Informal Conflict Resolution Resources

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Indiana State University
Faculty Ombuds Office

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Introduction

Many individuals who experience workplace conflict are interested in informal options for resolving their concerns. Usually, individuals feel it is in their best interest to avoid the time, stress, and hard feelings created by a formal grievance process and are interested in maintaining or improving their working relationships with their colleagues and supervisors. This resource document provides suggestions and resources for *informal* conflict resolution.

> ***Common examples of concerns include:***
> - Decision-making is not transparent; there is no written procedure or explanation
> - Policies and procedures are not followed, or are followed only when convenient
> - Decisions appear not to be even-handed; the person feels targeted
> - Behavior of colleagues or supervisors is perceived as disrespectful or unprofessional

Consultation

When dealing with conflict situations in the workplace, many people benefit from consulting with a neutral party or someone without first-hand knowledge of the situation. Some options for seeking this type of consultation are described below.

Faculty Ombuds

The faculty ombuds is a tenured faculty member appointed to provide informal, confidential, and neutral consultation to faculty members who have questions or concerns about workplace issues. The ombuds is charged with pursuing equity, fairness, and mutually agreeable problem resolution.

- The ombuds **can** provide information, guidance, and suggestions about multiple alternative courses of action and help you decide which path is right for you.
- At times, the ombuds **may** be able to facilitate a conversation between two or more willing individuals, or address concerns with a third party on behalf of a visitor.
- The ombuds **cannot** advocate for you personally, testify on your behalf, or act as a support person or consultant during a formal proceeding.

Peer Advisors

The ombuds office maintains a list of tenured faculty members who are willing to support, advise, and advocate for faculty in a way that is beyond the scope of the ombuds office. For example, these peer advisors may be willing to offer advice, attend meetings or hearings with

individuals in need of support or consultation, and assist with writing or responding to grievances. The Indiana State University chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) serves to advocate for academic freedom and shared governance and may also be willing to offer support for faculty in need of consultation, support, and representation both prior to and throughout formal proceedings.

Human Resources

Although the Office of Human Resources does not directly deal with formal faculty processes, they may be able to provide supportive consultation for questions about policies, disciplinary processes, or interpersonal conflict. Contacting Employee Relations (812-237-4114) may be a useful option for general consultation.

Faculty Senate Chairperson

According to Policy Library 146.16, any questions about the interpretation of the Bylaws to the Faculty Constitution should be directed to the Faculty Senate Chairperson. This would include procedural questions regarding the Faculty Discipline and Dismissal Proceedings policy or the University Faculty Grievance policy, as well as questions about the role and function of the University Faculty Senate or its standing committees.

Informal Resolution

The following suggestions provide a range of possibilities for those seeking informal resolution options. This list is by no means exhaustive; rather, it is intended to help individuals generate possible courses of action that might be well-suited to their particular situation.

Individual Conversation

Though difficult, a face-to-face conversation is often effective for promoting mutual understanding and moving toward resolution. There are many helpful online resources and articles about having difficult conversations; a separate "Conflict Resolution Resources" document is available from the faculty ombuds office to help you navigate this option. As you prepare, consider the following suggestions:

- Define the main problem you are hoping to solve. Share this at the beginning of the conversation and don't let yourself get sidetracked.
- Ideally, enter the conversation with a willingness to compromise.
- Be curious. Prepare to listen and ask questions about how the other person understands the situation and what they need and want.

- Make some notes. Consider the words you can use to help the other person understand your perspective and what you need and want.
- Practice using "I" statements (e.g., "I feel disrespected when…") to express your perspective and avoid placing blame.

Group Conversation

Sometimes, individual conversations are not successful, or a person feels unsafe approaching someone alone. In such situations, using many of the same strategies in a group setting may be productive. "Groups" may have a variety of configurations:

- Taking a supportive colleague along may be helpful. In this situation, the supportive colleague may or may not actively participate in the conversation. At times, just having someone witness the conversation is sufficient.
- In some situations, more than one individual has the same type of concern. Taking one or two allies with you to discuss your concerns together may have more impact, and you may be able to help one another keep emotions in check and stay focused on resolving the problem.
- Sometimes, an individual may request that a particular issue be discussed in a public forum, such as during a department meeting. This may allow a more open examination of how to resolve problems that affect the entire group, or to determine whether there is a consensus that a problem even exists.

Facilitated Conversation

Often, individuals are concerned that the other person involved in their conflict will not be receptive. This may be due to factors such as prior negative interactions, the nature of the conflict, or simply the person's lack of confidence to handle the conversation well. In these situations, it may be preferable to have a neutral third party help to facilitate a conversation. Facilitated conversations may occur in a variety of ways. Sometimes the facilitator may meet with both parties together; other times, it is best to meet with each party individually, or to use multiple individual and group meetings to arrive at a resolution.

A facilitator's role is to help both individuals remain focused on the main problem to be resolved, to ensure both individuals have an opportunity to express their perspective, and to guard against disrespectful or aggressive behavior. Ideally, the facilitator would be someone experienced with interpersonal problem-solving who has no vested interest in the outcome of the situation. The faculty ombuds or a peer advisor can sometimes fill this role, as can many experienced administrators. Often, department chairpersons serve in this capacity for conflicts between faculty members within the department.

Standing Committees

In many cases of concern or conflict, questions arise concerning the need for new or revised policies or procedures. For example, decision-making may appear arbitrary or unclear when no written policy or procedure exists to guide an administrative decision. In such cases, consultation and advocacy with the relevant policy-making body may be the most effective way to achieve a long-term resolution. Several standing University Committees (see a description or current membership) or Faculty Senate Committees (see a description or current membership) may be appropriate places to raise concerns regarding potential changes to policy. College-level governance units and college- or department-level committees may also be helpful, depending on the scope of the concern. Information about college-level governance is generally available on the "About" menu on the College's webpage.