Know your rules, keep your volunteers

Handling disputes and complaints in community groups

Joanne Law
Interact Community Dispute Resolution Service (ICDRS)

International Mediation Awareness Week (IMAW) 2026

Get the slides



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we each join today, and pay our respects to Elders past and present.

About your presenter – Joanne Law



"I've sat at the committee table. I know what happens when passionate people with different reasons for being there have to make decisions together."

Leadership and governance

- President, Interact Support Inc, which runs ICDRS
- Director, Mediation Institute
- Secretary, Mediators Beyond Borders Oceania
- Australian Mediator and Dispute Resolution Accreditation Standards (AMDRAS) Board, 2023 – 2025 during the establishment of the current standards

Working with community groups

- Many years as a coach, trainer and mediator including supporting community groups
- AMDRAS Accredited Mediator since 2013, Advanced Mediator since 2025
- Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner (Family Law Mediator) since 2014

Understanding why people do what they do

- Certified Life, Business and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) Results Coach
- Certified New Ways Coach
- Conflict coach (Conflict Management for One)

My way or the highway

My way

When decisions follow whoever has the most history, energy or influence. The people who feel shut out take the highway.

The rules way

Your rules should have a fair, agreed way of deciding that doesn't depend on the personalities in the executive.



Have you seen a volunteer leave your group because of a disagreement?

It starts with dignity



At the heart of most conflict is a threat to someone's dignity, real or perceived.

What sets it off

Something said in a meeting.

An incident.

A look.

Often it's generational

One person thinks they're guiding.

The other feels put down or bullied.

“Just trying to help”



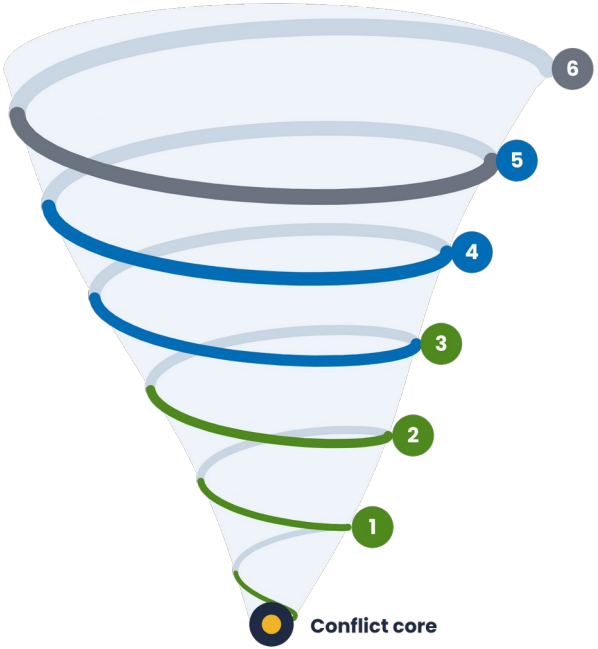
Margaret
25 years volunteering



Jess
28, new to the committee

> **We tried something like that years ago. You'll learn.**
>
> Margaret, when Jess presents her plan to move rosters online

The conflict spiral



Pop in the chat: where could someone have stepped in?

6 **Political / criminal response** Beyond anyone's control: public fallout, social media, worse.

5 **Legal response** Lawyers' letters and talk of rights.

4 **Dispute resolution response** A formal complaint lands, or someone suggests mediation.

3 **Community response** Allies and camps form: "I'm being bullied" / "The young ones have no respect." People start to get uncomfortable.

2 **Interpersonal response** They stop talking directly. Jess emails the President with a complaint about Margaret; no reply for three weeks.

1 **Personal response** Jess feels dismissed in front of everyone. Margaret feels her experience isn't valued.

Conflict core A threat, or perceived threat, to dignity, standing or something we value

Conflict Core and Conflict Spiral: an adaptation of Friedrich Glasl's model of conflict escalation for everyday conflict, by Mediation Institute

It's not only inside the club

Disputes also happen between groups, and with the wider community. They're common in small towns, where groups compete for the same resources.

Between clubs and associations

Sharing grounds, halls and equipment. Competing for grants, sponsors and volunteers.

Between organisations

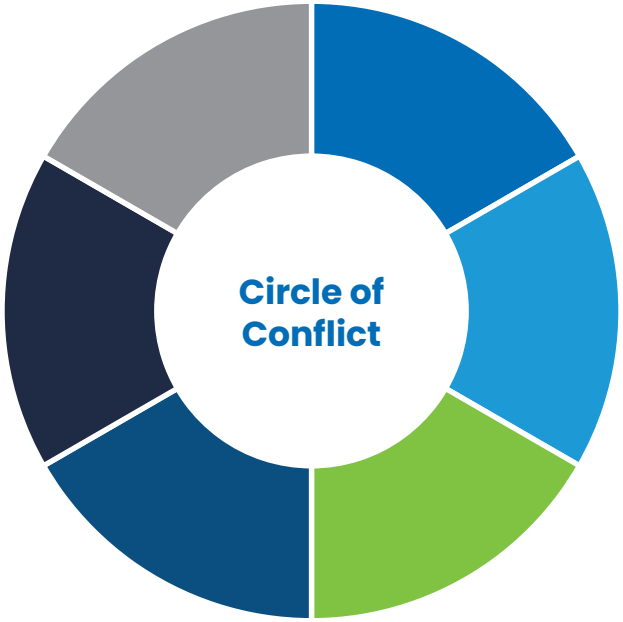
A club and its council, school or state body. Joint venture partners who see an agreement differently.

With the wider community

Neighbours and noise, parking, access, events, or how a shared space is used.

The same tools work: know the rules that apply, act early, and bring in an independent mediator or a facilitated conversation.

Why people do what they do



Adapted from Christopher W. Moore's Circle of Conflict (The Mediation Process), with a social / community cause as taught by Mediation Institute

Relationship
Old history, a clash of personalities

Data
Someone wasn't told, or heard a different version

Interests
What's important. Competitive club or social club?

Structural
Unclear roles, no complaints process, rules nobody can find

Values
Different beliefs about what's fair, safe or "how it's done"

Social / community
Status, standing and different life circumstances, such as long-standing members and newcomers

Margaret and Jess through the circle

Relationship

No trust built yet between old and new

Values

Experience counts / new ideas count

Social / community

Long-standing member and newcomer: status and standing

Structural

No clear process, so the email sat for three weeks

The structural slice is where your rules come in.

Which rules are you actually running under?



Model rules

The government's template. Many associations adopt them as they are.

Did you know that the updates apply automatically?



Your own rules

Written or changed by your group.

Change the model rules beyond the basics and you may now have your own rules, even if the document still says “model rules”.



Silent rules

In most states, if your own rules don't cover disputes, the model rules' dispute procedure fills the gap.

The layers of rules

The law
Your state's associations Act

Your peak or state body
Its rules and policies, if you're affiliated

Your constitution
Your rules

By-laws and policies
Code of conduct, member protection, grievance procedure

Each layer sits under the one above it

By-laws can't override your constitution.

Your constitution can't override the law.

Affiliated clubs are bound by their state body too.

Fair process: the four basics

1

Being heard

Each person gets to tell their side of the story

2

A fair response

People know what's said about them and can answer it

3

Impartiality

The facilitator or decision-maker has no stake, and isn't seen to have one

4

Following procedure

Do what your rules say, in the order they say

Grievance or disciplinary action?

They're different processes with different purposes. Victoria's model rules as the example.

Grievance rules 25 to 29

What it is	A dispute between members, or with the committee or association
Who starts it	The people in the dispute
The steps	Try to sort it out in 14 days, then ask for a mediator within 10 days
Who decides	The people in it. The mediator must not decide
If unresolved	The Act, or the law

Disciplinary action rules 19 to 24

What it is	The association acting on a breach of the rules or harmful conduct
Who starts it	The committee, if there are grounds
The steps	Unbiased subcommittee, 14 to 28 days written notice, member heard
Who decides	Subcommittee: no action, reprimand, set suspension or expulsion
Appeal	Within 7 days, to 3 or more people not involved

Order matters: a grievance waits while a disciplinary process on the same matter is under way (rule 25(2)).

From NMAS to AMDRAS

Mediator accreditation has moved on. Older rules haven't caught up.

2008
National Mediator Accreditation System (NMAS) begins

1 July 2024
Australian Mediator and Dispute Resolution Accreditation Standards (AMDRAS) begin

1 July 2025
Transition complete: AMDRAS replaces NMAS

Rules made in 2023 or earlier
will still say NMAS, or a mediator "registered" with the Mediator Standards Board. Victoria's 2023 model rules are an example.
Read it as an AMDRAS accredited mediator.

The next evolution of NMAS
AMDRAS builds on NMAS: trained, accredited mediators with ethical obligations and ongoing professional development.
Updating your rules? Name AMDRAS.

More information: www.amdras.au

Where mediation sits in the model rules

A required step

Victoria, NSW and the Northern Territory (NT)

Victoria: sort it out first, then mediation.

NSW: mediation, then arbitration. The service it names has closed.

NT: meet within 14 days, then with a mediator.

Available on request

WA, Queensland and South Australia (SA)

WA: a party can ask for a mediator.

Queensland: after 14 days, a member can ask and the committee must refer it.

SA: meet within 14 days, then a third person if both agree.

Not in the model rules

Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)

Tasmania: disputes go to arbitration.

ACT: an impartial decision-maker hears it.

No mediation step in your rules? You can still try mediation first. Your own rules may differ, so check yours. Detail by state: icdrs.interact.support/know-your-rules

Under the rules: how we do things here

Rules are high-level and generic, often with tight time frames. They don't tell you how to apply them.

The rules say

Try to sort it out within 14 days.

Tell the committee within 10 days.

Give 14 to 28 days' written notice.

Victoria's model rules

Your agreed process says

Who people can talk to first, with no form needed

Who on the committee responds, and how quickly

How we listen without taking sides

When we offer a facilitated conversation or mediation

How we keep brief, factual notes

Who we call for help, and who steps aside

Agreed, written down and used every time, it becomes your culture: dealing with disputes early and well, before they escalate.

Traps: avoiding, waiting and lawyering

Head in the sand

Looks like: Hoping it goes away because you're not sure how to step in.

Practical help: Build your skills with conflict coaching or a Conflict Management First Steps workshop. Your rules give you the steps, and Ask a Mediator is there.

No form, no fix

Looks like: Nothing is done unless a very formal process is engaged with. People won't put it in writing, so it simmers.

Practical help: A conversation is a valid first step. Get guidance or training for your committee on how to listen to a complaint without taking sides.

Lawyer up

Looks like: Calling in lawyers too early. A rights focus tends to reinforce grievances.

Practical help: Use your grievance procedure. Mediation is usually the best option within it, and in pre-mediation the mediator helps work out whether you need legal advice.

Traps: conflicts of interest and taking sides

“But I can be fair”

Looks like: Deciding a matter you're connected to because you feel impartial.

Practical help: Conflict of interest is about how it looks to others. Declare the connection, step aside and bring in someone independent.

The collusion trap

Looks like: Agreeing with whoever is in front of you while “just listening”.

Practical help: Validate feelings without endorsing their version. Don't rely on the grapevine: go directly to the people involved.

Trap: bypassing mediation

> **They're not talking, and mediation is talking, so let's skip it.**

Give it a chance: mediation is built for people who aren't talking

1 Private preparation

Each person prepares privately with the mediator first (pre-mediation process)

2 When they're ready

The mediator brings them together to talk only when each person is ready, if it is safe to do so.

3 A structured conversation

The mediation process helps people to identify sources of conflict and helps reach mutual agreements.

Traps: discipline and records

Off with their head

Looks like: Rushing to discipline or expel. Indefinite suspension without giving the grounds.

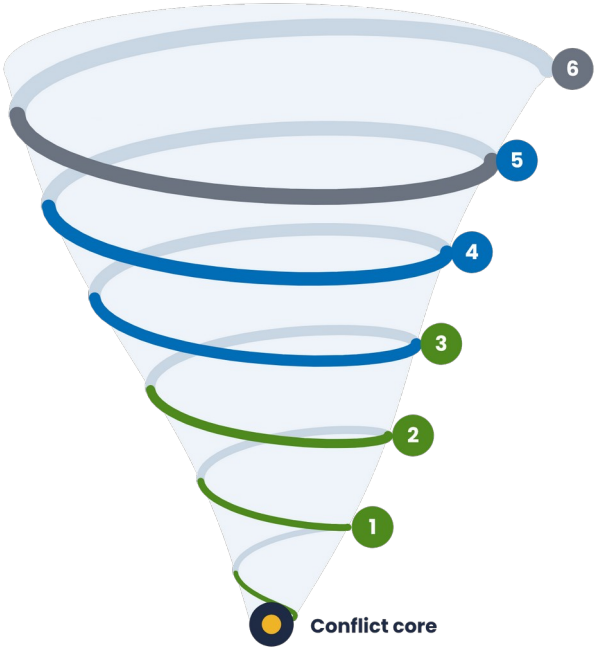
Practical help: Give the grounds, a hearing, and follow your rules. Get help to review your dispute resolution policy so the steps are clear.

No notes, or judgemental notes

Looks like: Nothing written down, or notes full of opinion and judgement.

Practical help: Keep brief, factual, dated notes of what was said and done.

Rewind: “Just trying to help”



6 Political / criminal Beyond control

5 Legal Lawyers' letters

4 Dispute resolution Formal complaint

3 Community Allies and camps; people leave

2 Interpersonal Not talking directly; email unanswered

1 Personal Hurt and anger on both sides

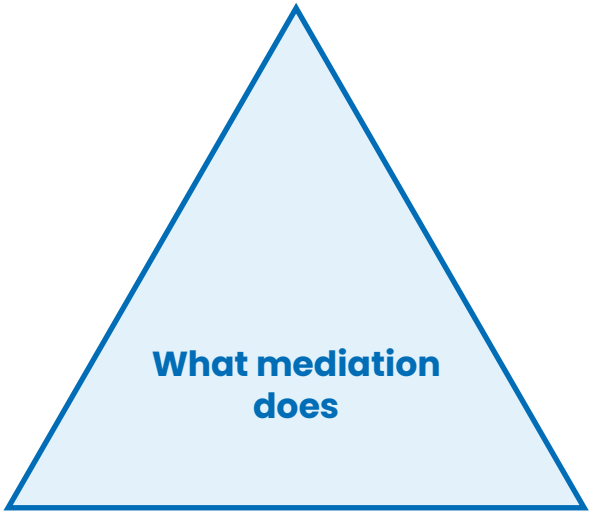
After the meeting
The President has a quiet word with each of them the same week. No form needed.

When the email arrives
A reply within days, and an offer to talk, without taking sides.

When the camps form
Someone independent is brought in, not a committee member with a stake.

Green: where early, calm, fair action stops the spiral

What an independent third party changes



The Conflict Triangle: People, Process, Problem.
Adapted by Mediation Institute.

1 **Support the people**
Each person is heard privately first, in pre-mediation. Dignity is restored. In mediation Margaret hears how her words landed; Jess hears what Margaret meant.

2 **Control the process**
The mediator runs a structured, safe conversation and a fair process. The mediator doesn't decide.

3 **Solve the problem**
They agree how they'll work together on the rosters.

Both stay. Handling conflict well is how you keep your volunteers.

First steps: early, calm, fair



Early

Act on the first sign; don't wait for a form



Calm

Let the first wave of emotion pass before you respond



Fair

Hear everyone, stay out of it if you're connected, follow your rules



Know what you're not

Refer on when it needs more than you can offer

"The best conflict first responders are the ones who know what they are not."

What does mediation cost?

A lot less than losing valuable volunteers.

It depends on the service
Ask for the rates and how they're worked out before you start.

Lower-cost options
Some mediators volunteer or offer lower rates to small charities and community groups.

Government services
A few early-intervention services remain; the trend is towards court-connected services.

Compared with lawyers
Even commercial mediation rates cost less than an adversarial legal process.

ICDRS provides mediation
AMDRAS Mediators, quoted upfront, with partner and club rates for affiliated groups. Pre-mediation and mediation are charged separately.

Where to get help

Ask a Mediator
Fill in a short form and a mediator calls you back, free

Mediation, facilitated conversations and conflict coaching
From ICDRS, with AMDRAS Mediators

Conflict Management First Steps (CMFS)
Practical training for committee members and club leaders or for teams, online or in-house

Help with your dispute resolution policy

Find a mediator
Mediation Institute: www.mimembers.au/find-a-mediator
Check accreditation at www.amdras.au

Scan for the slides and worksheet

icdrs.interact.support
icdrs@interact.support
1300 079 345

No formal complaint needed

Know your rules, keep your volunteers

Not my way or the highway, but the rules way: fair, agreed, early.

Slides + worksheet

Questions?

icdrs.interact.support · icdrs@interact.support · 1300 079 345

Interactive Guide & each state's rules