As a resident advisor there are many situations, complications, and surprises that will occur throughout the year. One of the most common will be roommate conflicts, and in order to handle them effectively, resident advisors need to be equipped with the appropriate skills. The following article is going to outline some of the common mistakes resident advisors can easily make when facilitating a roommate conflict, and it will also give tips on how to successfully navigate the conversation to resolution.

The process can be on a spectrum of difficulty. There are the cases that are simple and easy.  For example, one roommate really wants something, perhaps lights out at midnight, but they are simply too shy to communicate this to their roommate.  Instead they tell theirRA, who then has a chat with the other roommate. It turns outs the other roommate would prefer lights out at midnight too, and has only kept them on that late because they thought it was what the roommate wanted. Problem solved. This was a simple breakdown of communication, which is a skill the RA can continue to work on with the roommates in the future.  In regards to the roommate conflict, it was a piece of cake. Unfortunately, many of them are not this easy and straightforward. Typically, there are more emotions involved, demands being made, and hours being dedicated to resolving the conflict. Due to these components, mistakes and hiccups are bound to happen with roommate conflicts, and coming from a previous resident advisor, it is perfectly acceptable because it will produce growth as an RA and strengthening of facilitation skills.

So what exactly am I referring to when I say mistakes and hiccups? I will lay out the common slip ups and blunders that occur during roommate conflicts, and I will give reasons why they do not lead to success and also some tips on how to avoid them.

Common Mistakes:

1.     Speaking with each roommate separately throughout the entire process.  Initially, this seems like a great idea because they may be too heated or timid for a face-to-face confrontation.

2.     On the flip side, another common mistake is speaking with the roommates together for the entire process.  This may also seem appropriate because they can jump right into solving the conflict.

However, neither of these strategies quite captures all that facilitation aims to accomplish. If we attempt option (1) the roommates may come to a resolution without ever having spoken directly to each other. The problem is that their communication does not improve, and if further conflicts arise, they will not know how to deal with them. If we go with option (2), again the roommates may come to a resolution, but the process may be dictated by the stronger personality in the room or it may take longer due to arguing or other emotion-filled issues (crying, ignoring, etc).  Therefore, a combination of the two options is necessary. The resident advisor should speak with each resident separately prior to the facilitation. Allow the resident to tell their story and their hopes as well as fears concerning the facilitation. When both roommates are available, set a location and hold the facilitated dialogue.

3.     Ignoring the Conflict or Giving it Time to Work Itself Out.  This may seem appropriate because you do not want to invade their privacy or because you think they just need some time to gather the courage to speak to one  another about the issue, but…

The odds are the conflict will not get resolved with the added time. One roommate may be too shy to bring up the issue, and one roommate may dominate the conversation if the issue is brought up, or the issue will just fester until one roommate explodes with emotions. Therefore, the RA should address the issue as soon as it is brought to their attention.  In order to avoid domination by one roommate and shyness by the other, the RA should assess the roommates’ conflict styles. By this, I mean try to understand, by the prior conversation with each roommate, how each person reacts to conflict. Do they confront it? Do they give into demands of the other person? Once you recognize the styles of each person, you will be able to prevent certain personalities from taking over the dialogue.

4.     Telling each party what to do in the dialogue. As RAs, we may tend to think we need to have all the answers, but…

In a facilitated dialogue, letting the participants find their own solutions is empowering. It pushes them to improve on their conflict resolution and communication skills. All the RA should do during the conversation is facilitate. If the conversation stalls, move it along with an open ended question or reflection. If the conversation gets heated, bring the participants back with a reflection, maybe stating, “I can see you both are very upset about this issue.” Direct the conversation by allowing one person to talk at a time.

Tips:

1)      Use the LARA method in both the conversation and the dialogue.

* **L** stands for Listen. In this stage of LARA, active listening needs to be practiced, by maintaining eye contact (if culturally appropriate), nodding your head, and showing that you are listening.
* **A** stands for Affirm or Acknowledge. Much like active listening, this stage requires that the RA says something affirming like “I can understand why it’s difficult for you to talk to your roommate about this and why it is also so important to you.”  Acknowledge the feelings and needs behind what is being said.
* **R** stands for Respond. This is when the RA can respond to what was said – address the interests and needs that the resident brought up.
* **A** stands for Add. This is when the RA can provide additional information or options about solutions.  Do not give advice or force your opinion on anyone, though!

2)      Provide “I Statements” as a tool for dialogue.

a.       An “I Statement” refers to a sentence that explains how the person is feeling and what they would like without attacking the person they are speaking to or putting them on the defensive. The statement is as follows: I feel\_\_\_\_\_\_ when\_\_\_\_\_because\_\_\_\_\_so what I’m hoping is \_\_\_\_\_.  A complete example would be “I feel frustrated when the lights are left on after midnight because it is hard for me to fall asleep and then I don’t do well in my classes, so I’m hoping we can turn the lights off or dim them at a certain time every night, or find another agreeable solution that works for both of us.”

b.      If you notice in the previous example, I never told the other person they DID anything wrong or they have to DO something to make it better. I kept it all about me, the speaker, and how I was feeling and how I would like it to be solved.

When in doubt, contact the Office of Student Conflict Resolution for assistance!