

HOW TO MANAGE CONFLICT

"Sure I felt disappointment and anger. But I covered those unacceptable emotions... If I, a follower of God, allowed negative emotions to show, how could people possibly be attracted to Christianity? But the result was the opposite of my intent. My friends thought they'd need to be perfect Christians since that's the way that I acted. And they knew they were far from reaching that exalted plateau. So was I. A caring friend helped me change. Jill saw through me. But instead of accusing me, she asked questions that helped me explore myself and my feelings. Then she listened closely and carefully to what I said. Her presence created a safe place where I could be myself. She talked about some of her own failings, and yes, even her emotional needs. The result was life-changing. Because I was able to be honest with Jill, I became more honest with others. I was able to show them my ragged edges, and oddly, though I hadn't intended it, others became more attracted to the gospel. They saw that Christ did not reject people like me who had faults and needs. They saw ... that God was at work even in emotions."

-Phyllis Le Peau, *Caring for Emotional needs*, (Colorado Springs: InterVarsity Press, 1991).

I. THE NATURE OF CONFLICT:

There is no single definition of conflict but the majority of experts would agree upon these:

"A conflict is a situation in which two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive as being attainable by one or the other but not by both." (McSwain & Treadmill)

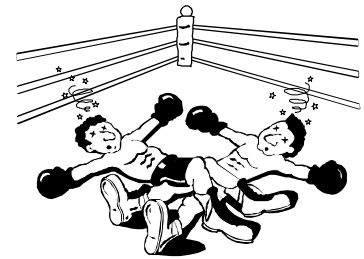
"Conflict is two or more objects aggressively trying to occupy the same space at the same time." (Lewis)

A struggle over values, or claims to status, power, and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals." (Coser)

Most likely, the first thought that comes to mind when you hear the word conflict is another person who angers you. While this may be true, there are many sources of conflict besides interpersonal tension:

1. Differences in Perception
2. Differences in Interpretation of Words and Messages
3. Differences in Motivations
4. Differences in Goals
5. Differences in Values, Interests, or Desires
6. Limited Resources-Time, Money, Power
7. Personality Conflicts
8. Lack of Trust
9. Competition

Conflict increasingly becomes difficult when each person involved is unaware of the other person's set of assumptions, values, power (or means of influence) and styles of managing conflict. It is rarely a right and wrong issue, but rather the unwillingness to understand and work within the differences of others. This is why it is extremely important to think through the possible source of the conflict before jumping to conclusions. It is also wise to know your own style before you enter into conflict and how it might relate to the others involved.



II. DIFFERENT STYLES OF MANAGING CONFLICT:

A conflict management style may depend on the circumstances and people surrounding the conflict. However, most people exhibit (either intentionally or non-intentionally) a particular preference in handling conflict. Before you continue reading about specific styles, evaluate yourself by taking the Personal Profile of Conflict Predisposition's, Strategies, and Tactics test included in this.

Norman Sawchuck in his book, How to Manage Conflict in the Church, has identified five styles of conflict management. (See Appendix)

1. Avoiding (The Turtle) - The driving force is to stay out of the conflict, to avoid being identified with either side.
2. Accommodating/Obliging (The Teddy Bear) - The intent is to preserve the relationship at all costs. Whatever will hurt or damage the relationship the least is the most important.
3. Collaborating/Integrating (The Owl) - The goal is to get all the parties fully involved in defining the conflict so that mutually agreeable steps can be taken .
4. Compromising (The Fox) - The intent is to convince each side to be satisfied with a bit of winning so a bit of losing is more acceptable.
5. Competing/Dominating (The Shark) - The goal is to win whatever the cost. The prime importance is placed on personal goals. Assertiveness and domineering are often the tactics used.

Think through these questions:

- Which style can you most identify with?
- What are the positives and the negatives of your style?
- How might your style relate to other management styles? In other words, if you are a turtle in conflict with a shark, the shark will win or the relationship will be severed because you avoid conflict. Do this with each style:

Possible result of interaction with:

- Avoidance -
- Collaboration -
- Compromise -
- Accommodation -
- Competition -

III. PRACTICAL TIPS IN DEALING WITH CONFLICT:

Before you enter into a difficult circumstance, there are four basic conflict rules to keep in mind: (taken from Dr. Sam Canine at Dallas Theological Seminary)

- make sure all parties are allowed to disagree without feeling guilty.
- each individual must be allowed to state his or her position with energy and exactness.
- protection from being hurt and hurting others must be sustained.
- remind conflicting parties when even small amounts of progress is achieved.

The following tips, if practiced, will minimize the conflict and produce positive results:

- 1. Choose your fights:** Identify your goals (and the other's) and what needs to be accomplished. Ask yourself: what can I live with? is it essential to the cause? will this make a difference in eternity? Remember, a dog can beat a skunk, but it isn't worth it.
- 2. Define the conflict:** Is it a problem to be solved? Is it a decision to be made? Is it a fact of life? What is the source of the conflict (see above list)? Evaluate your own feelings and thoughts before you respond to the situation. Make sure you are clear and that your motives are pure.

- 3. Center on the issue:** It is easy to get side - tracked especially when emotions run high. Keep bringing the conflict issue (once it has been determined) to the table and work toward positive steps of understanding, acting, and committing to the goals agreed upon.
- 4. Identify the options:** Be creative in your thinking. Perhaps there are options you have not considered. Be willing to listen and consider another approach. If you can be patient with tension, there may be a better result than earlier anticipated. Limiting your options will increase the conflict and perhaps lead to a stalemate or broken relationship.
- 5. Identify possible consequences:** You can't know for sure what will happen if you choose a specific course of action, but by identifying the possible outcome, you may select another option. Do this with the most likely actions you intend to employ.

When conflict is not dealt with on an interpersonal level, it can become destructive. This goes against God's desire for love, forgiveness, and unity in the body, as well as communication that may help to bring restoration to the parties involved. Before you approach another person with an issue, decide if it is your problem, if you are motivated by love for that person, and if the timing is right. If all check out, then proceed with the following:

- 1. Take the initiative:** Don't wait for the other person to seek you out. If you have wronged someone, it's your move (Matt. 5:21-24). If someone has wronged you, it's your move (Matt. 18:15-17).
- 2. Seek reconciliation:** Remember, the goal is not to be heard nor to be right. The goal is to be rightly related to God and to your brothers and sisters in Christ. This requires great patience and humility.
- 3. Communicate honestly and fairly:** Avoid superlatives (always, never). Avoid personal attacks. Avoid bringing up the past. Avoid coalitions (bringing up other people who side with you). Now that you know what NOT to do, here are some things that will help you learn WHAT to do.

- Describe the behavior (When you...")
- Describe how it affects you ("I have to..." or "I feel...")
- Describe what you want instead ("I would like you to...")
- Ask for a commitment ("Will you do it?")

The book, Caring Enough to Confront by David Augsburger, spends much more time in handling interpersonal conflict. I highly recommend it.

APPENDIX:

- I. Conflict Styles
2. Conflict in the Bible
3. Communication Covenant

Additional Resources

Augsburger, David. *Caring Enough to Confront*. Regal Books, 1973.
 Engstrom, Ted and Edward R. Dayton. *The Christian Executive*. Word Inc., 1979.
 Filley, Allan C. *Interpersonal Conflict Resolution*. Scott, Foresman and Co., 1978
 Frost, Joyce Hocker and William W. Wilmot. *Interpersonal Conflict*. William C. Brown Co., 1978

Available through Integrated Resources at 1-800-729-4351

InterActa studies:

Get Real
Conflict Happens
Mad About You

Personal Profile of Conflict Predispositions, Strategies, and Tactics

Before attempting to answer the following questions about your preferences and behaviors during conflict, list three conflicts that have been important to you.

1. The conflict was with _____
about _____
It was generally productive/ counterproductive. (Circle One)

2. The conflict was with _____
about _____
It was generally productive/ counterproductive. (Circle One)

3. The conflict was with _____
about _____
It was generally productive/ counterproductive. (Circle One)

Based on the memory of these conflicts and others, respond to the following questions about preferences for conflict behaviors.

Circle the number that indicates whether you strongly agree (4), are inclined to agree (3), are inclined to disagree (2), or simply disagree (1) with each of the following statements.

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1. When problems arise, I prefer to let others take the responsibility for solving them. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 2. I believe a middle ground can be reached in most conflicts. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 3. I like everyone to be able to say what they think, even if they don't agree with me. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 4. I can be firm in pursuing what I think is right. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 5. I try to reduce tension with others, take peoples mind off their problems. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 6. Usually it is best to try and postpone talking to someone when they are upset. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 7. Talking about feelings and issues are important in conflict. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 8. I like people to be willing to give some if I will also. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| 9. The goal must come first: conflict is inevitable and some people just can't take it. | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

10.	When people are upset, I am more concerned about their feelings than any particular problem.	4	3	2	1
11.	I don't like to be in unpleasant or tense situations.	4	3	2	1
12.	I like to win my points.	4	3	2	1
13.	Most conflicts are subject to compromise.	4	3	2	1
14.	Everyone should share in the gains and share in some of the losses.	4	3	2	1
15.	I will not contradict others if I believe it will make them unhappy.	4	3	2	1
16.	I offer solutions and ask others for solutions.	4	3	2	1
17.	I prefer to have everyone who is affected involved in solving the conflict.	4	3	2	1
18.	Believing disagreements can destroy effectiveness, I encourage others to stay with more agreeable subjects.	4	3	2	1
19.	I go after what I want, even if that makes others uncomfortable.	4	3	2	1
20.	Differences usually aren't important enough to worry about.	4	3	2	1
21.	I don't like to make others feel bad by disagreeing.	4	3	2	1
22.	I think the best solutions come when everyone participates and has concern for others.	4	3	2	1
23.	I want others to know where I stand and will will convince them of the rightness of my position.	4	3	2	1
24.	Confrontation can be managed if we seek middle ground.	4	3	2	1
25.	I try to help others be at ease, even if that means not pressing my point.	4	3	2	1

Personal Profile of Conflict Predisposition, Strategies , and Tactics Scoring Form

- 1.Total *Your score from the questions numbered* A. _____
1, 6, 11, 18, 20
- 2.Total *Your score from the questions numbered* B. _____
2, 8, 13, 14, 24
- 3.Total *Your score from the questions numbered* C. _____
3, 7, 16, 17, 22
- 4.Total *Your score from the questions numbered* D. _____
4, 9, 12, 19, 23
- 5.Total *Your score from the questions numbered* E. _____
5, 10, 15, 21, 25

Your scores represent a rank ordering of your preferences or predispositions for five conflict styles: (A) avoidance, (B) compromise (C) collaboration, (D) competition, (E) accommodation. Your highest number represents your first preference, and so on down the line. It is possible that you gave two styles the same score. This indicates that you have little difference in preference between the two. List your style preferences in order from most preferred to the least preferred.

First choice: _____

Second choice: _____

Third choice: _____

Fourth choice: _____

Fifth choice: _____