

Session 5: Managing Challenges – Conflict, Resistance, and Maintaining Momentum (09:15–11:00)

Objective

Prepare advisors to handle common challenges in innovation networks: conflicts between actors, resistance to change, and loss of momentum. Participants will learn techniques for conflict resolution and negotiation in multi-stakeholder settings, drawing on the “warm and cold” intervention ideas more deeply. They will also discuss strategies to sustain commitment (creating quick wins, maintaining urgency) and to address personal/emotional barriers to change (the human side of resistance). By the end of this session, participants should feel more confident in mediating disagreements and keeping an innovation process moving forward when faced with obstacles.



Presentation – Conflict Resolution in Networks (30 min)

Begin by stating a reality: *Conflict is not a matter of if, but when.* In multi-disciplinary innovation groups, disagreements are natural – and can be healthy if managed (recall Challenge vs. Fight from Day 1). The advisor often plays the role of *mediator* or *facilitator* in conflicts.

Introduce a simple conflict-resolution framework tailored for group settings:

- **Step 1: Ensure all voices are heard (active listening).** Often conflict escalates from feeling unheard. The advisor can facilitate a short “each side explains, others summarize” process to make sure people understand each other’s perspective. This aligns with using a *Dialogue* intervention to transform a Fight back into Challenge.
- **Step 2: Find common ground or shared goals.** In an agroforestry network, remind feuding parties of the bigger ambition they both share (e.g., “We all want this silvopasture trial to succeed”). This taps the *Exchange* pattern – highlighting mutual benefit or shared ambition.
- **Step 3: Use objective information or third-party input if available.** Data or an outside opinion can sometimes depersonalize a conflict. (For example, if two farmers argue about an approach, bringing a research finding might shift it from personal to problem-solving.) Or enlist a *peer mediator* – maybe one member who’s respected by both – to help.
- **Step 4: Generate options (problem-solving mode).** Essentially do a mini brainstorming of solutions to the specific conflict (this moves from confrontation to co-creation).
- **Step 5: Agree on a way forward and ground rules to prevent recurrence.** That might mean a compromise, or a rotation system, or simply agreeing to revisit the topic later after trying something.

Demonstrate with a quick role-play: You (facilitator) moderate between “Person A” and “Person B” who disagree. For instance, simulate a clash: A researcher insists on a complicated experimental design; a farmer says it is too burdensome. Show how you would apply steps: let each explain their concern (the researcher wants publishable rigor; the farmer fears time costs). Common ground: both want reliable results to inform practice. Bring in a fact or outside example: mention another project that found a simpler measurement still gave good data. Brainstorm option: maybe track only the 3 most important variables instead of 10. Agreement: adopt the simpler design for this year, and if more data is needed, find an intern to assist (thus addressing both needs). This kind of facilitation can turn a potential gridlock into an acceptable path.

Emphasize **neutrality**: The advisor must be trusted by all, not taking sides. Use neutral language, reframe blame statements into problem statements. If one actor is clearly out of line (say, personal attacks), an advisor should

enforce ground rules respectfully (a “cold” intervention for the sake of safety, e.g., “*I’m going to ask that we keep our language civil and focus on the issue, not the person*”).



Presentation - Dealing with Resistance to Change (20 min):

Shift to the broader challenge of *resistance*. In innovation, beyond active conflict, you often have passive resistance: stakeholders who are hesitant, dragging feet, or voicing lots of reasons why “*this won’t work*.” Ask: “*Have you encountered people resistant to a new idea? What did they do or say?*” Expect things like not showing up, constant criticism, etc.

Discuss common reasons for resistance: fear of risk, loss of control or power (gatekeepers feeling threatened), lack of trust, or simply overload and fatigue from too much change. Tie back to the **Survivor** role from the triangle – someone might appear resistant because they are in “survival mode,” worried about their own positions. **Gatekeepers** resist if they fear the innovation will disrupt what they’re responsible for.

Advisors can address resistance through both empathy and strategy:

- **Empathy & Communication (warm):** Talk one-on-one with the resistant person. Listen to their concerns. Often resistance contains valuable information (they might see a real risk others ignore). Acknowledge their perspective. Sometimes just being heard can soften opposition. Use techniques like reframing negative statements into questions to tackle (“*You say it’s too expensive – are there parts we can do within budget? What if we find funding for that part?*”).
- **Involvement:** Engage resisters by giving them a role. People often resist less if they have a hand in shaping the innovation. For instance, invite a sceptic to lead a risk assessment task – they will channel their concerns constructively and maybe be satisfied by the outcomes. This echoes Exchange (find something in it for them – perhaps recognition or addressing their needs).
- **Phased approach / quick wins:** If folks resist because they doubt results, propose a small pilot or quick win. Show success in a limited area to earn trust. For example, a Hungarian extension advisor dealing with sceptical farmers might set up a tiny demo plot on one farm rather than pushing all to convert land. When others see that farmer not losing yield (maybe even improving), their resistance lessens – *seeing is believing*. This strategy was part of Lewin’s change theory (unfreeze-change-refreeze) and Kotter’s “generate short-term wins” – not to dive deep into theory, but mention that quick tangible successes build confidence in the process.
- **Use peer influence:** Sometimes farmers who resist will listen to fellow farmers more than to experts. Leverage peer exchange: e.g., bring a farmer from another region (Spain to France or vice versa) who implemented the innovation to speak. That can challenge resisters in a friendly way (“*if they can do it, maybe I can too*”).
- **Set boundaries if needed (cold):** If one person is truly obstructive and harming the group, there may come a time to set a boundary, for example: “*We respect your choice not to adopt this, but we will proceed with those who are willing*.” Essentially, not letting one resistor veto the whole project. This is a last resort and must be done carefully to avoid breaking the network’s inclusiveness. However, sometimes a network can move faster after a chronic naysayer steps aside.

Ask participants to share any tactic they found effective in overcoming resistance. Summarize that resistance is natural – in fact, if there is zero resistance, maybe it is not a very innovative idea! Advisors should anticipate it and not take it personally. Think of resistance as feedback to address, not as an enemy.



Presentation - Sustaining Momentum (15 min):

The final challenge to discuss: keeping the energy up over the long haul. Many projects start with a bang and fizzle out. We touched on this yesterday with vital space, but here focus on practical project management side:

- **Set intermediate goals and celebrate achievements.** If your innovation will take 3 years to fully realize (say establishing a new agroforestry system until first harvest), find milestones (1st planting done, first field day held, first policy meeting) and acknowledge them. Small celebrations or even just a shout-out in the group keeps morale up.
- **Regular Communication:** encourage the network to stay in touch. Something as simple as a WhatsApp group or email newsletter with updates keeps people reminded that progress is happening. Advisors often play the role of communications hub – sharing news like “*X farm saw the first fruits from their trees!*” to the whole group, which rekindles excitement.
- **Rotate leadership or tasks** to avoid burnout. If one person (maybe the advisor themselves) is carrying the load, they’ll tire. Involve others by delegating tasks or letting others host meetings. Multi-actor projects benefit from shared ownership. For example, an Italian agroforestry network could rotate their monthly meeting location among farms – each host gets pride and the group experiences variety.
- **Refocus on the Vision:** When enthusiasm dips, remind everyone of *why* they started. Tell the story of the initial idea again, or envision the end goal (for example: “*Imagine five years from now, our region could have doubled tree cover and increased farm income – that’s what we’re working towards!*”). Sometimes advisors use visuals like a simple timeline on the wall with progress marked or a “vision board” created by participants to keep the end in sight.
- **Address external threats or changes:** Sometimes momentum falters due to outside factors (funding delayed, market prices dropped). Acknowledge these and integrate them into planning rather than ignoring. If a grant did not come through, openly discuss alternate plans – showing that the network can adapt. This maintains trust in the process even when context shifts.

Interactive element: Ask each participant to write on a sticky note one idea to sustain momentum. Post them on a “Sustainability Wall.” Read a few: they might include things like “*organize periodic field visits,*” “*keep core group meetings fun (include a shared meal),*” “*document and publicize results to motivate participants.*”

Tip for Success: It is important to recognise that innovation facilitation is partly about being a part-time diplomat and part-time cheerleader. You have to resolve conflicts (diplomat) and motivate people (cheerleader) throughout the journey. When things get tough – and they will – an advisor who can calmly navigate disagreements and re-energize the group is invaluable. Reassure them that these skills grow with practice; having frameworks (like we learned) helps them remain calm and methodical rather than feeling overwhelmed.