

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

I. Introduction

- A. Conflict is normal. It happens all the time and is part of the result of living in a fallen world. We experience conflict to some degree or another in every relationship we have: family, marriage, parenting, friendships, church, team life, and ministry. None are exempt from the experience of conflict.
- B. It just isn't natural. Conflict triggers reactions that sometimes we can't control. Our gut rather than our head takes over and we say and do things we later regret. We literally lose our minds in times of conflict as we lose awareness of what we are saying and how we behave. Conflict badly handled can lead to rupture in relationships that may have disastrous effects.
- C. Conflict, however, that is handled well, goes a long way to healing ruptures and can actually promote closeness and warm feelings between the parties in the conflict. Conflict resolved brings people together and can make them more productive. The reason for this is that conflict well-handled allows both parties to walk away feeling satisfied because their interests are being met. I like the Max Lucado quote: "Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional."
- D. We are going to look at several aspects about conflict as well as some thoughts on how to handle it well.
 - There are predictable sources of most conflicts. We will carefully look at where conflict comes from.
 - Each of us has a style in managing conflict. Some styles are better than others in resolving conflict well. You have had the opportunity to take a small instrument to determine your style. Keep that in mind as we go forward. When we understand our preferred style and can come to recognize both the strengths and weaknesses of each style, we have choices in the way we handle conflicts.
 - Another aspect of conflict that we need to consider is what happens in our bodies and brains when we sense we are in conflict. I have already mentioned that we can feel under attack when we are in conflict and our bodies have reactions that occur automatically when we are in danger, even perceived danger rather than actual danger. It is helpful to understand these processes.
 - Finally, I want to look at some practical steps to resolving conflict; how we can insure that each party in the conflict is satisfied with the solution because their interests are met. It is a process that takes work, so we will unpack each step of the way toward resolution.

E. First a story:

A man in the Middle East had three sons. When he died he left instructions to divide up his 17 camels among his sons. To the oldest he left half the camels. To the middle son he left one third of the camels. And to the youngest he left two camels.

When the sons began to divide the camels, they were left with an impasse. The numbers did not work, and they could not follow their father's instructions. They almost came to blows over the problem.

Finally they decided to talk with a wise man in the village and see if he could resolve the situation. After some thought, he told them that the only way to resolve it was for him to give them his only camel. Surprised by the suggestion, they accepted his gift.

So it was that the oldest son took nine camels, half of the 18 total. The second son took six camels, one third of the camels. The youngest took his two camels, and each was satisfied. However, to their surprise there was one camel left over. They returned it to the wise man, grateful for his help in resolving their conflict.

Sometimes conflicts need creative and unusual solutions!

II. Typical sources of conflict

It is very important in resolving conflict to be clear about what the conflict is. We will use this more in detail later. However, it is helpful to understand where conflict comes from. There are various sources of conflict and we will consider these.

- A. First let's define conflict: it happens when you are at odds with another person over what you think, want, or do. It begins when someone is not getting what they want. It also can be seen as a power struggle over scarce or limited resources.**
- B. The management literature seems to focus on differences as the source of conflict.**
 - Differences in beliefs and values, as well as in perceptions of self interest
 - Differences of interest and ambition
 - Interpersonal differences: different personalities and temperaments. Also differences of style can create conflict.
 - People can have strong feelings but disguise them by talking about the “principle” of the matter. Conflict itself arouses emotions.
 - Misunderstandings between individuals.

C. Biblically speaking, conflict is rooted in the sinful nature of mankind. The Bible speaks of several sources of conflict:

1. A desire for pleasure or self-gratification; this may include:

- Inflexibility about issues or a desire to have one's own way
- Maneuvering for a position of authority, which is a desire for status and admiration within the community
- Criticizing others, which is a desire to make oneself look good.
- Constantly exchanging hurtful words, which is a desire for dominance.

2. Distrust of God

- When I want something and doubt that God will give it to me, I can bypass God and manipulate the situation in order to get what I want. This is the idolatrous root of conflict. We want what we want.

3. Wrong motives

- Conflict is a heart issue. The drive for self-gratification forms your motives and affects your relationships.

4. Judging others

- Critical speech and slander become the vehicle for expressing your judgment of a brother and leads to conflict.

5. Negative attitudes, being easily offended

- These open the door for hurt feelings and conflict.

6. A bitter heart

- You give to others what you have. Consider a simple but profound statement: hurt people hurt people. Stop imposing your pain on others. Resolve your hurts.

7. A weary body and mind

- This is not so much a product of the sinful nature as it is a product simply of nature. When we are stressed and wearied, we can give in to words, actions or attitudes that can cause conflict.

D. Three important facts to be aware of in conflict:

1) People are different and want different things. That's often the SPARK of conflict.

- 2) *Differences get worse when sinful selfishness and pride drive our reactions. That's the GASOLINE of conflict.*
- 3) *Destruction results when we fail to respond properly and allow our sinful desires to continue driving our words and actions. That's the FIRE of conflict.*

The problem is not where we start but where we end up. The issue is not that we are different; it is what we do with our disagreements. Seldom do we choose to lay down our rights and humbly work through our difficulties with others. Instead we say, "We're different. I'm right. I've got to win."

III. How do we manage conflict when it occurs? Our styles

- A. **Each of us has a style for managing conflict when we deal with it. This may be a conscious approach or an unconscious reaction to conflict. Some styles are focused more on addressing the individual's personal goals or reactions. Others are focused more on addressing the relationship's needs. Some do a bit of both, some do neither.**
- B. **The literature on conflict management notes five basic styles of responding to conflict. You had the opportunity to take a small instrument to analyze your conflict management style. Keep your style in mind as I describe each one.**

1) Avoiding (otherwise known as the Turtle style)

- This style involves withdrawing from the conflict, running away from the problem at hand.
- The turtle values quiet more than anything else.
- His or her assumptions are that disagreement are bad or dangerous, and to be avoided at all cost.
- The message given by the turtle is that he or she does not care enough about the relationship or the issue at stake to engage in discussion. It can seem like passive aggressiveness.
- The result for both sides is I lose / You lose. The relationship also loses. The issue at stake loses.
- It is sometimes appropriate to be a turtle: e.g. as a temporary measure to postpone tension or to await more information.

2) Controlling/Competing (this is the Shark style)

- This involves pursuing your own concerns at the other person's expense, forcing your opinion or trying to win.

- The shark values being right.
- His or her assumptions are that in a disagreement someone is right and someone is wrong. Right must prevail.
- The message given by the shark is that I'm right and I know what is best. We have to do it my way.
- The result is I win / You lose. The relationship loses as well. The issue at stake wins or loses, depending whether or not I am in fact "right".
- It is sometimes appropriate to be a shark: e.g. when an immediate decision needs to be made with no time for consultation and the "shark" is the person in charge.

3) Accommodating (the Teddy Bear style)

- This involves giving in even at your own expense and working against your own goals, objectives and desired outcomes.
- The Teddy Bear values harmony more than anything.
- His or her assumptions are that disagreement is bad. Someone always gets hurt.
- The message given by the Teddy Bear is that in order to avoid risking someone getting hurt I will just go along with you.
- The result is I lose / You win. The relationship wins in the short run but loses in the long haul. The issue at stake wins or loses, depending on whether or not your solution is in fact the best one available.
- It is sometimes appropriate to be a Teddy Bear: e.g. when the issue is not really important to me; or when harmony is more important than the issue involved; or to avoid disruption when we are already on the path to an adequate (though perhaps not the best) solution.

4) Compromising (the Fox style)

- This style involves winning a little and losing a little. The object is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties.
- Foxes value fairness.
- Their assumptions are that disagreement is inevitable since no one can get everything he or she wants. What works best is to give up a little of what is not overly important to me in order to gain a lot of what is important to me.

- The message given by the Fox is that I am willing to give up a little to help you get a lot of what you want if you will also give up a little to help me get a lot of what I want.
- The result is Everybody loses at least a little / Everybody gains, probably a lot. The relationship is good, but probably could be better. The issues at stake are resolved in a good way, but a better way might be possible.
- It is appropriate to be a Fox when collaboration is not possible but compromise is.

5) Collaborating (*the Owl style*)

- This involves an attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both persons.
- The Owl values both harmonious relationships AND a good outcome for the issue at hand; they also value creativity.
- His or her assumptions are that differences are good—everyone has a piece of the puzzle to contribute.
- The message given by the Owl is that we can come up with a better solution together than any of us could alone.
- The result is that I win / You win. The relationship wins. The issue at stake wins.
- It is appropriate to be an Owl whenever possible; whenever all parties involved are capable of collaboration and there is enough time to work through the process.

IV. What happens in our bodies when we experience conflict?

- A. **Have you ever noticed changes in your body when you are in a stressful situation with someone? Things like your breathing quickening, your heart beating harder, sweaty or shaky palms, thoughts racing or jumbled? When we experience conflict, it can feel like we are being attacked and our body reacts by getting ready.**
- B. **God has created us as complex, wonderful beings with many physical systems designed to help us live in this world. Much of what happens in our bodies is outside our awareness and control. However, all of it is under the control of our brains. So it is helpful to look briefly at our brains and understand how it works.**

C. Those who have studied the brain, look at it in a couple of different ways. One is the fact that the physical brain is split into two sides, a right hemisphere and a left one with only a small strip of tissue connecting them. Another way to analyze the brain is to look at it from top to bottom with various areas that perform different functions. Very briefly I want to describe these two ways of understanding the brain as well as some of the implications for when we are in conflict.

1. *The two hemispheres of the brain have different functions.*

- The main functions of the left hemisphere are language, linear, logical, and literal processing—the four L's. The development of language is an expressed version of the linear flow of thought processing. We speak what we think. The left brain helps us make sense of the world around us by logical and linear means. It processes our experience analytically and is concerned with right and wrong.
- The right hemisphere is the intuitive side of the brain. It is concerned with pattern recognition, imagination, and rhythm. It is aware of body sensations and position and gives a holistic sense of experience. It communicates both receiving and sending non-verbal signals. It is aware of and has the ability to manage social and emotional context.

2. *The top-down model: The triune brain*

- a. It is called the triune brain because the human brain seems to function as three interwoven brains in one.
- The most primitive and earliest to develop portion of the brain is called the reptilian complex, or reptilian brain. This includes the brain stem and cerebellum. This part of the brain is responsible for life-sustaining functions such as breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure. It is also responsible for our sense of physical balance. These regions are highly responsive to even the slightest environmental shifts that spell danger, and respond quickly to these changes for the purpose of self-preservation. It acts automatically in the face of threat without input from parts of the brain responsible for conscious, reflective thinking.
- The second part of the triune brain to develop consists of the limbic circuitry, or mammalian brain. Located above the brain stem, this area lies on the inner, deeper border of the cerebrum. This part is largely responsible for recognition and memory of fear, attention to salient internal or external environmental stimuli, and pleasure. This area relates to the generation and modulation of emotion. It is highly connected to the other two regions to assist in the modulation of both the higher and lower activities of the brain. The neurons of the brain stem and limbic circuitry do not involve conscious mental activity. They generate sensations and activity that do not translate into thoughts or feelings. We share these two parts of the brain with animals such as reptiles and mammals, thus their names.
- The third and last to develop part of the brain the neocortex is the sponge-like, wrinkled layer of the brain with our highest social, cognitive/linguistic, abstract, creative, sensory, and motor abilities. This is the part of the brain that "makes us human" and helps us connect with others.

- b. We are constantly being influenced by the lower layers of our brain system, most of the time out of our awareness. We can sense something intuitively (in our gut) that is beyond rational awareness, leading to action without clear, logical cognition.
- c. The more we live with awareness of what all levels of our inner self are trying to communicate to us the more integrated we live, experiencing less anxiety and a greater sense of well-being. Healthy neural pathways are formed by what we pay attention to. The opposite is true; we dis-integrate between the parts of our brains when we ignore and dismiss information vital for our well-being. We literally lose our minds!
- d. Simple things such as being aware of our body's reactions when we encounter something unpleasant helps us develop choices in how to respond. By noticing when we feel a reaction internally, we can do any number of things to calm ourselves down. Just changing position, such as standing up or sitting down, or moving to another room to discuss a conflict can have a positive effect. Taking a slow, deep breath when we are aware of breathing rapidly communicates to the reptilian brain that we are not in danger and will help calm us down.

This is a much too simplified explanation of what is going on in our brains and the implications on our lives. However, I wanted to present this material because of its impact on how we behave when encountering conflict. If you want to know more, I have taken this material from a fascinating book written by a Christian psychiatrist who has delved deeply into what makes our minds work. Curt Thompson first wrote his material for a Sunday School class and when encouraged to do so by his pastor, wrote it in the book: Anatomy of the Soul. It is highly scientific material presented in a way that is easy to read with a great deal of Biblical integration included. I highly recommend it and I have included it in the Bibliography.

V. Finally we come to what we have been aiming for throughout our time together: What do you do when you face a conflict? How do you resolve it with another person or on a team?

- A. The process of conflict resolution is fairly straightforward and simple. It takes time and energy and is just plain hard to put into practice.
- B. There are a four basic steps to be taken:
 - Look at the conflict: defining and stating clearly what the conflict is about. What kind of conflict is it?
 - Look at yourself: becoming aware of your own reactions and desires, and taking responsibility for your actions or attitudes; being willing to share these with the other party with honesty and gentleness.
 - Look at the other person: listening carefully to what the other party feels, thinks or desires; being willing to validate those things.
 - Look together for a solution that satisfies both: staying with the problem solving process until the best solution is found and agreed upon.

C. Let's unpack each of these steps in a little more detail.

1. Begin by looking at the conflict. By facing squarely the fact that there is a conflict, by seeking to untangle the muddle of emotions, perceptions, needs, and cross-purposes that surround the conflict, you make it possible for the conflict to be dealt with. This is why the Avoidant/Turtle style of conflict management is so counter-productive. You have to know what is happening to be able to solve it. A couple of good questions to ask yourself are:

- What kind of conflict is it? Reviewing the sources of conflict that we went over earlier can be helpful in defining what is wrong.
- What are the areas that you want changed in order to rid you of the conflict?

State the problem clearly. Be as specific and comprehensive as possible and avoid vagueness and ambiguities. This forces you to reevaluate what might have seemed irrelevant at first glance. Consider all the facts and information available to you. Developing a complete and concrete understanding of the problem is the true beginning of solving your conflict.

2. Look at yourself and your responsibility in the conflict. This includes several things:

a) Owning your part in the conflict.

- “Take the log out of your eye before addressing the speck in your brother’s eye.” This is another area for self-awareness. What have I done wrong in this situation? How have my attitudes been sinful?
- Peacemakers Ministries make an interesting statement: “If I’m only 2% responsible for a conflict, I’m 100% responsible for that 2%.”
- This may entail going to the other party and confessing your sinful part in the conflict. Do that carefully, to all the persons involved, admitting in detail what you did, avoiding any blame of the other, acknowledging the hurt you have caused, being willing to receive the consequences, committing to not repeat the offense, and asking for forgiveness.

b) Another aspect of owning your part in the conflict is being aware of and able to express clearly what you need, want, hope for from your side of the conflict. Expressing your true feelings and sharing your real thoughts are both extremely important for all sides of the conflict to do. This forms the basis for finding a satisfactory solution.

c) Being willing to change your perception of the problem is also helpful. Some helpful reframing statements are:

- The real problem is not who is involved, but how I am responding.
- The real problem is not what’s done that bothers me, but how I respond.
- The real problem isn’t how it happens, but how I feel about it.
- The real problem isn’t why it happens, but why I respond the way I do.
- The real problem isn’t the situation, but how I am responding to the situation.

When you change your perception of a problem, you shift the creation of the problem from the situation to yourself. That gives you the power to deal with it.

3. Looking at the other party to the conflict involves listening carefully to what they are saying and how they are feeling. There is an old saying that is helpful to keep in mind: "You can't spit and swallow at the same time." When someone is upset or angry with you, listening to them empathetically allows them to get to the place where they can hear you. Acknowledging how a person feels or what he or she is thinking does not necessarily indicate agreement but rather understanding. "I see what you mean; I get what you want; I understand how you feel" are all phrases that help demonstrate true listening and understanding. Once the other party feels truly heard, then both are more ready to move to the final step in the process.

- Some helpful phrases to use when someone has a problem:
 - First respond by saying "That's interesting."
 - Then you add one of the following:
 - "Tell me more."
 - "Why would you say that?"
 - "Why would you do that?"
 - "Why would you ask that?"

An extremely important part of whole process is demonstrating true respect for each other. Especially as Christians we are to do unto others as we would have them do to us. By demonstrating both self-respect in expressing what we truly feel and think, and respect for the other party by understanding and accepting how they think or feel, conflicts then become an energizing search for the best and most satisfying solution to the conflict. It is exciting to move from dealing with the conflict itself to dealing with its solution. A helpful word picture is to imagine sitting with the conflict on the table. Instead of sitting across the table with the conflict between you, imagine sitting together on the same side of the table, looking at the conflict and seeking a way to resolve it in each other's best interest. A conflict does not need to come between you.

4. Looking for a solution.

We call this the problem-solving step. It uses the Collaborative/Owl style of conflict resolution. Also, it takes a commitment of time and energy.

a) Brainstorming is the best strategy at this point.

- Generate as many solutions to the problem as possible.
- Avoid using destructive criticism or judgmental evaluation during the generation of options. These destroy creativity.

- Be freewheeling and come up with even crazy or silly solutions. Those may be just what prompt the creative best solution.
- Once you have as extensive a list as possible, then combine and improve on the alternatives.

b) *Evaluating the alternatives*

- At this point visualize the consequences of any alternative. Think through what each of these strategies would accomplish. Cross out any ineffective strategies.
- Combine compatible solutions as much as possible.
- Try to insure that each solution is interpersonal and satisfactory to all concerned.

c) *Choosing the best option from your alternatives*

- Each party to the conflict writes down their three best strategies and lists the positive and negative consequences of each. Do this carefully, thoroughly, and conscientiously.

Ask yourself

- How would this strategy affect what I feel, need, and want?
- How will it affect the others on the team?
- What are the short-term consequences?
- What are the long-term consequences?
- Visualize dealing with the different outcomes. Choose the plan that has the best outcome for you. Be sure everyone has a chance to do this.
- Decide which is the best of all the alternatives suggested.

d) *Evaluate the result*

- Once the plans have been discussed and put in place, then you can act on them and evaluate the results

- This part of the process needs to take place after some time has passed and you have all experienced the results of the decision.
- Ask yourselves:
 - Are the plans proceeding as you had anticipated?
 - Are the results meeting your goals?
 - Is this solution actually better than what was happening before?
 - Do you need to go to another alternate solution that you have developed?

e) Once you have completed the process, celebrate the positive resolution of your conflict, and acknowledge that it has brought you closer together.

VI. Conclusion

This is a big issue that merits much more careful unpacking. I have tried to hit the main highlights and to give you some tools for understanding and managing the inevitable conflict you will experience in your lives. I acknowledge they are human ideas and tools. It will take dependence on God's grace and help to accomplish these with much success. My hope and prayer is that you will be able to do this in order to better glorify God and fulfill His command that we love one another as He has loved us so the world will know we are His servants. May He give us the strength and courage to do so.