

Conflict Resolution

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Purpose: To provide National Apartment Association (NAA) members with tools and information to aid in conflict resolution, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. While the following applies to multiple forms of conflict, the focus of this document is specific to handling conflict with residents.

Applies to: All NAA members who interact with prospective and current residents, specifically onsite employees.

Overview: Conflict resolution is an important skill for all employees to master, especially those working on the front lines at any apartment community, as they tend to regularly encounter upset residents. Problems will inevitably occur when managing apartments and resolving conflict is an important aspect of effective customer service. Taking the time to resolve disputes with residents improves the chances of future peaceful interactions within the community. This is a process that cannot be rushed; it requires careful consideration and should include an employee training component.

Even in the best circumstances, disputes with residents may arise. The onsite team may be vigilant in maintaining a safe, clean, friendly, regulation-compliant environment, however, people are imperfect. Misunderstandings, conflicts, mistakes and accidents happen. Leaders are responsible for ensuring that the onsite team is prepared to diplomatically handle these situations and understand the policies that govern the rights of the resident, the property owner and the management company. They will also need to know when it's appropriate to say "no," as well as when it's time to consult legal counsel.

Given the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant stresses for residents and staff, both fiscal and emotional, mastery of conflict resolution has never been more necessary. The following best practices offer guidance for managing and resolving these unique situations as they arise.

Guidance:

1. **Do Not Avoid** – While one approach to conflict resolution is avoidance, it is often not recommended. When a resident is upset, avoiding the situation may not help. Making oneself unavailable or prolonging a meeting may cause further negative feelings that could otherwise be prevented if handled in a more-timely manner. If the manager is unavailable to speak with the resident, have a plan in place for either an assistant manager to step in or assure the resident that the manager will be in contact within a specified amount of time. This amount of time should be determined by the owner/management company and will vary depending on the size of the community and employee workload. Regardless of the time frame, immediately handling situations helps prevent upset

residents from experiencing further distress, sharing negative thoughts of the community with family and friends and even posting reputation-harming content on social media and review sites.

2. **Listen to Understand** – Allowing a resident or potential resident to voice their concerns and frustrations is a good starting point. Often, conflict can arise from a misunderstanding between two parties. While there may not be agreement from both parties concerning the matter at hand, it is important nevertheless to actively listen so that the issues can be addressed and reasonable solutions can be identified. Avoid applying blanket answers to every dispute; while providing form responses and policy reminders can be convenient, the upset resident is probably already aware of these. It is best to first repeat the resident's concerns to ensure all parties have a shared understanding of the issue before evaluating solutions. It is equally important to not be dismissive of any part of what is shared.
3. **Think Before You Speak** – It can be easy to get defensive and emotional during a resident confrontation. When an individual has an emotional reaction, they are more likely to say something they do not mean—and in an inflammatory way. It is important to pause before speaking, and then politely and factually respond. Do not make assumptions; instead, focus on repeating key points the resident has addressed in their complaint. Using proper language while maintaining awareness of tone is key. Keep in mind the old saying, “It is not as much what you say as it is how you say it.” You should be courteous and professional whether you are collecting delinquent rent, dealing with misuse of common areas, reprimanding a lease violator or addressing inappropriate behavior.
4. **Be Cognizant of Body Language** – Body language is the use of physical behavior, expressions and mannerisms to communicate nonverbally, often done instinctively rather than consciously. Whether or not you are aware, you are continuously giving and receiving wordless signals when you interact with others. Body language includes gestures you make, your posture, your tone of voice and how much eye contact you make, and these all send strong messages. Your nonverbal communication cues—the way you listen, look, move and react—tell the person with whom you're communicating whether you care, are being truthful and how well you're listening. When your nonverbal signals match up with your words, they increase trust, clarity and rapport. They can generate tension, mistrust and confusion when they do not.
5. **Move From “I” to “We”** – The dialogue should continue by focusing on the problem at hand. Explain that both parties are part of a business relationship, and that each of you has an equally important stake in finding a solution, together. Further explain the importance of finding a good solution, one that does not lead to additional duress for either side. In the end, it is much more pleasant to live in a community where everyone can get along. Ask if the resident would be willing to try a solution, and then point out the mutual benefit that solution could provide. For example, you could ask a resident who works the late shift to run the dishwasher early in the evening before going to work instead of doing so when returning home from work after midnight to avoid disturbing their neighbors, or asking a resident who has multiple vehicles to park lesser-used vehicles in the overflow area, allowing more residents to park their primary vehicles closer to the building.
6. **Do Not Take It Personally** – For those who are passionate about their job and confident in their ability to provide an exceptional resident experience, it can be extremely difficult to hear unpleasant feedback. However, it is important to focus on the problem at hand and identify an amenable solution. If you focus on the insult by taking the situation personal, that increases the chances of inappropriate conduct with a resident to occur. It is easy for onsite team members to become distressed and flustered when a resident is yelling—or even cursing—at them.
7. **Follow Up** – It is recommended to follow-up after a meeting with a recap of the discussion in writing. This should include the complaint, an overview of the discussion points and the agreement on possible solutions. In addition, there should be a clear indication of who is responsible for what action(s). This will ensure proper follow-through is achieved as well as establishing agreement on the date each action is due to be completed. The deadline for completion should be a fair date that is achievable by all parties. You should be direct in saying what you plan to do, and then do it.

8. **Remember the Reason** – While we can confidently say the resident is not always right, it is important to remember the reason we are employed is because of our residents. We have an obligation to ensure our communities are operated to the best of our ability and effectively handling conflict is a part of that responsibility. After resolving a resident conflict, you may want to thank the resident for being a valued part of your community.
9. **Safety Protocol** – There will be times when following all the above may still end with an unhappy resident and a problem that continues to worsen. Be mindful of your own safety. If de-escalation isn't working, then stop and withdraw if necessary. Your safety is always the most important thing. In a worst-case scenario, it is important to note that your company should have a policy on how to handle situations that escalate to a point where the employee may begin to feel unsafe. This may include contacting the regional manager, corporate office or even the police in extreme situations. Education and training should be key elements of any workplace violence prevention program. The advice above may not be sufficient to address more serious violations such as harassment, discrimination or threats of violence.

Make sure you know and can identify the following signs:

- Sudden change in body language or tone in a conversation.
- Pacing or fidgeting, over-emphasized gesturing.
- Disruptive behaviors, e.g., yelling, cursing, refusing to follow instructions, etc.

10. **Conflict Resolution Approaches** – Social scientists have determined that most people respond to conflict in one of five ways, outlined below. Although each of these responses can be useful or even necessary depending on the situation, the most effective approaches often tend to involve compromise and/or problem-solving.

Approach	Description
Avoidance	Someone who uses a strategy of "avoiding" mostly tries to ignore or sidestep the conflict, hoping it will resolve itself or dissipate.
Accommodation	If a solution can be reached with an easy accommodation, give it a try. It is not always worth risking damage to relationships or causing more conflict.
Win/Lose	You are in charge and you must occasionally force the issue.
Compromising	All parties give a little and a compromise is reached. Often, there is more than one way to reach a goal.
Problem-Solving	Open communication can help develop a mutually beneficial solution for all parties.

Related Links and Forms

[Conflict Resolution Course on Visto](#)

About NAA

The National Apartment Association (NAA) serves as the leading voice and preeminent resource through advocacy, education and collaboration on behalf of the rental housing industry. As a federation of more than 150 state and local affiliates, NAA encompasses over 82,000 members representing more than 10 million apartment homes globally. NAA believes that rental housing is a valuable partner in every community that emphasizes integrity, accountability, collaboration, community responsibility, inclusivity and innovation. NAA thanks its strategic partners Lowe's Pro Maintenance Supply Headquarters and Yardi. To learn more, visit www.naahq.org.

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