A TOWN EMBRACES CONFLICT
Town of Okotoks

Conflict that is swept under the carpet rarely disappears. Although most conflicts start out quite small, they have the potential to build into mountains if they are not dealt with.

"Unfortunately, it seems to be human nature to shy away from conflict, or ask others to step in for you," says Nancy Weigel, Human Resources and Communications Team Leader for the Town of Okotoks, Alberta.

Weigel first became troubled about conflict-avoidance when she noticed this trend among Town staff. Often, she was asked to intervene between parties in conflict, and the results were not ideal. She's not a conflict-avoider herself, and she knew there was a better way. She just needed to find the right tools to help others build their own skills for resolving conflict.

She ran a successful one-day conflict resolution course for Town staff that trained about 15 people, but Weigel realized she needed a larger initiative. As fate would have it, helping herself was the first step to helping others. At a workshop she attended on Alternative Dispute Resolution, she came across Bill Diepeveen, the Manager of Dispute Resolution Services at Alberta Municipal Affairs. He helps municipalities find constructive ways of resolving conflict, both internally and externally, and that was just what Weigel needed.

Diepeveen directed the Town of Okotoks to the Alberta Municipal Affairs "Local Dispute Funding" grant program that provides financial assistance for municipalities looking at ways of addressing internal conflict. The grant funding can be used to design new systems to better respond to conflict, implement detailed plans, support training and create evaluation processes.

Building conflict management strategies

The Town of Okotoks hired a consultant who completed a needs assessment and targeted three areas as being the highest priority: planning and development, bylaw enforcement, and human relations. The second phase would be to extend the training to the community, beginning with the Town's boards and committees and community partners, groups and associations. In the area of human relations, the needs assessment indicated that in-depth training would benefit Town staff, particularly middle and senior leaders.

As a result, the Town of Okotoks routinely offers internal staff training on how to manage and resolve conflict, and about 70 percent of staff has now completed this training. Weigel says the training has accomplished great things: it forces staff to see one another's perspective, gives staff tools for assessing their own reaction to conflict, and generally makes people more willing to address disagreements. As she puts it, "it teaches people how to be hard on the problem and soft on the person".

For example, one tool helps staff evaluate how much a problem is bothering them on a scale from one to five. If they categorize the conflict as a 'one', it gives the person permission to drop the conflict since it is not significant enough for their time or energy. If, however, they rate the conflict as a 'four' or 'five', then they must find the most respectful way to go about resolving it.

Town staff also report that this training has helped them better deal with customers under some pretty stressful situations. When a customer is angry over a service disruption, staff can now manage the exchange successfully by depersonalizing the situation and using learned communications skills to help calm the discussion.

Taking what was learned outside

During the 13 years Weigel has been with the Town of Okotoks, the Town has experienced incredible growth. While growth is positive, it can provide challenges when natural stresses and conflicts arise between people: residents and developers, or boards and community groups.

Although Weigel knew in her gut that conflict resolution strategies could work in any arena, the needs assessment provided a formalized plan for taking these lessons to other external groups. The Town now offers conflict resolution courses for area boards and committees.

"As we grew, there were definitely pressure points in town. For example, we have a very young population and have recently experienced an overcapacity with our recreational facilities," she says. "Something as simple as coordinating booking times between minor hockey and skating groups can cause conflict. These groups need tools to help resolve these issues, and conflict training can help address that."

For her, it's been exciting to see the ripple effect of being a progressive employer and partner in the community who supports these concepts. "Luckily, we've always had a very participative style of management," she says. "This philosophy has allowed me to seek out ways we could proactively include conflict management strategies in our town's dealings and find ways to help others do the same."

An example of this ripple effect is with the Town's Development Services Team. For a number of years, they have been suggesting to area developers that they seek public input before they apply for permits as a proactive way of avoiding conflicts that may arise, often from a lack of information. As developers have seen the benefits of ironing out potential hurdles in advance, open houses have become a regular feature in the early collaboration between developers and the Town's residents.

Sharing collaborative tools with a larger community

With all these great initiatives under their belt, the Town of Okotoks was invited to put their experience to work by participating in the development of a public input toolkit for communities, municipalities, developers and citizens. The toolkit is an accessible "how to" manual for maintaining good relationships with an emphasis on collaborative processes. The toolkit itself was a collaboration between five municipalities including the towns of Okotoks, Canmore, Cold Lake, Sturgeon County and Morinville, and included the help of Alberta Community Development.

As part of this process, the Town of Okotoks has also helped Alberta Municipal Affairs host workshops on conflict resolution. "We hosted one here recently, and it sold out immediately," says Weigel. "I think that showed a pretty strong need in southern Alberta for this kind of training. I really think this proactive approach to conflict resolution is striking a chord."

As these initiatives continue to build, Weigel has been delighted to see Town staff and other key players embrace the philosophy of "participative management" that, in her eyes, makes Okotoks such a great place to live and work.

"It's really a beautiful thing to watch people become involved as part of the solution, instead of just sitting back and being told what they have to live with," she says. "We've been fortunate not to have significant conflict even though we've grown quickly. As a community, we know we can work through these things together. And, that's what conflict resolution is all about."