Understanding the conflict

Conflict typically arises from a clash of goals, values, beliefs or understandings related to a particular issue. The issue often involves high stakes, as well as an emotional component for one or more parties involved. Conflict is not necessarily an issue of right versus wrong, but rather one of incompatible viewpoints.

In the case of community cats, some people enjoy the cats' presence in their neighborhood and want to ensure their comfort and safety. Meanwhile, others feel the cats are an unwelcome nuisance and want them promptly removed.

The primary aim of any conflict resolution or management technique is to identify a common goal between the parties involved. A common goal — to reduce the number of community cats and mitigate or eliminate nuisance behaviors created by these cats — exists among people on both sides of the issue. This includes those who want the cats removed, as well as cat lovers (staff, volunteers and caregivers associated with community cat programs). In fact, one of our most successful community cat efforts has been the distribution of informational materials for community members with the following title: "Whether you love or loathe cats, we can help you."

Five steps to resolving conflict

Step 1: Determine your involvement

First decide whether or not engaging with a particular person or conflict makes sense. Prioritize safety first. Avoid engaging with anybody who appears threatening or aggressive. If someone requests that you leave their property, do so immediately.

Step 2: Understand the other person

Avoid making assumptions about people and adopting negative impressions before gathering facts and hearing all sides of the story. Details are important.

Example: Cats have created a legitimate nuisance for a community member.

Consider the following script as an example of how to manage the conversation:

Volunteer: "So, I understand that some cats are creating some problems for you. I'd like to get some more info on specifically what the problem is so that I can help. Can you tell me what's happening?"

Community member: "They're going to the bathroom in my flowers and ruining them."

Volunteer: "Well that's no fun. OK, are the flowers in a garden area or in flower pots? I ask because we have several different solutions for keeping cats out of various types of gardens."

The person may even show you the area, which allows you to gather more information and formulate a solution suited to their particular problem.

Step 3: Influence opinion or behavior: Work toward gaining trust and finding common ground.

Appeal to thoughts and feelings

- Cat caregivers did not create the homeless cat problem. We're just the people responding to it.
- Cat caregivers and volunteers care about community cats, just as people do their own pets. We recognize that the cats have individual needs and personalities, and we care about their quality of life.
- None of us wants the cats to cause problems for our neighbors. But we also know that simply removing the cats is only a temporary solution that doesn't actually address the source of the problem.

   Appeal to the common goal. We all want fewer cats on the streets. Lowering the community cat population means better overall welfare for the cats and fewer nuisance behaviors. (Don't bring up more specific nuisance behaviors (less howling, less spraying, etc.) unless the person has already referred to them.)

An explanation of consequences

- Any environment offering sufficient food, water and shelter will eventually attract cats. By removing the cats, space becomes available for more unvaccinated cats to quickly move in, reproduce and recreate the original problem. Through trap/neuter/return (TNR), the cats are spayed or neutered and vaccinated, which eliminates the chance for population growth, and addresses a number of health concerns.
- Cats will always be present in the community, one way or another. Through TNR, we do all the work and provide free or low-cost humane cat deterrents.
- Attempting to bait and trap cats on your own typically results in attracting more cats to your property, rather than fewer, which only adds to your problem. Instead, we provide you with effective methods for keeping them away from your home.

Suggestions for other ways to think about the problem

- Acknowledge that it seems odd and counterintuitive that returning the cats to the same area would actually reduce the problems, and then offer further explanation. For example: "I completely understand that you just want the cats gone and that, obviously, the cats have caused some issues for you. I was also pretty skeptical about whether or not TNR would work when I first heard about it. And that's the case with most shelters, too. But shelters finally decided to give it a shot when it was obvious that the same people were trapping cats and bringing them in over and over again, year after year. They finally decided that removing and killing the cats wasn't working. One man I spoke to said he couldn't believe it actually worked, but

that after we did TNR in his neighborhood and gave him some information on how to keep cats out of his yard, he didn't have to spend time trapping or dealing with cats for the first time in 12 years. He admitted that a cat still wandered through once in a while, but it wasn't a big deal.

- Most community cat problems have only four possible solutions, but only one of them will be both convenient for you and ultimately solve your problem:

  1. Do nothing (which usually makes matters worse).

  2. Repeatedly trap the cats and take them to the shelter (a temporary solution at best).

  3. Repeatedly trap the cats and relocate them (often considered abandonment and is illegal).

  4. Let us do TNR and see how it works.

Step 4: Resolve the problem

Make sure to define any future expectations and mutually discuss solutions to the problem. Once you've reviewed all the facts with the other person and discussed the issue, map out a customized solution for that individual and ask to discuss it with them.

Be careful to not make any commitments that you might not be able to keep. If you offer to supply someone with a motion-activated sprinkler the following week, for example, make sure you follow through. If in doubt, say that you will work to see if you can find someone else to follow up. (Sometimes we want to protect the cats so much, we're inclined to overcommit.)

Be sure to follow up. See how the plan worked, and be prepared to develop a new one, if necessary.

Step 5: Recover and go on

Remember that you can never make everybody happy. You will occasionally encounter people who just can't be satisfied with any solution, and that's just the way it goes. Put the focus on all of the positive changes that you've already created for cats and community members, and then keep moving forward.

Engaging in active listening

Remember you can always express genuine empathy with someone without agreeing with their point of view. So make sure not to accidentally reinforce someone's beliefs or concerns by using phrases like "I agree" or "Yes, that's true." Instead, try rephrasing what someone said using phrases such as:

- "I hear you saying … "
- "I understand that … "
- "I think what you're saying is … "

Any of the above phrases allow you to demonstrate to the person that you understand and empathize with their concerns, while giving you additional time to craft an appropriate response.

Managing yourself during conflict

Once things get heated, it can be challenging to stay calm and collected. Here are some suggestions (or perhaps, reminders) for when you find yourself in the middle of a difficult situation:

- Think before you speak or act. Be thoughtful and proactive, not reactive.
- Stay calm and objective (easier said than done). Emotional responses usually lead to more conflict and regrets.
- Be sincere and up front with the other person. Don't waste time or avoid addressing the issue.
- Make sure you're having a conversation, and not lecturing. It's important that the other person gets a chance to speak as well, and preferably earlier in the conversation. Allowing them to speak will help you gain their trust and gives you more information to work with when you respond.
- Put yourself in their place. You're more likely to resolve the problem if you're able to walk in the other person's shoes for a moment to appreciate their perspective.
- Be flexible and tolerant. Differences in opinion are what make the world go around. Keep an open mind. Embrace complex situations and think of everything as a learning experience.

Additional resources

- Solutions to cat-related issues:
  http://bestfriends.org/Resources/No-Kill-Resources/Cat-initiatives/Helping-Community-Cats/Solutions-to-Cat-Related-Issues/
- Best Friends' web page on community cats:
  http://bestfriends.org/Resources/No-Kill-Resources/Community-Cats/
- Best Friends' frequently-asked questions about trap/neuter/return (TNR):
  http://bestfriends.org/Resources/FAQs-About-Trap-Neuter-Return-TNR/
- Conflict resolution for the animal welfare field:
  http://bestfriends.s3.amazonaws.com/nmhpconf/2010/ConflictResolutionHandbook_SingleSided.pdf