to try.

Currently practice:

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Will try:

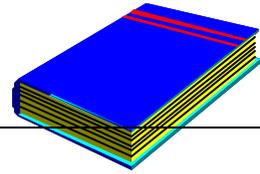
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Part II (10 min.) If you are working in a small group, pair with another participant to discuss your answers and compare notes.

STEP 4. BACKGROUND READING:

CONFLICT-RESOLUTION SKILLS



Suggested time: 20 min.

Study the following reading. Feel free to highlight sections or write comments in the margins.

I. USING A SEQUENTIAL PROCESS FOR ASSESSING AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS⁶

How a conflict is played out and resolved depends on the degree of tension between the parties, the history of the conflict, and the nature of the issues involved.

While each conflict is unique, leaders can use a similar, sequential process to assess and resolve conflicts. The process involves six stages and a set of questions for each one.

Stage 1. Define the Problem

The first step involves clearly defining the problem—the nature of the conflict and the fundamental issues. Ask these questions:

- What triggering event set off the conflict?
- What are the differences and perceptions among the members?
- Are the issues on the table the fundamental issues or an indication of some other issue that has not been raised?
- How do people relate differently as a result of the conflict? How will these actions and feelings affect the overall characteristics of the culture (norms, values, philosophies, rules, and climate)?
- How would each individual like things to be?
- Why is change or action necessary? What could be the consequences if no action is taken?

⁶Adapted from *Personal Conflict Styles Toolbox Activity 6b*. 1994.

Stage 2. Clarify the Needs

Clearly identify the needs of everyone involved. By taking everyone's perspectives into account, you are likely to develop solutions that benefit everyone.

- What is each member's statement or interpretation of what she wants most as a collaborative group goal?
- Do all the statements reflect an understanding of the nature of the conflict?

Stage 3. Generate Possible Options

Generate a range of possible solutions. This will help everyone involved analyze the plausibility of different options and their potential viability.

- What are the possible solutions?
- How does each member prioritize each solution?

Stage 4. Evaluate Proposed Options

Develop criteria that can be used to examine and evaluate each option. To test proposed options, ask these questions for *each one*:

- Do all members understand the solution?
- Is it realistic? That is, does the program have the resources (money, personnel, time, etc.) for implementation?
- Are all members of the team committed to the idea?
- What could go wrong?
- What are the potential benefits?

Stage 5. Develop an Action Plan

Once you have evaluated the benefits and barriers of the proposed options, you are in a good position to choose an effective solution. When the team members have reached agreement on the solution, ask these questions to develop an action plan:

- What small steps can the team take to achieve the best results?
- Who will take the lead for each step? Who else will be involved?

- What is the time frame for each step?
- What criteria will be used to evaluate the plan's effectiveness?

Stage 6. Develop a Contingency Plan

Now that your action plan has been developed, what will you do if unforeseen circumstances make it difficult to carry out? You need to develop well-thought-out, well-organized written contingency plans *in advance*.

- What will the backup plan be if the first plan does not work?
- Is the backup plan realistic? Does the program have the resources (money, personnel, time, etc.) for implementation?
- Are all members of the team committed to the idea?
- What could go wrong?
- What are the potential benefits?

II. SEPARATING INTERESTS FROM POSITIONS⁷

Interests are the needs, concerns, and values that motivate each person. They represent *why* a person wants something, and they get at underlying issues.

Positions are the actions a person will take to meet her needs. A position represents the *outcome* a person wants.

The ability to separate interests from positions is key to resolving conflict for these reasons:

- Focusing on positions often creates a competitive, even combative, struggle in which each party is determined to win.
- Separating interests from positions assists parties in focusing on the underlying issues rather than dealing with ideological or situational reactions.

⁷ Adapted from *Community Partnership Training Program Conflict Resolution Workshop*. November 1 Washington, DC: U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Module 5, pp. V-4, 59–61; and *Personal Styles Toolbox Activity*. November 1994.

- Focusing on interests rather than positions increases communication and the possibility of agreement.
- Identifying interests requires taking a step in defining and analyzing the conflict; such a step is necessary to reach a resolution.

Consider an example.

Tim, a program specialist from the Regional Office, is taken aback when he learns about the home-based socialization component at Cliff Woods Early Head Start: “Parents only meet four times a year to hear an expert talk? Haven’t you seen the regs?” Martha, the center director, defends her position: “Listen, more than four times a year is unrealistic for our center and for parents, too.” Martha and Tim continue the debate, each reiterating what they want. Consequently, they lock horns (or positions).

Tim then changes the focus of the conversation. He talks about *why* bringing parents and children together more often is important—how it can help children develop social skills while helping parents build informal networks of support. Martha then shares her interests—she feels that parents are already overburdened between working, attending job training, and trying to raise children with limited resources. She feels that given their schedules, they just won’t be able to participate in too many socialization activities. Besides, the satellite sites don’t have the space to accommodate families for socialization activities. Because Tim’s and Martha’s interests are now center stage, their conversation shifts. They are able to develop a plan collaboratively that meets everyone’s needs. Martha agrees to bring small groups of parents and children together more frequently to socialize—whether it’s at the local playground or in the children’s room at the local library.

Tips for Separating Interests from Positions⁸

- Change your focus. Rather than thinking about winning the conflict, think about what needs, concerns, and values motivate your position. Why is the issue important to you? What do you hope to gain? What do you fear you might lose?
- Clearly state your interests rather than your position.
- Ask questions to elicit and clarify the other parties’ interests—the

needs, concerns, and values that motivate their position.

HANDOUT: REACHING A WIN-WIN SOLUTION⁹



Suggested time: 10 min.

Study the following Handout. Feel free to highlight sections or write comments in the margins.

Traditional methods of negotiation—holding discussions to arrive at a compromise that is acceptable to everyone—are based on power relations in which one party wins and another loses. The win-win strategy involves collaboration and negotiation. It is based on interest rather than position. It can lead to agreements that satisfy all parties.

Next time you have a conflict, use these principles to reach a win-win solution:

- View participants as problem solvers
- Separate the people from the problem
- Be soft on the people, hard on the problem
- Focus on interests, not on positions or the bottom line
- Help participants create multiple options for *mutual* gain
- Use objective criteria
- Reason and be open to reason; yield to principles, not to pressure

⁹ Adapted from *Conflict Resolution Workshop*. 1994. Module 5, V-9.



HANDOUT: THE DEMORALIZED TEAM¹⁰

Suggested time: 10 min.

Read the following case, then complete the Step 5 Worksheet.

Each year, the Head Start staff prepare for family recruitment and registration with a “one-stop shopping” day. Parents are invited to spend half a day learning about services that are available to them through the Head Start program. They learn about clinics and about the physicians who can become their child’s primary provider. An eligibility worker attends to help eligible families apply for Medicaid, WIC, and other services. Parents also learn about extended-day child-care programs, and they can choose from a dozen short workshops on literacy and job-training programs, healthy diet recipes, support groups, and other topics.

Two days before the event, the project planning team runs into trouble. Kathy is blaming Vanessa for sending out the notices late to the participating community agencies. Darlene had agreed to line up transportation for families that needed it, but she never followed through on her promise. The teachers do not have enough information to pass on to the parents. Billy rejects any idea that is presented for fixing this disaster; he claims that it is too late and nothing will work now.

“When you agree to be part of a team, you have to carry your share of the work,” Kathy says, looking at Vanessa. “It isn’t fair to the rest of us when one person always messes up.”

“You have no right to blame me,” replies Vanessa. “We couldn’t meet as often as we needed to, and when we did meet, no one ever listened to my suggestions.”

“Maybe we should cancel the whole thing,” says Billy. “After all, we can’t pull it off. Darlene never followed through with transportation, so parents have no way of getting to the event. Even the teachers are upset, since they were never really part of the planning and don’t have enough information.”

¹⁰ Adapted from Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community, *Leading Head Start into the Future*. 1997. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Human Services, p.71.

“Canceling is not an option and you know it, Billy,” retorts Kathy. “You are supposed to be the team leader but you aren’t open to anything. We met with the teachers this morning and gave them flyers. And if we need to consider a different approach to transporting the families, then let’s do it. I’m tired of people not following through and making us all look bad. And besides, when you complain behind our back to the director, that certainly doesn’t help move anything forward.”



STEP 5. WORKSHEET: APPLYING CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS

Suggested time: 45 min.

Part I (10 min.) If you are working with a small group, conduct a role play. Participants read the parts of Kathy, Vanessa, and Billy.

Part II (15 min.) After the role play, use the following questions to begin a discussion. If you are working on your own, answer the questions in the space provided. You may find it useful to refer to *Understanding Conflict*, the Step 2 Background Reading, and *Conflict Resolution Skills*, the Step 4 Background Reading.

1. What seem to be the primary causes of the conflict?
2. How would you characterize each person's style of handling conflict?
3. What are the issues involved?
4. List a position statement (wants and needs) of the parties (see the Step 2 Background Reading).
5. List the underlying interest (motivation) for each position statement.

Part III (10 min.)

Answer the following questions on your own (see the Step 4 Background Reading and the Reaching a Win-Win Solution Handout).

For questions 1 through 4, imagine that you are Kathy:

1. What strategies could you use to help team members focus on interests rather than positions?

2. How would you involve the team in generating a list of options that takes into account each person's point of view?

3. How would you involve the team in identifying the barriers and benefits of each option?

4. How would you involve the team in developing and implementing an action plan? What strategies would you take in both the development and implementation stages?

5. Think about a time when you and a co-worker locked horns (or positions).
 - What could you have done differently to focus on interests rather than positions?
 - How do you think the outcomes might have changed as a result of this change in focus?

Part IV (10 min.) If you are working in pairs or a small group, discuss your answers and compare notes.



STEP 6. SUMMARY

Suggested time: 10 min.

Key Points

- The symptoms, sources, and stages of conflict
- Different styles of handling conflict
- Conflict-prevention skills
- Conflict-resolution skills
- Separating interests from positions
- Reaching a win-win solution

Personal Review

What did you learn from this activity?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

How will you use your new knowledge and skills in your work?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

What other things do you think you might need to learn in order to master the skill of conflict resolution?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

