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# Managing Conflict with Professionalism

Property managers often find themselves in a unique position when conflict emerges in a condominium. As the primary contact for resident and owner concerns and the liaison to the board, management is often thrust smack in the middle of conflict – from the early stages all the way to mediation, arbitration or court.

While it can sometimes be uncomfortable for property managers to find themselves in this position, it is also a shame when opportunities to have a positive influence are missed. As an added impetus for managers to make the most of such opportunities, it is often the case that all involved in a condominium conflict remain members of the community

throughout it. Accordingly, the way that a conflict is managed can make a significant difference, both in respect of tensions that arise during the conflict and upon the relationship that will often continue to exist long after the matter is addressed.

In my mediation practice, I have been involved in disputes where property management has been instrumental in resolving matters and in disputes where property management has been instrumental in preventing resolution. What follows are some examples of how managers have effectively managed conflict...

## Checking In

A condominium resident was regularly sending complaints to security

and management about noise troubling them in their unit. While investigations were ongoing and board input was needed to determine how the matter would be addressed, the property manager noticed the pattern of complaints. Instead of waiting for the next anticipated complaint to come in, the manager took the initiative of checking in with the resident to see if their concern persisted.

### *What did this do?*

While it was made clear to the resident that the manager was simply “the messenger” coordinating communications and not the ultimate decision-maker on how the matter would be addressed, the act of checking

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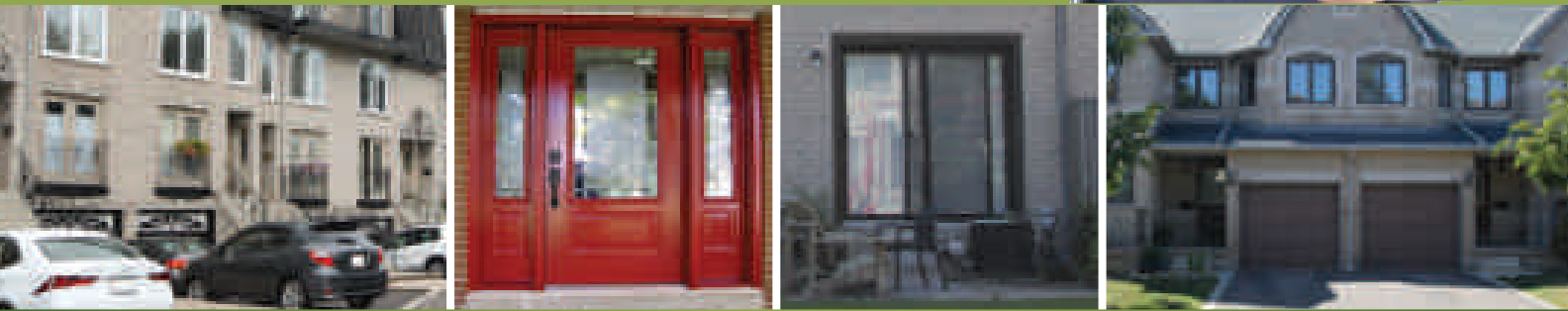
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in showed the resident that the manager cared. As opposed to feeling that they had to keep following up or resort to tactics like storming the management office and yelling to get attention, the resident felt like their concerns mattered to the manager and, regardless of how it would be addressed, that they could rely on property management to take the concern seriously.

The communications that followed between resident and manager were much more pleasant and friendly than is often the case when a resident with an issue feels that no one cares.

### **Taking Responsibility**

A condominium owner was participating in a mediation with members of the board and tensions were running high. The owner did not trust the directors and did not believe that the board would actually take certain next steps offered to try to address their concerns surrounding the state of their unit. Just as the process became frustrating through a lack of progress, the property manager offered to take ownership of next steps.

One particular offer was to have an engineer inspect the owner's unit. While there seemed to be interest in this path, a lack of specifics about how this would work or who this would involve made it appear to be a non-starter given the tensions in the room. Then, the manager spoke of their relationship with a reputable engineer. Sensing interest but hesitation about prospective timing, the

manager pulled out their cell phone and proceeded to call the engineer, leaving a message inquiring about the engineer's availability to carry out an inspection at the premises as soon as possible.

#### ***What did this do?***

In truth, the manager's action led to the settlement of the matter. By taking responsibility and initiative, the manager showed they were dedicated to improving the situation. The manager was able to identify how their business connections could be leveraged and how their participation at mediation could help the owner overcome a lack of trust in the board.

### **Saying Hello**

A long-awaited trial date finally arrived and the president of the board, the condo's lawyer and property manager sat outside a courtroom waiting for it to open for the day, prepared to defend their condominium in court. The unit owner who brought the claim against the condominium then arrived. As the owner came within earshot, the president made a nasty comment about the unit owner that would surely be heard. The manager pretended not to hear it and instead looked at the unit owner and said hello.

#### ***What did this do?***

In staying civil and putting personal feelings about the owner aside, the property manager in this situation was able to act professionally and avoid a name calling exchange from taking place outside the court room as everyone awaited trial.

The manager recognized that, regardless of the outcome of the dispute that would be imposed, everyone would remain in community and would need to continue to interact. The olive branch extended through simple courtesy offered an opportunity for civil communication to remain between parties. This ultimately served to save everyone both time and costs as their trial date got adjourned (postponed) due to the heavy court schedule that day, making further contact necessary.

The key to the property manager's role in managing conflict means keeping focused on what is important in the big picture. A property manager does not need to be a mediator just as they do not need to be a judge. All that a manager really needs to do is stay professional and not let the personal animosity that can affect the actions and behaviours of residents, owners and directors interfere with how they conduct themselves. This may involve having a thick skin or otherwise not taking things too personally. Identifying little ways to leverage the unique position that property managers find themselves in to positively influence ongoing communications and foster civil relationships of mutual respect can be tremendously beneficial. ■

**Marc Bhalla** is a chartered mediator who focuses on condominium conflict management. See [CondoMediators.ca](http://CondoMediators.ca) and [MarcOnMediation.ca](http://MarcOnMediation.ca) for more.

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