PURDUE UNIVERSITY

PURDUE EXTENSION

ID-366

SOCIAL/ECONOMIC ISSUES

CAFOs and Community Conflict:
Understanding Conflict Between Individuals

EXPERT REVIEWED

Janet Ayres

Agricultural Economics

This publication is one title in the *Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations* series.

To view the entire series, visit <http://www.ansc.purdue.edu/CAFO/>.

Introduction

The expansion of CAFOs in Indiana has created high levels of conflict in communities. People disagree over the permitting of operations, location of facilities, and the impacts on the community. The stakes are high, conflicts are emotionally charged. CAFO owners, other farmers, neighbors, and elected officials are pitted against one another, oftentimes damaging personal relationships for years.

Are there better ways of dealing with such complex and controversial issues? This series on community conflict is intended to help people involved with CAFO issues deal with their differences in more effective and constructive ways. The purpose of this paper is to provide a better understanding on how to deal with differences between individuals and what can be done to keep the conflict from escalating.

Although issues around CAFOs are multi-faceted and involve many stakeholder groups, it is at the individual level that most conflict situations occur. People talk with one another at meetings, on the street, or in the local grocery store. During these encounters, people often disagree with each other, emotions rise, and conflict can escalate very quickly. It is important to know how to handle these stressful situations. The ability to distinguish between disagreements and conflict, and how to manage emotions are fundamental to reducing tensions.

Distinguish Between Disagreements and Conflict

It is natural for people to disagree. People have different ways of thinking, different values that are important to them, different beliefs and perspectives on issues, and different life experiences. It's okay to disagree. In fact, debating an issue can be useful to learn other perspectives, acquire new information, and check out one's own assumptions and beliefs. People can "agree to disagree" — then let it go. Disagreements don't have to be resolved.

A CAFO owner and an advocate for environmental interests can have a meaningful conversation and not agree on many things. The danger occurs when one, or the other, insists on being "right" or "winning" the argument. This can quickly change the situation by making the other person defensive, escalating emotions on both sides, and

triggering verbal attacks to "hurt" each other. These stressful situations damage personal relationships that can last for years in a rural community.

Is it necessary for either party to agree with the other in order to have their needs met? For example, if two neighbors do not agree about a proposed CAFO in the neighborhood, is there any benefit to arguing? Is any need being served? If not, then they might have a "healthy" discussion by listening to each other, asking questions, and speaking his/her own thoughts. Body language, tone of voice, and the words spoken should be calm, respectful, and non-threatening.

The discussion itself should remain focused on the issues and not get into personal accusations, threats, or name calling. If emotions start to escalate, however, it is best to end the conversation. There is little to be gained by arguing when emotions are high — and a lot to lose such as one's reputation, respect, and personal relationships.

On the other hand, if there is a clear need or purpose to *persuade* the other party in order to have concerns met, then it is more effective to think about a strategy, time, and place to influence the other party. The grocery store may not be the best place to have a serious conversation about a person's concerns. The ability to effectively influence another person requires being prepared with a clear message based on facts, and is intentional and thoughtfully delivered.

Generally, conflict is defined as a situation in which people have incompatible goals with some level of negative emotion. The more important the goals are to people, the more defensive they become. Consequently, high levels of emotions become part of the conflict itself. As people become more focused on defending their position, they tend to block out others. They tend not to listen, not to understand what the other person is saying, or, at the worst, not care about the other person's interests or concerns.

Such behavior triggers similar defensive behaviors in the other person, and thus the conflict escalates. If left unchecked, the conflict may escalate to a point where the issues themselves give way to a greater need of "being right" or "winning" against the other side. Issues that could have been resolved early on are now compromised and complicated by poor communication and damaged relationships. Not only is conflict at this level emotionally and physically stressful, it doesn't help people get what they want — to have their interests addressed, and be made part of the solution.

Recognize and Manage Emotions

It is unrealistic to expect people to always agree. What is important is how people deal with their differences. The key lies in a person first taking responsibility for his/her own mindset and actions. Here are some keys:

- First, distinguish if the situation is a disagreement or conflict. If a person does not need the other person to meet their interests, why argue? Either "agree to disagree" or walk away. Don't get trapped in trying to be "right" or to "win over" the other person. If, on the other hand, it is important to persuade the other person (such as a local official), then practice influence and negotiation skills. Think carefully about what can be lost by continuing an emotionally charged conversation. Is it worth it?
- Recognize that a person can't change another person. A person can only take responsibility for his/her own attitudes, emotions, and actions.
- Gain control over emotions. Back away from the other person a step or two and take a deep breath. Buy some time to think before speaking. Think about what is important to say and why. Is the intent to inform, or to hurt? A person can't eliminate his/her feelings but he/she can try to disconnect the automatic link between high emotions and inappropriate actions, albeit that is hard to do.
- Recognize that people make assumptions about issues and other people. Assumptions are often based on a person's worst fears and, therefore, are frequently inaccurate. Check out assumptions before jumping to conclusions.
- Pay attention to frame of mind. Difficult people and situations can be one of life's greatest teachers if a person is open to learning more about him/herself. An open and positive mindset can make a big difference.

Conclusion

CAFO issues trigger many emotionally-charged interactions between people in rural communities. Often, these encounters turn into conflict situations that are not useful and destroy relationships, sometimes lasting a lifetime, and do little to resolve the real issues.

As human beings, it is natural to disagree. If left to natural inclinations, people react to others with whom they disagree without thinking, and consequently escalate the conflict. The good news is that people can become more conscious of their attitudes and better skilled in listening, controlling their emotions, articulating their thoughts more clearly, negotiating their interests and resolving their differences. These are skills that can be learned and practiced.

References and Further Reading:

Fisher R. , Ury W. 1981. *Getting to yes – negotiating agreement without giving in.* NY: Penguin Books.

Silberman, M. 2000. *Peoplesmart – developing your interpersonal intelligence.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Ury, W. 1991. *Getting past no – negotiating your way from confrontation to cooperation.* NY: Bantam Books.

PURDUE AGRICULTURE NEW 4/08