# 6.3. 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:

Let’s get one thing about these rules straight, right here at the start: You won’t need them every time the PCs open their mouths and say something. They are specifically for resolving conflicts by talking, same as the combat rules could be used to try and resolve that same conflict with violence.

What this means is that, once the players decide that their characters need something from a certain NPC and that they’re going to try and ensure the cooperation of an NPC by talking, that NPC has to have a reason why he doesn’t want to do that. 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 help, he’ll do it and then he’ll be on his way. In this case, no special rules and no dice rolls are needed; it just happens 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? Those are.

**To sum it up:** Once you have a tangible conflict which can be resolved with words, then you can use these rules.

When NOT to use these rules:

You should have noticed by now that only PC to NPC interactions were called out. 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.

With that out of the way, let’s get back to the actual rules.

Persuasion:

“Allow me to break the ice.”

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 can’t think of one, you don’t have a conflict and thus you don’t need conflict resolution rules. 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 interaction, 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. <WELL, THERE WILL BE!>
* 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 bit 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, 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 you understand how resolving social conflicts works conceptually. What follows are the rules to formalize it a bit more, to “gamify” it, if you will.

Persuasion Mechanics, Formalized:

Setup:

* Determine Objections and Incentives
* Determine patience

Flow:

* Talk
* Test

End:

* Success
* Failure