

# Building Trust & Managing Conflict within SARTs

The distinct roles, responsibilities, and perspectives of each team member are vital to a SART's overall success. Individuals from various disciplines are often guided by different principles, goals, and/or legal requirements. It is the diversity in perspectives that makes SARTs a potential place for effective and innovative problem solving.<sup>1</sup> However, if team members are not able to respect each other's perspectives or navigate disagreement, the team's progress can become stagnant and ineffective. Building trust, healthy communication structures, and commitment to managing conflict are the keys to unlocking the team's potential for success.

Conflict is a situation when two or more parties disagree. Unresolved conflict can negatively impact the success of an organization.<sup>2</sup>

💡 *Conflict can be a source for growth when it is communicated and addressed in a productive manner. Productive conflict focuses on identifying or solving problems, and involves a willingness to teach, as well as an openness to listening and learning.*

## → Why is conflict resolution necessary for SARTs?

Having a process for resolving conflict is required by law for SARTs in Texas. Additionally, the ability to address and resolve conflicts within the team is a necessary skill for SARTs. Research with victims of sexual assault shows that they are negatively affected when service delivery systems become fragmented.<sup>3</sup>

*“Coordinating the delivery of services to victims, is predicated on the ability of providers from different fields of practice to come together, find common ground, and collaborate in their services for victims. If, however, the process of coordination is contested, teams may not be able to realize the intended benefits of using a multidisciplinary model.”*

-(Moylan et al. 2017)

## → What types of conflict can occur within a SART?

**Task related** conflict centers on the ways to resolve problems that are caused by differences in viewpoints, ideas and opinions. This form of conflict can result in creativity and improved decision-making.

**Relationship** conflict centers on blaming other parties rather than resolving problems. This form of conflict can be detrimental to organizations.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Baker, D. P., Day, R., & Salas, E. (2006). Teamwork as an essential component of high-reliability organizations. *Health services research*, 41(4 Pt 2), 1576–1598. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6773.2006.00566.x>

<sup>2</sup> The Difference of Conflict Management Styles and Conflict Resolution in Workplace. Lim Jin Huan and Rashad Yazdanifard. *Business & Entrepreneurship Journal*, vol.1, no.1, 2012, 141-155.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, P. Y. (2005). *Rape work: Victims, gender, and emotions in organizational and community context*. New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>4</sup> Huan J & Yzdanifard R, 2012.



## Common conflicts for SARTs<sup>5 6</sup>

- Confidentiality limits of different parties.
- Admonishing team members instead of recognizing everyone has distinct, varying and important roles and responsibilities.
- Authority differences. Some disciplines are trained to “take charge” while others are taught to defer authority to the victim and promote self-determination.
- Lack of rape-specific expertise. For certain professionals this distracts from the work of supporting victims.
- Credibility. It is important that the core group be seen as credible sources of knowledge by their counterparts and their own discipline. Numerous complaints from victims about an individual or group will undermine the credibility of that professional or their discipline.
- Differences in power and access to resources. The groups and systems at the SART are not equal in their **power or access to resources**. Therefore, some groups or disciplines will be elevated in authority and credibility while others are discounted.

### What exacerbates team conflicts?

When team members don't speak up in the moment or follow up directly and quickly with questions and/or concerns, conflicts can become more complex and harder to manage. If members choose not to voice disagreement they are, by omission, sending a message that the behavior, actions or words are ok with them<sup>7</sup>. This can lead to contempt within parties on the team, with separate camps around an issue as thoughts are shared privately, and not in the larger group.

Common barriers to resolving conflict <sup>8 9</sup>	Potential Remedy
Trying to be right	Active listening can signal that you respect someone's opinion even if you don't agree with them.
Blaming	Focus on the solution not the person.
Being unwilling to compromise	Compromise can be appropriate for many situations. Try looking for needs or gaps first. This can be an effective way to develop a win/win solution.
Ignoring power dynamics	Mitigating power dynamics so team members can address conflict more openly. For example, ensuring that those with less power are provided with multiple opportunities to provide feedback on a topic.
Not addressing the conflict	Gather facts and take time to clearly define what the issues are
Mode and method of communication	Addressing conflicts in the proper space, method, and time can help ensure success. For instance, a one-on-one conversation between parties with opposing views may be more effective than an email to the whole group.

<sup>5</sup>Huan J & Yzdanifard R, 2012.

<sup>6</sup>Martin, P. Y. (2005). Rape work: Victims, gender, and emotions in organizational and community context. New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup>Workplace Conflict Resolution. 2012.

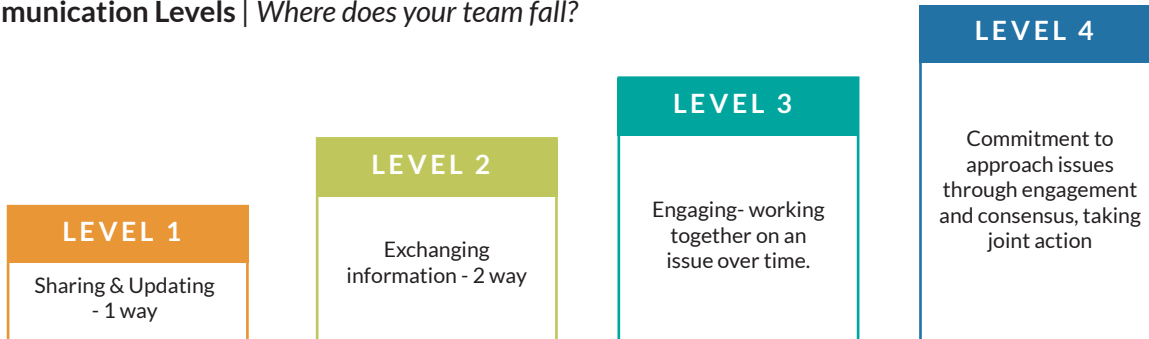
<sup>8</sup>Moylan, C. A., & Lindhorst, T. (2015). Yes, its "Catching flies with honey": the management of conflict in Sexual Assault Response Teams. Journal of interpersonal violence, 30(11), 1945-1964. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514549464>

<sup>9</sup>Hargie (2011) Conflict Resolution: Professional Communications. <https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/profcommsontario/chapter/conflict-resolution/>

## Conflict Management

There are a number of theories, principles and guidelines for managing conflict within groups and organizations. Here we draw from the practices of collaborative law, managing public disputes<sup>10</sup> and the theory of adaptive leadership to recommend assumptions and tools for your team to consider.

### Communication Levels | *Where does your team fall?*



### Assumptions | *Are these agreed upon by the group?*

- ➔ Everyone should come as a learner
- ➔ Leaders cannot really lead on an issue of importance if the stakeholders do not decide to support and make the change.
- ➔ Stakeholders cannot really get their needs met on an issue of importance if they do not work with those who have the authority to make change.
- ➔ Challenges should be met by the whole group, not just one person dictating the process and outcome.

## Process Steps

- 1 Establish ground rules** for the conflict resolution process that your team will adopt and write them down.
  - A** These might include: a commitment to participate in the process and reach agreements; advanced communication about the meeting; use of a clear agenda; a small focused group that is responsible for hearing conflicts and reaching agreement; agreement that delays will not be used as a tactic to avoid an undesirable result; agreement that personal attacks will not be tolerated; disagreements will be viewed as problems to be solved instead of battles to be won.
- 2 Select a facilitator.** If the conflict does not involve the presiding officer or SART leadership, those individuals may be able to facilitate the process. However, it is often best to invite in a facilitator from a neighboring SART or third-party agency.
- 3 Statement of goals and expectations by each party.** Individuals should describe the history of the problem, their role in the issue thus far, share complaints/concerns and their desires for the outcome.
- 4 Educate all parties.** Compile information, consult with outside experts (attorneys, coalition or association staff, etc). Fact check the information and clarify perceptions.

<sup>10</sup>Carpenter, S & Kennedy WJD. 2001. Managing Public Disputes; A Practical Guide for Government, Businesses and Citizens Groups. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

- 5 **Generate options to solve the problem.** Develop a list of 2-3 options and discuss the pros and cons of each.
- 6 **Reach agreement on an option.** This can be done through a vote of simple majority or consensus. The team should plan in advance which option will be used to reach an agreement.
- 7 **Plan next steps** (if needed).

*Steps 3-7 can all be conducted within the same meeting if adequate preparation is done in advance. This will create a more efficient process for the team.*

### → Example of how this could look in a common SART conflict

*An advocate from the rape crisis center is assisting a victim with making follow up medical appointments. The victim shares that when she was making the initial police report, the officer made some comments to her that made her feel like the rape was her fault, including asking her why she was “out so late at night” and why she lived in such a “bad part of town.” She also shared that she was considering dropping out of the investigative process entirely. This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> such story that the advocate can recall hearing about patrol officers from this department in the past year. The advocate notifies her supervisor of the complaint, and with the victim’s consent, the center decides to bring up the issue at the following SART meeting. During the meeting the center staff shares with the group that a patrol officer had made inappropriate comments to a victim, causing her to feel blamed for her assault. The center staff also states, “This keeps happening and we really need to figure out a way to address it.” The police department representative begins to ask questions regarding who made the comments and what they were. “What did they say that was offensive? Sometimes victims don’t understand that law enforcement needs to ask certain questions and those questions can make them uncomfortable.” The discussion begins to get more heated and defensive on both sides.*

In the example above, we can identify 3 key issues:

- 1 **Process:** There is not a structured process within the team for addressing and evaluating issues that impact the survivor’s experience. When issues “keep happening”, this is usually an indicator that there is nothing in place to identify a problem early on and course correct. For instance, SARTs can create a documented log that outlines the date, complaint, and parties involved with a corresponding plan for improvement and date to assess progress.
- 2 **Trust:** The responses from all parties indicate that there is a lack of trust between professionals. This involves questioning the credibility of the complaint as well as the individual sharing the complaint. The lack of trust is also present in the fact that instead of going directly to the police department to address the concern or use an agreed upon conflict resolution process, the center decided to share it in a team meeting without advance notice.
- 3 **Shared values:** This will allow the team to have a clear focus when working with other members. Here it is clear that survivors are not considered a credible source to all team members. Another value missing from this interaction is a commitment to focusing on solutions and systems rather than individual people and problems.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cochran, H. (2018). Systems Advocacy. TAASA Regional Training.

Let's revisit this conflict and how the team utilized conflict management processes to move forward.

*Due to the argument and blaming unfolding in the meeting, the presiding officer ends the discussion and asks both organizations to come to the meeting next month with more information on how patrol interacts with sexual assault victims, and suggestions they have for making changes, if any. She states that there will be time dedicated on the agenda to fully hear out the concerns and potential options for addressing them. Since SART members previously agreed to follow a prescribed process for addressing conflict, a small group composed of one representative from each discipline will vote on an option for moving forward at that meeting. The presiding officer points out that this should have been how the center brought the issue forward in the first place if it could not be resolved between the agencies involved.*

*At the following meeting, rape crisis center staff have compiled more information on various negative experiences with patrol that victims have reported. The police department was able to identify which officer was involved in the initial complaint. They also reviewed other reports that that individual took from sexual assault victims. Both agencies agree that the issues seem to stem from one or two specific officers. The police department shares that the initial comments are a deviation from their stated policies for interacting with victims and suggest that patrol can attend a training at the center to learn how to be more trauma-informed. Center staff suggests that the team consider providing victims with an opportunity to provide feedback on their experiences with all first responders or member agencies. This is a practice that has been adopted by other SARTs, and can provide good information for the team to improve their protocols.*

*After 45 minutes of discussion, the presiding officer requests that the team vote on both of the options presented. Ultimately the team decides to move forward with both suggested options.*

The team implemented a process that allows survivors to anonymously give feedback about their experience with the advocate, nurse, law enforcement and prosecutors.

- ➔ **Process Change:** The concerns are now viewed as “data” that is reviewed every quarter. The data includes numbers that demonstrate how survivors rate their experience, anonymous written feedback, and additional details about any individual incidents that occurred.
- ➔ **Trust:** The data is reviewed by the whole team. It is not treated as a personal attack on any one discipline or individual but as a quality improvement process for everyone.
- ➔ **Shared Values:** The team decides to begin treating the survivor’s experience as credible information. They worked as a team to implement a new process that will assist them in identifying issues and allow for survivors to be heard right from the beginning.