

## **Basics of Conflict Management in the Church** (2/2013, TCP)

- Use direct communication, face to face. Avoid Triangles (see Matthew 18:15-17, and remember how Jesus treated sinners and tax collectors).
- Pray for each other. Seek to see yourself and others the way God sees us.
- Seek to understand first, and restate the other's position favorably to gain empathy.
- Be solution-oriented instead of offense or problem-oriented. Look for win-win solutions.
- Own your own position and your own emotions; beware your blind spots.
- Remember the cycle of penitence:
  - Confession: truth telling (about myself—not the other person)
  - Repentance: committing to a different response.
  - Forgiveness: “as many as seventy times seven;” Remember that Christ forgave us before we repented or confessed: “while we were still sinners Christ died for” us.
  - Reconciliation in Christ: this is the goal, not “winning.”
- Ground the conversation in God, focused on mission; in Scripture, tradition and reason.
- Start in relationships. If you have to rely on authority, you've already lost something.
- Clarify the issues. Distinguish the issue from the person (but respect that there may be personal implications for the issue).

### **Conflict Management Styles:**

(From “Discover Your Conflict Management Style,” by Speed Leas, Alban Institute, 1997.)

Each of us tends to prefer one style of managing conflict, and is thus less comfortable in other styles. But each style is important to employ in the right situation (and each is also the wrong one to employ in other situations). Best to learn them all and gain the wisdom of when to use them.

**Persuading:** manage the conflict by convincing the other party to change his or her mind. We like persuasion, but we are often blind to its weaknesses. Use persuasion in situations of trust, and where the other side doesn't have clear and strongly held opinions, and where you do have a clear sense of your view as best for all parties. Without these elements, persuasion is less effective than negotiating or collaborating, where you must recognize that part or all of the other's positions may not change. Without trust and openness, persuasion is ineffective and weak if at first “successful.”

**Compelling:** Manage the conflict by the use of authority, or physical or emotional force. General tacit use of authority helps the system run smoothly (in other words, have clarity on who we have decided makes the final decision on a matter). Abdicating authority can create severe problems in a relations system, and sometimes (especially unpopular decisions), conflict is healthier if the person responsible simply makes the tough decision.

However, enforcing a decision based on authority without empathy or relational care often comes at a relational cost, so we use authority with care. We dislike compelling in the church because of our egalitarian ideals, but there are many cases where compelling is necessary. For instance, when a priest is abusing a child or a lay person is embezzling funds (not a time for negotiation or avoidance).

Use compelling in very clear, concise ways, without softening or confusing the directive, but without adding emotional content or humiliation. Clearly spell out the desired positive behavior (not just what's wrong, but what is right). Compelling only works for behaviors, not thoughts, ideas or especially feelings. In employee issues, or in severe cases with lay volunteers, document the process. Use compelling sparingly, when it is well worth the cost, and when you can clearly monitor the performance.

**Avoiding/Accommodating (also ignoring or fleeing):** Various ways of either giving in to the other side, or avoiding dealing with the problem altogether. These are dangerous strategies because they don't resolve the conflict, and sometimes can make things worse. However, some issues simply aren't worth engaging, and both the relationship and the system is better off. At their best, these are examples of the Christian virtue of forbearance. At their worst, however, these styles create triangles or allow mountains to grow from molehills while they fester and stew. Use these strategies when you can truly let go of the issue, or when you are truly powerless (but don't underestimate your ability to impact the situation).

**Collaborating:** mutual problem solving for “win-win” solutions. In situations of clear conflict, this means working with the people with whom you disagree. In those cases, clarify *together* that there is a problem, what it is, the ground rules and process for dealing with it, identify shared interests and opportunities for mutual gain, jointly determine criteria and jointly choose a decision. Collaboration takes time and a clear commitment to the process. Collaboration is not really an option in conflicts over limited resources, where win-win solutions are impractical. Collaboration is not effective where there is no trust (either in the process or the people). However, if you can engage collaboratively, the decisions are generally more satisfying, conflict management processes are positively reinforced, and people have a high motivation to follow-through on the decision.

**Negotiating (or bargaining or compromise):** Working together for a mutually tolerable solution, generally where each side gains something and loses something. Negotiating requires trust in the process, and a willingness to give a little. Negotiating works if the “prize” can be divided, such as dividing budget funds among projects. Negotiating is good for fairly even power positions—among peers who both have rights or a stake in the decision. The downside of negotiating (seen best in a compromise solution) is that the solution is always a little bit “lose-lose.” Negotiating is a weak strategy if the trust in follow-through is weak.

**Supporting:** Helping the other party to reach objectives more effectively. This can be used when the ultimate decision is acceptable, but the process is problematic. ‘Why be confrontational—approach the issue in a more helpful way’ might be an example. Supporting is best used when you are not a party to the conflict and you don't want to be pulled in. Avoid the damage of triangles by supporting the other person to manage his or her conflict in a healthy and solution-oriented way, empowering him or her to manage the conflict more directly.

Support by acknowledging the other's feelings, asking clarifying questions, and reflecting what you are hearing. This can be done without taking a side, or without taking responsibility for the conflict. Help the other person explore the issues of the conflict, the possible perspective of the other parties, and options for response. Think of the father in the parable of the prodigal son, helping the older brother to understand. Use supporting when teaching or empowering or when it is not your issue.

## **Levels of Conflict, Tension & Anxiety (from Speed Leas)**

Note that Level Zero only exists where there is no pulse. If you think there is no conflict, look again—it may just be buried, and therefore not dealt with in a healthy way. Conflict is a creative process that helps to see and manage problems and opportunities and adapt to change. Healthy Conflict is an essential element in a healthy relational system.

### **Level I: Problems to Solve**

Real differences exist, but the language tends to be clear and specific. Participants stay focused on the problem, and open to approaches. Use collaborative approaches and include minority views.

### **Level II: Disagreement (more oppositional & emotional)**

Self-protective motives arise; language starts to generalize; more emotional content and assumptions are involved. Conversations aren't as open. Parties assume that something is likely to be lost in a resolution. Flaws and arguments matter more for “scoring points” than in resolution. Jokes have a hostile edge or are received as hostile. Listening skills recede.

**Respond by:** clarify the problems, work for solution-orientation, build trust, maintain relationships & unity, use collaborative methods.

### **Level III: Contest (clear party lines with committed positions)**

Participants are out to win. Emotions drive perceptual distortions: overstating contrast, universalizing, hyperbole, arbitrary assumptions of intent or motive, diminishment of the value of the other. Coalitions or factions form, personal attacks increase and often replace problem solving, parties drop back into confrontational statements, listening or understanding is often abandoned.

**Respond by:** work toward mediation with trusted facilitators to: clarify the problems, work for solution-orientation, build trust (at least in the process) by identifying process norms & ground rules. Use collaborative methods or negotiating/compromising where collaboration fails. Identify common goals, values, and commitments. Clarify the difference between assumption and reality. Use active listening (even if only by a mediator to start). Provide safe way to deal with underlying feelings (probably when the parties are separate from each other).

### **Level IV: Fight or Flight (the relationship must end)**

Factions seek to leave or force the other faction to leave. Strong leaders emerge. Winning is more important than resolution. Trust is absent, integrity impugned. Issues are confused with principles. Stereotypes & distortions are closely held.

**Respond by:** generally relying on a third party to: clarify the conflict, the issues and the principles (at best, stating positions in the language of those who hold them), rely on authority of roles or process to reach a final decision (hierarchy, vote, established rules), build trust in that process, allow each party to maintain integrity, and allow for separation with integrity.

### **Level V: Intractable (destroy the other at all costs)**

Departure is not enough. Conflict is cosmic in scale. No authority can stop attacks. Separation does not end the conflict. Respond by resorting to peace keepers and enforcing boundaries.