

RESOLVING CONFLICT EFFECTIVELY

Dr. Benjie Sokoken

Rationale: Conflict happens. It happens on the work place, between groups in our society, within families, within churches, and right in the middle of our most personal relationships. Conflict is ever present, both fascinating and maddening. The challenges of dealing with differences have rarely been greater.

Conflicts arise naturally in all kinds of settings. On the global scale, nations struggle with one another, both diplomatically and militarily. And with the increased globalization of the world's economy, we are all becoming more interdependent with one another.

On church ministry, conflict is a stubborn fact of organizational life (Kolb and Putnam, 1992, 311). Rather than seeing conflict as abnormal, we view organizations as arenas for staging conflicts and managers as both fight promoters who organize bouts and as referees who regulate them (Pondy, 1992, 259). Interestingly, sometimes, some churches, like other companies small businesses, conflict may be the very essence of what the organization is all about. If conflict isn't happening then some church leaders think the church has no reason for being! Hence, one can see training in organizations as a form of preventive conflict management (Hathaway).

The recognition of the prevalence of conflict in all institutions has led to books on resolving conflict, showing how leaders can learn conflict resolution skills to intervene in disputes in their own work. Unresolved conflict has negative impacts that reach far beyond the principal parties. If two pastors are unable to reach agreement about their responsibilities, their supporters will complain at one another, subverting both groups' goals.

The continual avoidance of the problem seeps throughout the church, affecting everyone who has direct contact with the pastors. Deacons and youth leaders tend to take sides and eventually discredit one another.

Ignoring conflict sets destructive forces in motion that decreases productivity. Spread in conflict to others will lessen their morale and productivity. Sometimes, the senior pastor will decide on reorganizing the structure of their church ministries in order for his associates not to tangle along the way.

Objectives: Studying conflict resolution will bring you to advantages such as:

- You can learn to get along with other youth church leaders
- You can begin to see conflicts coming
- Learn productive responses like getting more cooperation from your members in resolving conflict
- Assist other youth resolve their disputes with one another
- Prevent conflicts from spreading to other departments of the church or denominations/organization

Assignment:

Personal history in families of origin. Our personal history in our families of origin has a big impact on what we choose to do when conflict starts to rumble in our relationships. Choose which of the following would best describe your family of origin:

Avoidant Families

- Conflict doesn't exist, and if it does, don't recognize it
- If there is a conflict, figure out what to do about it on your own
- Don't tell anyone else if there is a struggle
- Walk away if something starts to brew
- Don't ever raise your voice
- Sulking and silent treatment are good strategies
- If someone has a concern, don't respond to it
- Don't express strong feelings

Collaborative Families

- Have a family meeting and discuss the issue
- Use good listening skills when someone has a concern
- Deal with people directly
- Say openly what you are feeling
- Parents need to feel resolved about their children's conflicts
- Regular interaction is important
- Dirty tricks such as sulking are not allowed
- Strong feelings are seen as normal and are allowed

Aggressive Families

- It is survival of the fittest
- Be brutally honest regardless of the impact
- Show your emotions strongly even if it hurts someone
- Establish your position early
- Have an audience present when you engage someone
- Don't back down—hold your ground no matter what
- You have to take it if someone attacks you
- People who don't engage are weak

While this list vary from family to family, notice how different the three lists are from another. If you grew up in an avoidant family and your fellow youth leader grew up in an aggressive family, it would not be too surprising if a conflict between the two of you is difficult to resolve—each of you will break the rules of interaction the other expects you to follow.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In many cases, conflict in the ministry or any workplace is a fact of life. We have seen situations where people with different goals and needs have come into conflict. And church leaders, including youth leaders, are submerged in an often-intense personal animosity between them. However, the fact that conflict exists is not necessarily a bad thing. Actually, when it is resolved effectively, it can lead to personal and professional growth. In many cases, effective conflict resolution can make the difference between positive and negative outcomes. By resolving conflict successfully, other problems that the conflict has brought to the surface can be solved.

Benefits When Conflicts Are Resolved Conflict Successfully

1. Increased understanding: Resolving conflict expands people's awareness of the situation, giving them an insight into how they may achieve their own objectives without undermining others.

2. Increased group cohesion: Resolving conflict develops church leaders develop mutual respect and a renewed faith in their ability to work together.

3. Improved self-knowledge: Conflict pushes individuals to examine their goals in close detail, helping them understand the things that are most important to them, sharpening their focus, and enhancing their effectiveness.

However, if a conflict is not handled effectively, the results can be damaging. Conflicting goals can quickly turn into personal dislike; and talents will be wasted as people disengage from their work—they will end up in a vicious downward spiral of recrimination and vengeance.

Keeping church leaders work effectively needs an awareness of two theories that lie behind effective conflict resolution:

Two Theories On Effective Conflict Resolution

1. Understanding the Theory: Conflict Styles

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1970s) identified five main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. They argued that while people typically have a preferred conflict resolution style, they may utilize different styles which are most useful in different situations. Such Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) helps you to identify which style you prefer to use when conflict arises:

A. Competitive: a person who tends towards a competitive style takes a firm stand and understands what they want. They usually operate from a position of power, drawn from things like position, expertise, or persuasive ability. This style can be useful in an emergency which a decision needs a quick decision; even when the decision is unpopular; or when defending against someone who is trying to exploit the situation selfishly. However it can leave people feeling bruised, unsatisfied and resentful when used in less urgent situations.

B. Collaborative: a person tending towards a collaborative style tries to meet the needs of all involved. Such person can be highly assertive but unlike the competitor, he cooperates effectively and acknowledges that everyone is important. This style is useful when a you need to bring together a variety of viewpoints to get the best solution.

C. Compromising: a person who prefers a compromising style tries to find a solution that will satisfy everyone. Everyone is expected to give up something, and the compromiser, him or herself also expects to relinquish something. Compromise is useful when the cost of conflict is higher than the cost of losing ground, when equal strength opponents are at a standstill and when there is a deadline looming.

D. Accommodating: This style indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of the person's own needs. The person often knows when to give in to others, but can be persuaded to surrender a position even when it is not warranted. This person is not assertive but is highly cooperative. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, when peace is more valuable than winning.

E. Avoiding: a person tending towards this style seeks to evade the conflict entirely. This style is typified by delegating controversial decisions, accepting default decisions, and not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. It can be appropriate when victory is impossible, when the controversy is trivial, or when someone else is in a better position to solve the problem. However in many situations this is a weak and ineffective approach to take. Once you understand the different styles, you can use them to think about the most appropriate approach (or mixture of approaches) for the situation you are in. You can also think about your own instinctive approach, and learn how you need to change this if necessary. Ideally you can adopt an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people's legitimate interests, and mends damaged working relationships.

Understanding The Theory: The "Interest-Based Relational Approach"

The second theory is commonly referred to as the "Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Approach". This type of conflict resolution respects individual differences while helping people avoid becoming too entrenched in a fixed position. In resolving conflict using this approach, you follow these rules:

A. Make sure that good relationships are the first priority: As far as possible, make sure that you treat the other calmly and that you try to build mutual respect. Do your best to be courteous to one-another and remain constructive under pressure.

B. Keep people and problems separate: Recognize that in many cases the other person is not just "being difficult" – real and valid differences can lie behind conflictive positions. By separating the problem from the person, real issues can be debated without damaging working relationships.

C. Pay attention to the interests that are being presented: By listening carefully you'll most-likely understand why the person is adopting his or her position.

D. Listen first; talk second: To solve a problem effectively you have to understand where the other person is coming from before defending your own position.

E. Set out the "Facts": Agree and establish the objective, observable elements that will have an impact on the decision.

F. Explore options together: Be open to the idea that a third position may exist, and that you can get to this idea jointly.

By following these rules, you can often keep contentious discussions positive and constructive. This helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so-often causes conflict to spin out of control.

Using The Tool: A Conflict Resolution Process

Based on these approaches, a starting point for dealing with conflict is to identify the overriding conflict style employed by yourself or by your team. Over time, people's conflict management styles tend to mesh, and a "right" way to solve conflict emerges. It's good to recognize when this style can be used effectively, however make sure that people understand that different styles may suit different situations.

1. Process on resolving conflict:

A. Step One: Set the Scene - If appropriate to the situation, agree the rules of the IBR Approach (or at least consider using the approach yourself.) Make sure that people understand that the

conflict may be a mutual problem, which may be best resolved through discussion and negotiation rather than through raw aggression.

If you are involved in the conflict, emphasize the fact that you are presenting your perception of the problem. Use active listening skills to ensure you hear and understand other's positions and perceptions.

Restate
Paraphrase
Summarize

And make sure that when you talk, you're using an adult, assertive approach rather than a submissive or aggressive style.

B. Step Two: Gather Information - Here you are trying to get to the underlying interests, needs, and concerns. Ask for the other person's viewpoint and confirm that you respect his or her opinion and need his or her cooperation to solve the problem.

Try to understand his or her motivations and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these. Also, try to understand the conflict in objective terms: Is it affecting work performance? damaging the delivery to the client? disrupting team work? hampering decision-making? or so on. Be sure to focus on work issues and leave personalities out of the discussion. Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view. Identify issues clearly and concisely.

Use "I" statements
Remain flexible
Clarify feelings

C. Step Three: Agree the Problem - This sounds like an obvious step, but often different underlying needs, interests and goals can cause people to perceive problems very differently. You'll need to agree the problems that you are trying to solve before you'll find a mutually acceptable solution.

Sometimes different people will see different but interlocking problems – if you can't reach a common perception of the problem, then at the very least, you need to understand what the other person sees as the problem.

D. Step Four: Brainstorm Possible Solutions - If everyone is going to feel satisfied with the resolution, it will help if everyone has had fair input in generating solutions. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you never considered before.

E. Step Five: Negotiate a Solution - By this stage, the conflict may be resolved: Both sides may better understand the position of the other, and a mutually satisfactory solution may be clear to all.

However you may also have uncovered real differences between your positions. This is where a technique like win-win negotiation can be useful to find a solution that, at least to some extent, satisfies everyone.

There are three guiding principles here: **Be Calm, Be Patient, Have Respect.**

Key Points

Conflict in the workplace can be incredibly destructive to good teamwork. Managed in the wrong way, real and legitimate differences between people can quickly spiral out of control, resulting in situations where co-operation breaks down and the team's mission is threatened. This is particularly the case where the wrong approaches to conflict resolution are used.

To calm these situations down, it helps to take a positive approach to conflict resolution, where discussion is courteous and non-confrontational, and the focus is on issues rather than on individuals. If this is done, then, as long as people listen carefully and explore facts, issues and possible solutions properly, conflict can often be resolved effectively.

CASE STUDIES

Conflict #1: When one harms someone (Matthew 18.15-17)

Conflict #2: the desire for significance/power: The disciples argue over who is the greatest (Luke 22.24-27; Matthew 20.20-28; Mark 10.35-45)

Conflict #3: The clash between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15.36-41)

Conflict #4: The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15.6-20)

=====

Benjie Sokoken, has a Doctor of Theology degree from ASIA BAPTIST GRADUATE THEOLOGICAL Seminary in Baguio. He is a Pastor of Hillside Baptist Church in La Trinidad. He also serves as Director for Evangelism and Church Growth with the Mountain Provinces Baptist Association (MPBA) and is the Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Cordillera Southern Baptist Churches Ministries, INC. Aside his church ministry, Benjie loves to sing and is known to be a good Bass singer. He was the founding member of Acappella singing group called 'Master's Call'. He lives with his wife Nilda P. Sokoken and son Abraham P. Sokoken in Kayapa, Nueva Viscaya, Philippines.