**January 2016 Happy New Year to all.**

I hope this message finds you excited to start the spring term and to welcome back our students.

It also may be a good time to consider some new changes.  I’ve kept December’s message, below, about conflict prevention as a reminder of how important those small steps can be to improving the climate of your department and enhance the environment for teaching, research and service.

In addition to prevention, **conflict management** is an ongoing responsibility for most of us.  If you have ongoing conflict within your department or office, consider your *purpose* when intervening in others’ conflicts.  While it’s natural to desire closure to conflict, it’s not always realistic and can lead to actions that are more harmful than helpful.  A useful goal in conflict management is mutual understanding, not only for those engaged in the conflict, but for you, as Chair/Director/Supervisor.  If you can facilitate mutual understanding, there is benefit to each person involved and we are reminded that we can “agree to disagree” and that divergent discourse is healthy.  We can engage and argue without taking things personally which often leads to unnecessary and destructive conflict interaction.

How do we facilitate mutual understanding?  One way is to demonstrate it yourself.  While you may have formed judgements about others’ motivations and personalities, take a step back and work at seeing them differently and more generously.  Ask them what is fueling the conflict situation for them, about their goals and intentions, and what they think would work to resolve or dilute the situation (by that I would be looking for what can they do internally, behaviorally, and relationally).  Stay open and avoid taking sides (even if you have in the past).  Then have the same conversation with the other/s involved.  Consider what you learned by taking both a micro- and meta- view of the situation.  Make it your expectation that all involved work toward minimization of the conflict, if not resolution.  Take direct action if you witness harassment, bullying or violence, but insist that those involved take ownership and responsibility in all other situations.  Of course, add your own thoughts and creative ideas for resolution, but remember to keep responsibility with the players (which includes ensuring buy-in if they take your ideas).

If you are comfortable, bring all parties together to discuss the issues.  Here are some guidelines for having a productive conversation:

* Invite and require attendance by all and be transparent as to topic and purpose.  If you have expectations regarding their behavior or the situation as a whole, be open and transparent in your communication.
* Consider using a talking piece to ensure everyone is heard, or set and hold ground rules for the conversation
* Limit monologue to 5-10 minutes per topic
* Make listening and developing mutual understanding an expectation and ask if they will agree that this is the goal
* As meeting leader, regularly reflect back what you are hearing, including the emotional content (e.g., *You seem hurt and disappointed that your Tom would make disparaging comments about the quality of your teaching to your students*.)
* Summarize at the end, or after each 45 minutes or so of conversation.  Useful summaries are thematic, and not chronological.  In the course of a meeting, a summary might look like this:  *You’ve talked quite a bit about your contributions to the research project and you each see things differently.  Julie, you’ve shown documentation of the time you’ve spent with your students that is 40% more time than you believe the others’ have spent on the project and feel your contributions should be recognized.  Carl, while you admit you haven’t put in as much time, you feel your contributions have been more significant due to…..”*  At the end of the conversation, a summary should capture the topics/themes discussed, as well as the ideas of all participants, any progress or agreements, and don’t’ forget to include remaining differences – as this is where there is still work to be done.
* After the meeting, be sure to check-in within 2-3 days and thank the participants, and continue to encourage ongoing dialogue to work on resolving issues either with or without your presence.  Often, after the first meeting, people like to try it on their own.  However, as a supervisor, you  may feel the need to monitor progress.

\*I am happy to assist and help prepare for these meeting, and even to facilitate if you feel like the conflict is too high, etc.  I’m just a phone call away.

Kind regards,

Kristine

**From:** Kristine Paranica   
**Sent:** Friday, December 04, 2015 4:29 PM  
**To:** 'ndsu-chairs@listserv.nodak.edu' <[ndsu-chairs@listserv.nodak.edu](mailto:ndsu-chairs@listserv.nodak.edu)>  
**Subject:** December Message from the NDSU Ombuds

**Conflict Prevention?**

As you are ending the semester and looking forward to a break, consider how you might *prevent conflict* in the coming months.  One way is to celebrate accomplishments together as a group.  Be inclusive as you give credit for work well done – no one should be left out.  Another is to offer apologies or empathy to those you have harmed (unintentionally or not) or who are struggling.  A simple written note or spoken word can go a long way.  If you have had ongoing conflict with others, create a plan to resolve issues before the end of January.  The plan could include looking at all sides of the issue, standing in others’ shoes, considering what you have to offer, to forgive, to change…, and then prepare to have a conversation with the goal of resolving differences and increasing mutual understanding.  There may be an article or two on the resources page of my website to help with this, or give me a call if you’d rather.  In any event, we could all use a break from work and a break from conflict as we recharge our batteries and prepare for another productive semester at NDSU.