

Building a Culture of Collaboration: Understanding Conflict Better

Report on the GAF Open Meeting on October 16th at Milk

A discussion took place between the attendees and the session facilitator.

Several main 'types' of conflict were identified, based on different general sources of disagreement.

Thinking about these 'types' can help to generalise out from individual examples of specific disagreements and to look at the broader systematic reason why people might be in conflict.

Each type was discussed to help understand what the fundamental underlying issue might be, and strategies for either preventing or dealing with each one were shared.

1 Arising from holding different principles, values, perceptions and understandings

Finding time to interact as an association member to talk about these key issues is important. New members of the committee should be part of a discussion about the purposes and practices of the committee. Particularly about how committee members should relate to plotholders, what their role might be, how the rules etc are interpreted and understood. The committee itself needs to make sure that every association member is encouraged to participate in the functioning of the site. The committee should show that difficulties and problems are openly and respectfully considered (don't sit on problems hoping they will just go away).

There should be someone on the committee with the task of engaging with new plot-holders giving time to talk to newcomers and listen to their concerns and issues. New plotters can be also buddied up with an experienced plotholder and introduced to their neighbours. Taking time to go through the rules and what they mean, encouraging them to ask questions and seek help is very important – relying on reading alone isn't enough.

Arranging social events where everyone involved with the site, including family and friends, can intermingle and chat by appointing a social secretary and/or a team of interested plotters to organise an event(s).

2 Arising from using distance as a 'safe' strategy – relying on formality, bureaucratic language, tone and systems, keeping yourself to yourself, not letting on:

Making sure that written communication by the committee is open, accessible (plain English) and respectful to all members. Valuing face-to-face interactions particularly where there are likely to be difficulties. Getting to know people on site, their skills and interests and circumstances. Exercising empathy.

Using mediation as a strategy by ensuring someone on the committee has those skills (provide access to training). Having a clear procedure re: complaints and safe-guarding so that people know how they can get help if they are bullied or can't settle an on-site dispute themselves.

Strengthening communal bonds by providing the means for plotholders to join in whilst also respecting plotholders' wishes for privacy. Making decisions with plotholders where possible by practicing democracy e.g. at AGM's. Delegating decisions to a range of people – encouraging and enabling people who are not committee members to participate.

3 Arising from the exercise of control and power – exerting it, overstepping it or feeling you have none

Committees should make sure that decisions that affect everyone on site should be put before the membership wherever possible for discussion and assent.

Inspection is a common source of conflict and bad feeling. Making judgments on people's plots, on their contribution to the community and doling out "punishments" in the form of failures and terminations can have a dire effect on the ethos of the community. Changing the language can help e.g. using "plot checks" or "the spring site survey" instead the term "inspection".

Where more work on a plot is needed or the plotholder may be doing something they shouldn't - taking a problem-solving approach to understanding why the difficulty has arisen is often productive. A committee member and the plotholder working together to resolve the issue can lead to a win-win outcome e.g. often plotholders are well aware that they are not coping and talking with them may enable an agreement to be reached even if that means giving up their plot. At least then they feel they have been part of the decision making rather than being judged as a failure and punished for it.