



From Conflict to Collaboration

A professional mediator shares his strategies for getting people past conflict and on the road to communicating, cooperating and collaborating.

by Kindra Gordon



One doesn't need to look far in the beef industry to find examples of conflict: The industry is split on checkoff and border issues; ranchers, the government and the public often have differing views of livestock grazing on public lands; many farm families don't get along in running the family ranch.

Can there be a resolution to such seemingly unresolvable issues? Will any good come from such conflicts?

Dennis Phillippi, a Bozeman, Mont.-based certified range management consultant and professional mediator, has seen firsthand that people with opposing viewpoints can get past conflict and find common ground. Phillippi, who has worked

in natural resources all of his life, most recently founded a family business called Natural Resource Options Inc. with his two sons. They work with land managers on natural resource planning and monitoring, as well as providing training and facilitation in resolving conflict.

Phillippi says, "Not all conflicts are bad. Often, they are to somebody, but conflict also tends to cause discussion, and that can be positive. It opens dialogue and creates awareness for different viewpoints, which can bring about knowledge that didn't exist before."

That said, Phillippi advocates that groups or individuals who have conflict between one another find ways to work through what

he calls the ABCs of conflict resolution — analysis, bridging the gap, and communication and collaboration.

A = analysis

At the root of many conflicts is a lack of understanding for one another, Phillippi says. Thus, in the analysis phase, he suggests assessing the level of conflict or disagreement by asking yourself (or your organization) three questions:

1. What do we know about the issue?
2. What is not known?
3. What do we need to know?

Phillippi also suggests trying to separate real vs. perceived issues, recognizing if there are individual needs vs. group needs, and questioning if the issue is about power. "A lot of time, conflict is about power," he says. "Egos are in the way. Sometimes it's about turf and traditional roles."

For resolution to occur, he says power struggles need to be set aside up front. "A healthy ego is one that is always active and always in control," Phillippi says.

Another helpful assessment during this phase is in understanding people and different personality styles. "Recognizing personality types is critical," Phillippi notes. "Different personalities have different learning styles and hear things differently. People are not all the same, and in resolving conflict, the views of others should be respected."

Additionally, in the instances where you are dealing with especially difficult people, Phillippi says, "They are there, and you need to recognize that you may be one of them. Every one of us is difficult to somebody."

B = bridging the gap

As the analysis phase evolves, Phillippi says with it should come an understanding for others' viewpoints, as well as a building

Seven ways to manage conflict

A native of Wyoming, Dennis Phillippi grew up around family ranching operations and studied range science in college. Much of his tenure was as a state range specialist in Washington and Montana with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), then known as the Soil Conservation Service. After an early retirement, he established a family business with his two sons with the goal of bringing more cooperation between people and natural resource issues.

Through his personal experiences and research, Phillippi says there are seven ways to manage conflict.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Avoidance. While this is not an effective tactic in dealing with conflict, Phillippi says it is unfortunately a very common way decision-makers in businesses and families handle conflict. Worse, because this strategy does not strive for resolution, it can often bring more frustration and rumors to the situation. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Cooperation 3. Negotiation 4. Mediation 5. Arbitration 6. Litigation 7. Warfare |
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Phillippi explains the difference between these strategies is that the last three — arbitration, litigation and warfare — are turning the outcome and the decision over to someone else. "Here you play win-lose or lose-lose," he says.

However, the first four strategies leave the outcome in the hands of those involved as part of the decision-making process. "Cooperation, negotiation and mediation provide a better relationship and trust level at the end — and the economics make more sense, too," Phillippi says.

of relationships. These are steps that will eventually lead to “bridging the gap.”

Phillippi offers the phrase, “First seek to understand, then to be understood” to assist in conflict resolution.

He says, “One of the things that causes the most problems is not understanding each other. Too often, people try to dive in and solve problems, but first they need to build relationships and understanding.”

As an example of developing such relationships, Phillippi says that in the sessions he facilitates, he likes to bring some fun aspects into the process. “This helps set the stage for trust and relationship building,” he says.

He also likes to find common ground areas on which groups can agree before they get to the main issue at hand. For instance, he describes a situation in which he involved the ranch community, wildlife groups and environmental groups. While each of these groups had different concerns, all could agree that invasive species were a problem. So, in a land management situation, they addressed solving that situation first. By doing so, partnerships were built, and everyone felt it was a win-win situation. Phillippi says that when tougher issues need to be addressed in the future, these groups already have a favorable working

relationship established and are more likely to be successful in resolving conflicts.

Additional tips Phillippi offers for bridging the gap include:

Going to the balcony. Phillippi explains that this simply means looking at an issue from different viewpoints to gain insight and perspective.

Staying focused. “Remember to attack the issue, not the person,” says Phillippi about resolving conflict. He also stresses focusing on needs, not positions, and encourages bringing in a facilitator to help keep the process on track.

Meeting in a neutral location. This may sound simplistic, but Phillippi believes meeting in a neutral setting where people feel comfortable is an important element.

Keeping an eye on the prize. “Think about what is the reward or outcome for everyone involved. Having a shared vision helps move to the future,” Phillippi says.

C = communication and collaboration

Admittedly, the process of resolving conflict will require some give and take. So, Phillippi says an important ground rule is to “agree to disagree.”

He uses the acronym BATNA (best alternative to negotiated agreement) and

says, “Win-win is possible, but we may not always get 100%. However, if we can go from 0% to 85% cooperation, that’s improvement.”

He adds, “You have to be willing to listen, build trust and develop relationships. Usually conflict situations have more than one issue, so be willing to find common ground on easier issues, and, as communication improves, go back to resolving those harder issues.”

Additionally, Phillippi says that when it comes to resolving resource issues, it will often mean solving people problems first. “In my career, I’ve had the opportunity to see that resource issues are often about people. Cows don’t cause overgrazing — people do,” he says.

Phillippi adds, “We do have tools available to resolve conflict. I suggest individuals or groups look for outside help in moving toward collaboration. In agriculture, things can be difficult enough, but if families or organizations are fighting internally, it makes it worse. Those in agriculture need to be solid together.”

For more information about conflict resolution and collaboration, contact Phillippi at (406) 587-7792 or nroinc@mcn.net.

