



## The Universe of Options for Addressing Interpersonal Conflict

### 1. Do Nothing

This is an option when a situation is too risky to address (e.g. large power differences, potential for retaliation) or when the situation is small and the person can make peace with or forgive the perceived problematic communication or behavior.

### 2. Informal Options

#### a. Difficult conversations

The person experiencing conflict can invite the other to talk through their situation or dynamic. Sometimes resources (Crucial Conversations, Non-Violent Communication, handouts on Giving and Receiving Feedback, personal style assessment) or coaching can be helpful. Ombuds can talk through strategies and help individuals experiencing conflict through clarifying goals and role-playing conversations.

#### b. In the moment response

Identify and practice constructive responses to perceived problematic communication that the person can employ in the moment. The goal is to either reframe the challenging comment, to reflect back to the speaker how the comment was perceived, or to interrupt negative behavior to give both speaker and recipient an opportunity to break the momentum and provide time to revisit the topic at a better time. Possible “back pocket” responses may include, “What did you hope I would take from that statement?”, “It seems you have a reaction to what I just said, and I’d like to hear more.”, “How might you approach that differently?”, or “I’d like to have this discussion when we can both engage respectfully; I suggest we take a break and come back to this later.”

#### c. A structured, supported informal mediation through the Office of the Ombuds

The Office of the Ombuds provides informal (off-the-record), confidential, independent, impartial mediation services to allow both parties to share their perspectives, to hear how the other person has experienced their interactions, and to develop agreements for moving forward. As an impartial mediator, the Ombuds meets with both/all parties individually to understand their goals for the mediation and perspective about the situation. Necessary criteria for mediation are that both/all parties are willing to mediate, are engaging in the process in good faith, and that the issue being addressed is mediatable. The mediation and what is said during the mediation are both confidential, and both parties sign a confidentiality agreement before mediating to confirm their understanding of and commitment to this essential requirement.

### **3. Formal Options**

#### **a. Notify authority**

A person can report their complaint to their supervisor or to another person with authority within the supervisory structure. It's then up to that person to address the conflict. They may choose to speak with all parties providing due process to the person against whom the complaint is lodged. They may choose to look at objective information (timesheets, chart notes) or talk with others. They may consult with Human Resources regarding options. Their solutions may include having a conversation about expectations, making a structural shift (separating conflicting parties), or disciplining either party. They may also ask parties to work it out between themselves. In a formal option, the supervisor may choose to use HR strategies such as performance improvement plans or progressive discipline. Unless the complaint includes a reportable offense that a supervisor, manager, or faculty member is required to report, the response is at the discretion of that authority.

#### **b. Filing a formal internal grievance**

UCSF and University of California Office of the President (UCOP) policies outline who has standing to file a grievance and how specific grievance processes address their situation and their role (Faculty, represented staff, non-represented staff, and student policies differ in some areas. Some policies address all members of the UCSF community.) Formal grievance processes typically include protection from retaliation and are investigated by designated investigators.

#### **c. Filing a formal external grievance**

There are formal complaint procedures available through state and federal agencies for specific types of workplace complaints.

### **4. Leave**

In some situations, a person may assess that their best option is to find another unit or to leave the UCSF entirely. In order to address especially challenging circumstances, an exit interview may be requested in order to share the experience that led to the decision to leave.

The decision to pursue a specific option is a personal one, based on the individual's goals. An Ombuds can help assess the options with the ultimate decision-making power retained by the individual.