

In this segment we're going to discuss all the sticky stuff – which means we'll be talking about keeping the peace between players and DM, metagaming, being the linchpin and awarding and promoting inspiration points to your group. When you accept the role as DM, you're not just accepting the responsibility of keeping the game and story going, you accept the responsibility of keeping the GROUP going. This means likely dealing with the not so fun aspects of group play like conflict between players and even conflict between yourself and players.

There are four basic types of conflict that might come up in a D&D group: Player vs Player, DM vs Player, Character vs Character and the campaign in general. The first thing you need to ask yourself which one of these conflicts are you looking at? As you'll likely deal with at least one of these conflicts at some point in your DMing career, let's go through the resolution process of each of them. You can follow along through the flow chart I've provided you with.

We'll start with Player vs. Player because this is probably the most common conflict you'll see in a D&D group. The first step in resolving a PvP conflict is to talk to each player individually to hear both sides of the story. After that, you'll either be able to clearly tell which player is in the wrong or find that it's not clear who is in the wrong or that they both are. Let's start with the situation that one player is clearly in the wrong. After hearing their side of the story, talk to the player about their actions and explain that they **MUST** work cooperatively with ALL party members for the story to progress. If they listen and correct their attitude, great! If not, speak to them again to give one final warning that if they continue to be a disruption to the group you will ask them to leave the group. I don't know of a DM that handles this threat lightly. A situation typically has to be pretty severe for a DM to threaten asking a player to leave. That being said, if that player is **STILL** an issue after your multiple interventions, it's time to do the hard thing and ask the player to leave. You'll find that almost every conflict will not actually resort to this. Most players want to keep coming back each week and will adjust their attitude or behavior if spoken to by their DM. Hopefully you won't have to experience evicting a player from the group, but it is a reality you should be aware of. Let's return to the scenario that you're not sure who of the players is in the wrong or perhaps they both are. Ask each of the players individually what they would like you to do about the situation. They could simply say they don't want you to intervene. This likely means the player was just frustrated and needed to let off a bit of steam. Sometimes it's hard to define when you're talking to your friend looking for a shoulder to cry on, so to speak, or your “boss” for a solution. Don't take any action regarding this issue but keep an eye on the players in question and make sure no further tension builds. It's also good to follow up with the players in a week or two and just see how they're feeling about things now that some time has passed. Let's say when you ask your player what they would like you to do, they do ask you to make some changes and you find they are things you can easily accommodate. For example, the Rogue is frustrated because every time he goes to unlock a door, the Bard with a criminal background jumps in and rolls for the check before the Rogue even has a chance to open his mouth, making him feel like he's not a valuable member of the group. You can easily accommodate this by opening your next session with a brief chat about letting classes do their class specific checks. You don't have to single anyone out, just make it broad spectrum. Or if you prefer, the next time the Bard tries to make a rogue-esque check while the Rogue is present, you can simply say “Why don't you let your Rogue do that? Isn't that why he's here?”. Again, after correcting an issue, follow up with the player in a week or two. Let's go back up to the original scenario again. Let's say that the correction your player is asking you to make is **NOT** something you can accommodate because it is either impossible or unfair to other group members. For example let's say that same Rogue tells you he wants you to change the Bard's background so her skills don't overlap with his. Taking that kind of control over a player's character is **ALWAYS** an undesirable action for everyone involved and is blatantly not fair. At this point you can explain to the player that what they're asking is unfair and not something you're going to do. Offer the player a compromise (like offering to

make sure the Rogue gets to do his checks and the Bard spends her energy on diplomacy). If the player then accepts your compromise, great! If not, explain to them that they **MUST** get along with all party members for the story to progress or find another group that suits them better. Again, you'll find more than most players are willing to accept a compromise than leave a group.

The next kind of conflict you'll really have to keep your head on straight for. This is DM vs Player conflict. It's not common but sometimes you will have a player not agree with what you're doing for one reason or another. This can be a little more difficult to detect because players often become frustrated with the game, especially during a challenging section, but when they get upset with you personally, that's when intervention is required. Remember that **THE MOST** important thing when dealing with this type of conflict is to be calm, thoughtful and in a sense, professional. You don't want to soil your reputation as a DM by taking things too personally. When there is conflict involving you, first ask yourself if this concerns the whole party or just you and one player. Let's say in this scenario, it is just between you and one player. Make sure to talk alone with that player, there's no sense in dragging everyone else into the business between you two. Identify what the issue the player has is and ask what can be done about it, similar to how you handled conflict between two players. If your player asks you to make changes you're able to accommodate, make them! Let's say a player is really frustrated with you because when entering in combat, you weren't specific about how many enemies there actually were in a room. The player may not have initiated combat if you had been more clear and would have found a more diplomatic approach, but now has to follow a path they wish they hadn't chosen. In this situation you can explain to the player that you will be more specific when describing scenes, especially when combat is involved. Make sure to apologize to the player and as always, follow up with them later. Let's say the player asks for something you can't accommodate. For example, the player doesn't like how that situation happened and asks you to "rewind time" to before that situation happened so they can play it out differently. This is obviously an extreme correction that affects the whole party who may not have had any issues with how the original scenario played out. Explain to the player that what they're asking is not possible and offer a compromise like promising to be more specific in the future. You can even sweeten the deal for the whole party (make sure to **NEVER** reward just one player except for inspiration which we'll get to later) by awarding a little extra gold or XP and explain you feel you could have done a bit better in that scenario. If the player does not accept the compromise and won't work on a viable solution with you, you have to tell them the hard truth that you are the DM and ultimately your decision is what stands. If they accept this, put the issue behind you and **DO NOT** hold a grudge against that player. It may be hard forget accusations like this, but for the sake of your reputation and dignity, let it go. If your player does not respect your firm hand after multiple attempts to compromise, it's time for you to either suggest they find a new group or they may just leave on their own. This obviously is a very undesirable outcome, but it takes both parties willing to work together for anything to succeed. You just have to rest easy that you did all you could to salvage to situation. Let's travel back to the original scenario where this issue between DM and Player does concern the whole group. The first thing you'll want to do is sit down with the entire group and talk about any issues anyone has. Work through the "what can I do" and offering compromises steps to find a solution. If all goes well, problems should be solved before your next session. But if all doesn't go well, you'll need to explore things further. Let's say you sit down at the table and every single player has an issue with how you're running things. At this point, some inward reflection is required. If one person has an issue, it's likely a difference in opinion between you and that player, which is completely fine and expected. If every single one of your players is having serious issues, there's a good chance you're doing things wrong. This is the part where you really have to steel yourself. You're going to feel attacked, you're going to feel ganged up on, but if you want to truly better yourself as a DM, just listen and assess the situation. Ask the party what can be done and decide if those changes can be without sacrificing your D&D morals and DMing style. If they can be made, make them. Take this as a learning

experience. If the changes can't be made without massive sacrifice on your end, remember one thing; The most important thing about D&D is not how long it lasts, or having the same players for 10 years. The most important thing is that everyone is having FUN. If the changes the players are asking you to make are so extreme that YOU end up not having fun, then it might be time to consider disbanding the group. How does a group get like this? Problems like this usually stem from the very beginning of the group's forming and lay bubbling below the surface until something eventually cracks. I've said it before and I'll say it again, choosing your players carefully and a complete session zero are crucial to a group's survival. A group disbanding like this may be because you gathered your players without knowing a single thing about them and couldn't anticipate future problems. The players may simply not jive with your style of DMing but you didn't find that out until later. It could be that you didn't have a in depth session zero (or at all) where you told the players what they could expect from you as their DM. Perhaps you weren't quite clear on how you planned to run things and the rules you had. If you and your players have a very good understanding of what went wrong and why, you can always try again, making sure to have a complete session zero and make sure everyone is on the same page from the very beginning. If you chose to start fresh, I do suggest to allow a week or two for everyone to cool off before leaping back into a campaign.

After all this heavy talk, let's move on to a much easier form of conflict to deal with: Character vs Character. The difference between PvP and CvC is that PvP happens outside the D&D world and CvC only happens inside your D&D world. You may find players shouting at one another during a session, but then go laughing out the door for ice cream together at the end of the night. This would be a strong indication that you're players are just heavily role playing their characters and it is the characters that have the conflict, not the players at all. This type of conflict is common and FAR less serious than PvP. The first thing you should ask yourself when you notice this behaviour is "is it disrupting game play?". Players are free to role play however they like so long as it doesn't stagnate the story, annoy other players, or constantly derail other players or your plans (some derailment is expected; it's D&D after all!). If the role playing doesn't seem to be upsetting the balance of the group, it won't need your intervention. Just keep an eye on the interactions and make sure they remain civil. If the role playing is disrupting the game play, you will need to intervene. A good sign of this disruption is to watch the other players while the two characters are engaged in conflict. If the rest of the group looks annoyed, bored, on their phone or maybe even looking to you for some sort of assistance, you should act quickly. Remind the players that they MUST trust each other and get along for the story to progress. If this adventuring party were real and you constantly fought with a member, you would probably leave. Since this is not what we want to have happen, they must get along to some extent. Hopefully the players will heed your warning and adjust their behavior. If the players continue to aggressively argue in game despite your intervention, talk to each player individually to find out what the problem is. Any RPG can be an outlet for many emotions, especially negative ones. This situation might have actually evolved into a PvP conflict, but the players are acting out the anger through their characters. If the problem is a PvP situation then you can refer to that section earlier on the flow chart.

The final kind of conflict you may encounter is with the campaign itself. Sometimes a story line is just not engaging, or fun, too challenging or what the party expected to be. Signs that this might be the problem would include your players constantly looking bored/on their phone during the session, sighing and exasperation every time they are given a quest or piece of the story line, extreme frustration or anger when presented with a challenge or your players might even talk about how much they're looking forward to another campaign. If you see these signs, it's maybe time to chat with your players about the campaign. No need to make it all doom and gloom, just a light conversation about how everyone is feeling about the campaign and if they're all still having fun. If they're not, change the campaign. It's that simple. Forcing a group to continue a story they no longer enjoy is a good way to

lose all of your players. A story is not worth losing friends, even if you wrote it yourself....

No matter what conflict you're dealing with in your group, enforce the Zone of Truth spell rules. If no one is being honest about what's going on and problems their encountering, NOTHING can be solved. As in any kind of relationship, communication is everything. Make sure you keep in touch with your group on a regular basis. Even if you don't sense any problems brewing, it's never a bad idea to just have a quick "how's everyone doing?" talk once a month or two. After I finishing running a campaign I like to hand out DM review cards for my players to fill out which asks what they enjoyed about the campaign, what they didn't enjoy, what they think I can improve on and what they hope to see in future campaigns. This gives my players and opportunity to bring anything to my attention that maybe isn't severe enough to make its way onto the conflict resolution flowchart, but is something they want to mention. These review cards also give me a really good idea of where my players are at and what more I can do to improve their entertainment.

There's one other sub-type of conflict you'll encounter which technically fits under DM vs Player but deserves it's own section of discussion. This is the dreaded METAGAMING. I'm sure most of you have heard that term before but let's talk about what metagaming actually is. When a player metagames it means they are using information they know *as a player* but it is not information their *character knows* and they're usually trying to use that information to their advantage. For example, in a previous campaign one of your players ran through, they encountered a lot black puddings. That player knows that if a black pudding suffers slashing damage it splits into two enemies. They're now playing your campaign where their current character has not encountered a black pudding and would have no knowledge of its stats. When combat starts the player shout "okay, no one use slashing damage on it! It'll split into two!". Cue heavy sigh from the DM. This kind of metagaming really spoils the fun for not only the rest of the group, but for you as the challenges you're throwing at your players are no longer very challenging. It's understandable that the player may not want to play completely dumb on their turn and deliberately do something they know is ineffective. It's a bit unreasonable to ask any player to do that. But shouting out information their character wouldn't know to the rest of the group is CLASSIC metagaming. A lot of players will buy a Monster Manual and read through it because, let's be honest, it's a freaking sweet book to trundle through. A player may come across a certain monster's stat through their casual reading and you, the DM, have to rely on their integrity to not use that information. Another form of metagaming happens when you run any of the published adventures. There's no law saying player's can't read the published adventures...however, it is common courtesy to your DM and group to NOT read an adventure you know you'll be playing through. Some players just get excited to read new content, some players like to always have the upper hand, and some players do it unintentionally by listening to or watching one of the streaming D&D groups online, not knowing they will be playing in the same campaign they listened to. Regardless of how or why, a player knowing what will happen in the story can be a problem for you as the DM. The easiest way around this, is to simply ask "And how would your character know this?" with the appropriate amount of DM sass whenever you notice someone metagaming. It may be a bit uncomfortable to call out a player like that, but it's really important to stop metagaming in its tracks. Another tactic you can use is to change the story slightly. It's your prerogative as the DM to change whatever you see fit whenever you like. If you find that one of your players already knows the story, add new hooks in, take some characters out, change the location of an object. It's up to you how you modify the campaign but make sure they story still resembles what the players joined up to play. I am notorious for doing this because I know at least one of my players reads the campaign books as soon as they come out. I find that it also gives me a little bit of artistic freedom to write bits of my own story and create characters I normally wouldn't get the opportunity to.

It can feel frustrating to be a DM for a variety of different reasons and one of them is that you're always the linchpin. What I mean by that is your are absolutely imperative to the story's progression but are never the main character or reap the rewards of being the hero. Every week you have to show up. Every week you have to do all the behind the scenes book work. Often times you play the enemy. You have to make difficult and uncomfortable decisions or rule with an iron fist. And you're never the one the villagers hold grand feasts for or get to go on massive shopping sprees with all of your new found riches. It can definitely start to feel a bit thankless being a DM, but I encourage you to look a little deeper at what you do. You are everything. You hold the entire universe together and none of the good things the players experience would happen with out you. It may seem like being a DM is all doom and gloom, heavy sighing and endless paperwork, but for every one bad DM story I have, I could tell you ten more amazing ones. You are pivotal to your player's happiness and they do appreciate that, even if they don't always say it out loud. Being a linchpin can also be incredibly beneficial to you without your knowledge in that you are the one in the driver's seat in a world that seems to out of control.

I'm going to share something personal with you all to show just how much DMing can give back to you. This past October I lost my brother in law in a motorcycle accident. He was not only like a blood brother to me and a huge part of our family, he was an active member of our gaming community here. He had his own D&D group, he played Magic and board games and was a friend to everyone. After the accident, I called off D&D for a few weeks while I helped my sister through the tragedy and scrambled to keep myself together. I remember sitting with my sister and she would always ask so many questions. "Why did this happen? How is this fair? What do I do now?" and my answer was always the same "I don't know". I couldn't help, I couldn't predict and I most certainly couldn't control anything in a situation that felt like the entire universe was spinning out of control and losing all sense of reality. After about a month, I felt I was ready to get back to D&D. My players had been so patient and I wanted some sense of normality back. When I sat behind that screen again, it was like putting on my glasses for the first time, like coming out of a fog. At a time in my life when I had no answers, I could sit behind that screen and have the answers, I knew what came next and could help my players when they needed it. DMing gave me a sense of control when I needed it most, if even for a few hours a week. I sincerely hope none of you have to go through what I went through to realize how much DMing can do for, but I guarantee at some point in your DMing career, you'll have that same epiphany feeling.

Speaking of epiphanies, let's talk about our final subject this week: Inspiration! Inspiration is a new mechanic Wizards introduced in 5th edition as an *optional* aspect but I strongly encourage everyone to use it! This mechanic is explained on page 125 of the PHB and on pages 240 and 241 in the DMG. The official description is that an inspiration point is awarded by the DM for role playing to the characters bonds, flaws and ideals or by risk taking. A character can spend an inspiration point by using it when making any d20 roll to gain advantage on that roll. The player can also give that point to another player if they wish. The only real rule that applies to this inspiration is that you can't have multiple at one time so once you have an inspiration point, you have to use it before you can get another. Because this is an optional rule in the game, feel free to customize this mechanic however you choose (not that it really matters since you're the DM and can change whatever you want anyway). In my group, instead of advantage, we make it one free re-roll of a d20. My players can use it on themselves, give it to another player or make ME reroll a d20. I also have decided for my group that I don't want to be the one deciding who gets the point at the end of the session, I have my players vote for who they think should get it. I have each of my players vote for a player and say *why* they think that person deserves the point. I stress that inspiration is not based on who did the most damage or who was necessarily the most effective, but should be awarded to someone who enhanced the session with their presence. It could be that they thought of a really good plan, selflessly spent a lot of gold for another player or even that they

botched something so horribly, it made the whole party erupt into laughter for several minutes. I want inspiration to always shine light on what keeps people having fun together each week. I have my players award the point rather than myself because I always encourage my players to support each other and communicate. I find that having them award each other points and actually verbalize what they enjoyed about each other is a perfect format for that. The only other modification I make to the inspiration rule is the “DM stackable rule”. When I award an inspiration point as DM, it is the ONLY time you can have two inspiration points. Usually something pretty epic has to happen for me to award a stackable point but it definitely has happened a few times. I have even awarded a stackable inspiration point to every single party member if I feel they all did really well or made me laugh the hardest I have in a while. It's important to always encourage the fun of D&D.

Being a DM can be sticky but as long as you keep communication channels open and make yourself available to your players, you'll find even the conflict can be easy to navigate.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

