# 6.3.1 Social Conflicts

Persuasion & Public Debates

This chapter presents the rules for resolving conflicts with words, whether it be through diplomacy, seduction, intimidation or some other method.

When to use these rules:

To make it clear right from the start, you won’t need these rules every time the PCs open their mouths and say something. They are primarily rules for conflict resolution, so we need a source of conflict. This is not contradicted with the fact that these rules pertain to methods which are usually civilized and peaceful (emphasis on ‘usually’). A conflict itself is one thing; how the players decide to get around it is another.

So, how to recognize a conflict?

It’s simple, actually – you need the players to want something from an NPC (information, a good, a service etc.), and you need a reason why doesn’t want to cooperate. That reason can be anything – maybe it costs him time to help, maybe it’s tedious, maybe it’s dangerous, and maybe he simply doesn’t like the PCs – it doesn’t matter.

The point is that if the NPC has no reason not to cooperate, he’ll do it and then he’ll be on his way. In this case, there’s no conflict, so no special rules and no dice rolls are needed to resolve it; the NPC just does what was asked of him and the game carries on.

Know that it’s not the NPC himself that’s the source of conflict, but actually his reason to not want to help. For example, if the PCs want to enter a building whose door is guarded, the guard is not a source of conflict. The guard’s orders not to let anyone inside and his fear of getting in trouble for not following orders are.

Once there is a conflict caused by the various reasons why the NPC doesn’t want to help, and the players want to persuade him to help anyway, then these rules come into effect.

On the other hand, they are not needed if the players deal with the source of conflict directly. For example, let’s say a warrior (PC) needs a good shield from a blacksmith (NPC). The blacksmith, obviously, doesn’t want to let it go for nothing because it cost him time and materials to make it. If the warrior agrees to pay a fair sum upfront, he removes the source of conflict and the deal is done. Alternatively, if he asks to receive the shield up-front, and promises to pay the blacksmith double once he’s used it to defeat the dragon and take his treasure, then that is a viable situation to resolve with these rules.

When NOT to use these rules:

You should have noticed by now that only PC to NPC interactions were mentioned. That is not in error, and indeed, these rules are asymmetrical in that sense. Interactions purely between NPCs should be resolved by the GM at their own discretion, and interactions between two or more PCs should be settled by players themselves.

Persuasion Vs. Public Debates:

What follows are rules for persuasion, followed by some extensions to enable public debates. The difference between the two is as follows:

* In the former case, the PCs are trying to convince one or more NPC, in private, to change their minds about something, or trying to, at least, reach a useful agreement about it.
* In a public debate, however, they (the PCs) trying to get their opponent or opponents to concede to their (the PC’s) points of view and agree to something, **in front of an audience**. The NPCs won’t have to change their minds (though they can), but that won’t matter, because everyone will know who’s right!

Usually the first will negate the need for the second: if you get someone to share your views, they probably won’t go around telling people otherwise.

Persuasion:

“The problem is not the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem.”

Objections & Incentives:

If an NPC is ever going to help the players, they are eventually going to need a reason to want to do that. Some NPCs start off with a reason to want to help, but their reason to want to not help is preventing them from helping – they’re conflicted. Others have no reason to help and the players will have to provide one, or overcome all the NPCs reasons to want to not help.

For simplicity, we will refer to any reason an NPC has to not want to help the PCs as **Objections**. And we will refer to reasons why the NPC does want to help the PCs as **Incentives**. Objections are the reasons an NPC wants to not help the party. Incentives are the reasons the NPC wants to help the party.

### Examples of Objections:

Fear of getting in trouble, helping is costly, spite against the party, spite against the party’s patron, fear of danger, offended, thinks the party is up to no good, dislikes authority, dislikes strangers, religious objections, a vow or promise, protecting someone or something, etc.

### Examples of Incentives:

Something in it for the NPC, desire to do the right thing, a vow or promise, respect for the party’s patron, inclined to respect authority, has something to prove, personal feelings toward the PCs, wants to put the PCs in their debt, unburden guilt or shame, avoiding personal harm or injury, just putting an end to the pain, etc.

GM Tips:

Going back to “When to use these rules” for a moment, think of it like this: Before you can use them, you need to have at least one Objection for the NPC. If you want to make life easier for the PCs, you can also create an Incentive. But you can also rely on your players to create Incentives.

### Notice the wording:

We keep referring to Objections as “reasons to want to not help.” We don’t say an Objection is “not having a reason to help.”

Not having a reason to help is not the same as having a reason to not help. The first simply means the NPC feels neutral. They will help if it is convenient or not help if it is onerous and that’s it. And nothing the players can do will affect that. A reason to not help is more active. It is a thing in the NPCs brain that tells them not to cooperate. It is an actual obstacle. No matter how convenient it might be to help, the NPC has a reason not to. In order to make a nontrivial social scene, you need a true Objection. Something the players can attack.

Objection and Incentive Scores:

Each objection and eventual Incentive an NPC has will be associated with a number – its Score – ranging from 1 to 5, with one being a minor thing and 5 being a big deal.

To make the system more intuitive, we’ll mark Objections with negative numbers and Incentives with positive numbers. Then, logically, while the Objections outweigh the Incentives (the total sum is negative), the NPC won’t cooperate. Eventually, if they balance each other out or the Incentives pull ahead (the overall sum becomes positive), the NPC agrees to the terms, whatever they may be, and the PCs get their way.

Talking, Intents and Approaches:

While the goal here, in terms of mechanics, is to reduce the Objections and increase Incentives or create new ones, we have to start from the beginning. Like with other resolution mechanics, it starts with players describing what their characters are doing. In this case, since it’s about social interactions, they describe what their characters are saying and, sometimes, how they’re saying it.

“Hello, good sir, we need to go in.”

“I tell him that we’re in a hurry and that we need to go in.”

“My character looks at his menacingly and tells him there will be hell to pay if he doesn’t let us in.”

The GM’s responsibility here is twofold:

* First, they need to speak for all the NPCs and reply appropriately to what the PCs are saying (taking into consideration what they – the NPC - know and think about the PCs, the subject matter and the world in general). At first glance, it may seem like an easy task, but there’s something to be said about being evocative while not being overly verbose, but still giving out enough information to players so the game can flow nicely. At the end of this chapter, there’s a big section to help GMs with this. <(there will be, work in progress)>
* The second responsibility for the GM is to interpret what the players are saying and how it affects the game world. Same as with other kinds of interactions, the GM will have to piece together what the players are trying to accomplish (intent) and how they’re trying to do it (approach). Where appropriate, they’ll call for Skill Tests and steer the game from there.

### More on Intents and Approaches:

Take, for example, the statement: “let us in or I’ll kick your ass.” The intention is that the NPC allows the PCs to enter. The approach is threatening the NPC. What about “we need three rooms for the night?” The intention is to secure three rooms. The approach is by asking for them, though offering to pay for them is implied.

Teasing out approaches is actually a little trickier in a social interaction. On the surface, the action is the same every time: the PC says something. But the approach is determined by what the PC said and how the PC said it. Is what the PC said true or false? Is the PC being hostile or polite? Is the PC being insulting? Is it accidental or on purpose? Is the PC offering something or making a promise? Is there an implied promise?

It is not good enough just to fit an action into a Skill (there are not enough of them to differentiate well, for starters). The approach needs to be described in more detail - for instance: playing for sympathy, offering a convincing argument, and seduction all fall under the D&D definition of Diplomacy. But they are very different approaches that might elicit different responses. A greedy, evil merchant doesn’t have any sympathy (that’s what greedy and evil mean), but some convincing arguments might work and he or she might like a good sexing from a high Charisma character. Who doesn’t?

If all else fails, the GM should ask the player how they are trying to do things. “Hey, that sounded threatening. Did you really mean to threaten the NPC?” “You don’t really work for the Duke, do you? You’re lying to the guy, aren’t you?”

Sometimes, a player will pack both the intent and the approach neatly in a single sentence, like in the example above (“My character looks at his menacingly and tells him there will be hell to pay if he doesn’t let us in.”). Other times, it will be spread out over a series of exchanges, like in the following example:

**GM (as the NPC):** “What do you want?”

**Player:** “I want to know what you were doing at the docks Friday night.”

**GM (as the NPC):** “Yeah? What business is it of yours?”

**Player:** “I’m makin’ it my business. Got a problem with that?”

**GM (as the NPC):** “Maybe I do.”

**Player:** “Well then maybe we can continue this conversation downtown. And we can also talk about these watches you’re selling that I’m sure were legitimately acquired and not one of the serial numbers will have been reported stolen.”

**GM:** “Test Consort against his Willpower.”

**Player:** “Five.” [the GM rolls 3 successes]

**GM:** “All right, all right. Geeze, it wasn’t a big deal anyway. A business associate asked me to check out…”

The point, as was already demonstrated in the example, is to arrive at a point where the player has stated both the intent and the approach, and has also said something the NPC might respond to.

If this form of intent + approach + chance to fail or succeed is starting to ring a bell, you’re not wrong – it’s the Skill Test mechanic in brief.

At these points in the conversation, the GM should explicitly call for opposed Skill Tests between the PC and the NPC, with the specific Skills being tested being determined by the PC’s approach.

If the test is successful, it can reduce the score of an Objection by one or more points, and/or increase the score of an Incentive by one or more points (or create a new one). Then, we repeat this process until the NPC is convinced (Incentives balance out the Objections), or one of the two parties gives up on the conversation.

Up until this point, the text has been more on the descriptive side, to help explain the concept. What follows are formalized rules.

Persuasion Mechanics, Formalized:

A single persuasion scene is a simple three-step process: Setup, Main phase, End.

Setup:

Once the PCs ask something of an NPC, the GM must determine their Incentives and Objections to that request, aided by the below guidelines:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Incentive level** | **Description** |
| +1 | Small boon |
| +2 | Moderate boon |
| +3 | Considerable reward |
| +4 | Big reward |
| +5 | Life-changing opportunity |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Objection level** | **Description** |
| -1 | Minor inconvenience |
| -2 | Moderate inconvenience |
| -3 | Considerable problem |
| -4 | Big problem |
| -5 | Life-ruining change |

For more detailed guidelines for setting Objection and Incentive scores, see the GM guide for running social encounters on page XX. <WIP>

The Incentives and Objections can be carried over from the previous interactions with the NPC, but they don’t have to be. It’s up to the GM, depending on the situation.

The GM must also determine the NPC’s **Patience**, a new concept here. Basically, it’s just a number which says how much longer the NPC is willing to put up with the PCs, and if it reaches zero, the persuasion attempt fails (more on fail states later).

The starting Patience for a NPC at the start of the interaction is 2d6.

In case of favourable conditions for the PCs (good first impression, good reputation, the NPC has lots of free time etc.), roll 3d6 and pick the highest two. In the opposite case (PCs have bad reputation, NPC doesn’t like them due to prejudice, is busy etc.), roll 3d6 and pick the lowest two.

Finally, if this NPC is new in the game, determine their Social Traits using one of the methods outlined on page YY.

### Factoring in relationships:

If there is an existing relationship between PCs and NPCs and the NPCs disposition is anything other than Indifferent, it needs to be taken into account.

A positive Relationship Level counts as a passive Incentive of equal level (so, Cordial is +1, Helpful is +2 and Friendly is +3; More Than Friends counts as +5).

Analogously, a negative Relationship Level works as a passive Objection of equal level (Unfriendly is -1, Antagonistic is -2 and Hostile is -3, with Nemesis being -5).

The GM may, at their own discretion, negate this rule if hostilities or friendship have no bearing on the PCs’ request. In other words, being someone’s friend won’t make it easier for them to accept something that goes against their beliefs and/or nature; and sometimes the circumstances are such that even enemies have to put their differences aside and work together.

Main phase:

This phase of the encounter begins as soon as the GM finishes setup. It is where the PCs and NPCs actually talk to each other.

As stated earlier, the conversation is freeform and the players should go with whatever feels natural.

However, once a PC says something which addresses one of the NPCs’ Objections, appeals to an Incentive or creates a new one, the GM can interrupt the conversation and call for a Skill Test. Remember, this can happen after a series of exchanges between the PC and NPCs, but it is required that, after that series, the PC’s intent and approach are clear. There are a few more (hopefully obvious) limitations here:

* What the PC states must be relevant for the subject matter being discussed. That water is wet is technically true, but doesn’t help the discussion if you’re asking the king of a neighbouring realm to reinforce your army.
* A single method of dealing with an Objection or appealing to an Incentive is valid for one try, no matter if the Skill Test that follows it succeeds or not. You cannot simply rephrase what you’ve already told the NPC and have another go. Respect the “Let it Ride” rule.

**Player 1:** “Look, the orcs are amassing huge numbers. We’ve seen them. And once they roll over Dongor, they will destroy Norahn.”

**GM:** “Hm… Perhaps there is some truth to what you say. But still…” (Objection down to -1)

**Player 2:** “Yes! The orc’s numbers are massive! If you don’t help us, your kingdom will surely be swept away!”

**GM:** “Mm. Your ally said as much. But I’m still not convinced.”

The second player just rephrased what the first player said. The King has already heard that argument, and still remains unconvinced. The Objection score stays where it is.

**Player 3:** “The orc’s don’t just have numbers, my liege. They have strong leadership as well. Bhargar the Despoiler leads them, and he has pledged to wipe away the kingdoms of Man.”

Here, the players have introduced a new reason why the orc’s should be taken seriously, not just re-iterated an earlier point. The Objection score therefore drops again.

Once all the conditions are met, the player may roll an Opposed Skill Test against the NPC. There are multiple Skills to choose from, so use these guidelines to determine which one is most appropriate:

* To exert a dominating, commanding presence, negotiate from a position of power, threaten, coerce or intimidate, test **Command**.
* To socialize and connect with others, test **Consort**. When consorting, you’re getting to know people, trying to get on their good side, and leveraging social and emotional ties.
* To argue, negotiate, manipulate, or downright charm and seduce someone, test **Sway**. When Swaying, you’re trying to win someone over, influence them, basically buy (literally or not) their cooperation.

The NPC defends with Willpower, following the usual rules for Opposed Skill Tests.

If the PC wins, it means they managed to get the NPC to agree, at least to this one point. Increase the relevant Objection or Incentive by 1 (remember, since Objections are represented by negative numbers, this means that its absolute value goes down by 1). In case of a critical success on the PC’s end, and also in other cases where the GM deems appropriate, the increase may be more than 1 point.

However, if the NPC wins, he remains unconvinced in the PC’s story. No changes to Objections and Incentives happen, and his Patience drops by 1.

### Test Adjustments:

**1.** The first thing which can influence the opposed test between the PC and NPC (no matter which approach the PC is taking and which Skill they’re rolling) is the current total Objection/Incentive balance. For every 2 points below zero (every 2 points by which the Objections outweigh the Incentives), the NPC gets 1 Automatic Success on all of his Willpower tests.

The reasoning here is that people usually take a very defensive stance when things seem heavily stacked against their favour.

**2.** The second adjustment comes from taking into consideration what the PC said (their approach) and seeing how it plays along with the NPC’s Social Traits, as described on page XX.

Any time the game comes to an Opposed Test between a PC and NPC, and the approach the PC took (that led to the test) corresponds to one of the Social Traits defined in the game, one of three things happens:

* If the NPC’s rating for the relevant Social Trait is zero, nothing special happens (proceed as usual).
* If the NPC’s rating for that Social Trait is D-prefixed, he receives a number of Automatic Successes to his Willpower roll equal to the value of the trait’s rating (for example, D2 Flattery will confer 2 Automatic Successes when appropriate).
* Finally, an L-prefixed rating works the same as a D-prefixed rating, but opposite – it subtracts successes after the roll (down to 0). *Normally, you’d just give Automatic Successes to his opponent instead, but this mechanic is special.*

**GM Tip:** The Social Traits of an NPC shouldn’t be immediately obvious to players, so it’s recommended that the GM always roll the NPCs’ Willpower tests in secret, adjust the result accordingly and only tell the players the final score.

### Narrating Results of the Tests:

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Deception & Lying:

So, it turns out people lie to each other, and pretty often, too. Especially when there’s something to be gained. In the game world, it’s no different.

Whenever a character is lying, he tests the Deception skill opposed to Insight of the person he’s lying to. Depending on how believable the lie is, apply the following adjustments:

* **The lie is oddly convenient**, but other than that, not too hard to believe: +1 Automatic Success to defender’s Insight test.
* **The lie is unlikely** and the story has some holes: +2 Automatic Successes to the defender’s Insight test.
* **The lie is far-fetched** and difficult to believe: +4 Automatic Successes to the defender’s Insight test.
* **The lie is (almost) impossible –** it’d be a miracle if somebody believed this: +8 Automatic Successes to the defender’s Insight test.
* **Presenting convincing evidence** can push the lie up one or two “believability categories” (described above; GM’s discretion), which can even result in some Automatic Successes for the liar if the lie wasn’t too ‘out there’ in the first place.

As always, use Circumstance Modifiers to represent other significant circumstances: The target is drunk, drugged, trusts the liar, is inherently suspicious or paranoid, and so on.

**Special Rule:** Insight tests made to detect falsehood are always rolled by the GM in secret and may never benefit from Effort or other effect which require player agency.

If a PC lied and succeeded, follow it up with another test depending on its implication - from the perspective of the NPC, who now believes the lie. After the second test, adjust Objections and Incentives if needed.

For example, the PC says: “We were sent by the king himself, and if you don’t let us in, you’re going to be in so much trouble!” If the Deception test is successful, it should be followed up by a Command check (for intimidation), and if that one succeeds, it’s going to result in a good dent in the NPC’s Objections.

If a PC is caught in a lie, the NPC could, depending on their personality and the lie itself:

* Become Offended or Gravely Offended,
* Become suspicious of the PC, leading to a lowered Disposition towards them,
* Pretend he believed it and use it later against the PC,
* Gain new Objections due to mistrust,
* Or let it slide and not do anything at all (use this sparingly).

The choice of consequence is up to the GM, depending on the situation. They can also combine the suggestions above or come up with their own.

If a NPC lies and succeeds, the GM should only tell it to the player in a way which implies what information he perceives as true, but shouldn’t disclose any information about test results (remember that Insight tests are done by the GM in secret in these cases). The GM can also provide the player with different levels of assurance that something is true or not, depending on how successful the NPC was in lying.

“You’re not sure, but you think he might be telling the truth.” [NPC barely won the opposed test]

“You find little reason not to believe him.” [NPC won the test by a few points]

“You’re convinced he’s not lying.” [NPC won the opposed test handedly]

If a NPC is caught in a lie, it’s up to the players to decide how to proceed. The GM should, again, describe what they think about it depending on the results of the test.

“Something doesn’t add up here…” [PC’s Insight test barely wins]

“You’re not convinced.” [Insight test wins by a few points]

“He’s obviously lying.” [Insight test wins by a lot]

### Deception is not Mind Control:

Even if a PC wins on the Opposed test and the NPC believes the lie, they may still remain suspicious about it and may want to check the veracity of it later, if able, especially if the Opposed Test was not won by a large margin.

The general rule of thumb is that if the PC wins by 3 or more successes, the NPC is entirely convinced, and remains at least a little suspicious otherwise (if they have a reason to, of course).

End:

* Failure (Objections 10 pts over Incentives; Patience reaches 0; NPC greatly offended or became hostile).
* Success (an agreement is reached)

Group Conversations:

The rules have, thus far, assumed a single PC and a single NPC arguing, but there’s no reason either side couldn’t be a group of two or more people.

For each exchange of the conversation (meaning a single ‘segment’ leading up to the Opposed Skill Test), either group may (but doesn’t have to) appoint a different “active speaker”. He/she will be the person who does the bulk of the talking for that exchange, and the person who rolls against the opposition at the end. Others may Aid them as per the usual rules.

Other than that, use the same rules as for 1-on-1 conversations.

GM’s Guide to Social Conflicts:

What to roll in secret?

Determining Obj/Inc Scores:

* +8 for dream-come-true offer\*
* +4 for big reward\*
* +2 for moderate beneficial thing\*
* +1 for small boon\*
* -1 for minor inconvenience\*
* -2 for moderate inconvenience\*
* -4 for big problem\*
* -8 for life-ruining change\*

(\* - can be reduced if the outcome is not certain; by how much depends on the chance of it going right or wrong)

+1 to +3 for appealing to a belief or passion (depending on strength)

-1 to -3 for going against a belief or a dislike (depending on strength)

Narrating Results of the Tests:

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Other stuff:

* Insight vs Deflecting, Blocking, Deception

Reading Material:

<https://theangrygm.com/help-my-players-are-talking-to-things/>

<https://theangrygm.com/systematic-interaction/>