

# Leadership Qualities: Conflict Management

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Once upon a time a man was shipwrecked on a deserted island. He was an industrious, hard-working sort of man, so by the time he was rescued, 15 years later, he had managed to transform the island into a collection of roads and buildings. The people who rescued him were amazed at his accomplishments and asked for a tour of the island. He was more than happy to oblige.

“The first building on our left,” he began, “is my house. You’ll see that I have a comfortable three-bedroom estate, complete with indoor plumbing and a sprinkler system. There is also a storage shed in the back for all my lawn tools.” The rescue party was astonished. It was better than some of their homes on the mainland.

“That building over there is the store where I do my grocery shopping. Next to it is my bank, and across the street is the gym where I exercise.”

The rescuers noticed two other buildings and asked what they were. “The one on the left is where I go to church.”

“And the one on the right?” they inquired.

“Oh, that’s where I *used* to go to church.”

Conflict is a part of life. There is simply no getting away from this fact. As a leader, as a human being, you can be sure that you’ll face relational conflicts. No leadership model exists that will totally eliminate disagreements or clashes of personality. In fact, the tension that comes from conflict can be healthy and beneficial to growth if dealt with correctly. Jean Varnier, founder of L’Arche communities across the world that give disabled people the chance to discover their true worth and beauty, wrote, “Communities need tensions if they are to grow and deepen. Tensions come from conflicts.... A tension or difficulty can signal the approach of a

new grace of God. But it has to be looked at wisely and humanly.”<sup>1</sup> The question isn’t “Will I face conflicts?” but “How can I best manage conflicts when they arise?”

### ***Jesus and the Art of Conflict Management***

When Jesus addressed problems, he tackled them head-on. While delivering the Sermon on the Mount (and later in Matthew 18) he dealt with the issue of conflicts brought about either by others offending us or by our offending them:

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”

Matthew 5:23-24

“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Matthew 18:15-17

While the Lord was addressing the problem of sin, there are broader principles at work in his teaching. And no matter which side has caused the problem, the solution is the same: First, go to the person with whom you are experiencing a conflict and address the issues face-to-face. Avoid involving a third or fourth person, especially if their knowledge of the situation will worsen the problem for the offending individual. Such discussions tend to intensify the conflict and further undermine the relationship. Judging from the amount of conflict experienced in our world, this is surely one of the most overlooked commands in Scripture.

The fact that we are not appalled by the amount of broken relationships and persistent hostility between people is a sad indicator of our spiritual health as a believing community. The

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Varnier, *Community and Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 120-121.

sins we are taught to avoid tend to revolve around lifestyle issues: drinking, smoking, going to the wrong kinds of movies or listening to the wrong kinds of music. But we are not dismayed by a lack of loving relationships. John Ortberg writes about a church-going man he calls “Hank.” Hank was filled with complaining and judgment. He was sour and easily irritated. His own children felt distant and unloved by him. Here is Ortberg’s main observation:

But even more troubling than his lack of change was the fact that *nobody was surprised by it*. It was as if everyone simply expected that his soul would remain withered and sour year after year, decade after decade. No one seemed bothered by the condition. It was not an anomaly that caused head-scratching bewilderment. No church consultants were called in. No emergency meetings were held to probe the strange case of this person who followed the church’s general guidelines for spiritual life and yet was nontransformed.<sup>2</sup>

Yet God abhors this. Our Lord summed up the total teaching of the Old Testament in one word: Love. “Love God and love people,” he says. The greater sins, the weightier sins, are transgressions against love. Grudges, gossip, slander – these are done in direct defiance to Jesus’ essential command. And these behaviors are tolerated all the time – even among Christians. We do not find them odd; we would find it odd if they suddenly disappeared.

Jesus tells us to first go to the person one-on-one. Second, go to the person quickly. Jesus counseled that, if someone is worshiping God and remembers that he or she has offended a friend, the appropriate response is to stop right there and go immediately to the offended individual. With those words Jesus made it clear that correct interpersonal relationships are more important than correct ritual. This tends to grate against religious folks who say that God must be our first priority. It is true that God should be our primary focus. However, our relationship with God is better gauged by our human relationships than by religious ritual.

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<sup>2</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), p. 32.

Although we cannot guarantee that the offended brother will accept us, we are obligated to make every effort “as far as it depends on” us (Romans 12:18).

Interestingly, in both cases, Jesus’ advice is to take the initiative. When you have done something wrong, you go and make it right. When someone else has wronged you, you still take the first step. Larry Calvin says:

Now wait just a minute. If your friend has something against you, *you* go to him? And if you have something against your friend, *you* go to him? That has you going to him in both cases, whether you have something against him, or you know he has something against you. When I first made that discovery, I remember thinking: That’s not fair! Then I realized that God is not asking us to do anything that he has not already done. You see, God is the initiator in the God-person relationship.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is not asking us to do anything he hasn’t modeled for us. He gave up heaven to come down to earth, become a servant and die to repair our broken relationship with the Father. In Jesus Christ, God takes the initiative. When we come to see how important people are to God, we will value the community Christ’s death makes possible. We will value it enough to take the initiative in resolving relational breakdowns.

Effective leaders don’t ignore conflict. They manage it by creating an environment in which people are enabled to work through relational friction on a one-on-one basis. Only after such efforts have failed are others allowed to enter the conflict, and then only for the purpose of bringing about reconciliation. Conflicts can’t be avoided, but they can be managed. And a wise leader will devote himself or herself to learning how to do just that.

### ***God’s Cosmic Conflict***

Although the players may be invisible, we live in the context of a titanic war in which the opposing forces of light and darkness contend for the souls of men and women. Scripture

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<sup>3</sup> Larry Calvin, *The Power Zone* (Fort Worth, TX: Sweet Publishing, 1995), p. 62.

assures us that although this invisible war is real, it is also temporary; God himself will bring history to a point at which this cosmic conflict will be finally resolved. The Apostle John records a vivid symbolic description of the final intervention of the King of kings and Lord of lords in the affairs of human history:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

#### KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great."

Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

Revelation 19:11-21

The vivid imagery in this passage portrays the decisive intervention of the Son of God at the end of the age when he defeats the forces of ungodliness at his second coming. In his triumphant return, the King of kings and Lord of lords will eliminate the powers of sin and of death and bring all spiritual conflict to an end. The Apostle Paul writes, "Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and

power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:24-26). After his second coming, Christ will bring all things under subjection to God the Father, “so that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28).

In his wisdom and sovereignty, God is able to use conflict to accomplish his divine will. In discussing the distinction between fate and sovereignty, Charles Spurgeon said, “Fate says the thing is and must be; so it is decreed. But the true doctrine is – God has appointed this and that, not because it must be, but because it is best that it should be. Fate is blind, but the destiny of the Scripture is full of eyes.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, God always acts and allows circumstances and events for a purpose. His purposes, though they may seem harsh and even cruel from our finite perspective, are always generous and good. He is both good and omnipotent, but his will is done from the perspective of eternity. One day, everything that is upside-down will be turned rightside-up, every thing that is wrong will be made right. God will use whatever means necessary to prevent evil and suffering from having the last word.

Although we live in a world that is far from perfect, Scripture assures us that God is using this fallen world in preparation for the new heavens and new earth. In the meantime, God patiently awaits the right moment for the final resolution of all things. The Apostle Peter writes:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

2 Peter 3:9-10

In his creation, God is using conflict and pain to produce a greater good. Conflict, if properly managed, can also do this in the context of human relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 15 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1970), p. 460.

## *David and the Dangers of Conflict Avoidance*

Fight or flight, aggression or avoidance – neither of these strategies provides an effective long-term technique for managing conflict. Because we have different temperaments, some of us are less confrontational than others. Still, a good leader must develop the skill of confronting others when necessary. King David provides a negative example for us in the way he mismanaged his conflict with his son Absalom (2 Samuel 14:1-15:37).

Absalom had heard that his half-brother Amnon had raped his sister Tamar, yet he had failed to confront Amnon. Instead, he deceitfully arranged for Amnon's murder two years later and fled after the deed had been done (2 Samuel 13).

King David had also failed to discipline Amnon (13:21-22), and now he was shirking his responsibility to settle his conflict with Absalom, even though his son longed to see him. David relented only after Joab entreated him to restore Absalom following three years of banishment. But even after allowing him back into the city, David refused to see Absalom for another two years until Absalom forced the issue and the meeting did take place. But it was too late; Absalom had become embittered against his father and conspired to take the kingdom away from him. Lynn Anderson says, "The opposite of love is not hatred; it is indifference. Whether he meant to or not, David was communicating the opposite of love for Absalom."<sup>5</sup>

David's conflict avoidance strategy not only failed to work but eventually caused the conflict to escalate. Had he dealt promptly with the issues surrounding Amnon and Absalom, Amnon's murder and Absalom's conspiracy might have been averted.

The key to conflict management is prompt reconciliation by "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Effective conflict managers know how to balance truth (confrontation) and

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn Anderson, *The Shepherd's Song* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1996), p. 120.

love (reconciliation). Effective leaders learn to be peacemakers by dealing directly with disagreements and seeking amicable resolutions. David shows us that putting off confrontation only strains relations and inevitably compounds the problem. Avoidance allows bitterness to simmer and alienation to solidify.

### ***Constructive Conflict***

While the word *conflict* usually carries a negative connotation, conflict itself doesn't have to be negative. That's why this chapter is titled "Conflict Management" rather than "Conflict Resolution" – a conflict is not something that simply needs to be "resolved," as though getting through it and moving on are the highest goals. Often we inappropriately assume that spiritual maturity will lead to fewer conflicts. But Larry Crabb suggests, "The difference between spiritual and unspiritual community is not whether conflict exists, but is rather in our attitude toward it and our approach to handling it."<sup>6</sup>

Conflict produces energy, and energy can be channeled in positive directions. How can a leader make this happen? The Apostle Paul gives us the keys to managing conflict with the goal of a positive outcome:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3

The critical issue in conflict management – and the one that most strongly influences one's approach to it – is this: "What will my proper management of this conflict accomplish?" Christians who live up to their calling (v. 1) must "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), p. 40.

of peace” (v. 3); that’s the preferred outcome. So how can a godly leader approach conflict so that it cements unity between the participants?

Think your way through verses two and three. Ask what each element named contributes to managing conflict so that unity and peace result. “Be completely humble”; “[be] patient”; “bear with one another in love”; “make every effort to keep the unity.” Imagine how people would approach conflict if humility, gentleness and patience provided the context in which all participants viewed the solution, and if unity and peace were the sole motives. Imagine how the process would work if all participants exercised these qualities as they worked through conflict. Imagine that conflict, as intended, produced growth in individuals and unity between people.

You may object, “Conflict produces growth and unity? I’ve never heard of that before.” But conflict between people produces energy, and energy can be channeled in different directions. For example, a conflict between a husband and wife can serve as a venue for open and honest discussion, which can lead to greater understanding between the two and, in turn, a better relationship. Similarly, a conflict between two engineers over the design of a product can lead to a better design than either one was capable of producing alone.

The key to positively channeling the energy that conflict produces is in exercising the qualities that Paul speaks of in verse 2. When we exercise humility, gentleness and patience with one another, we have a much greater chance of producing the best outcomes: greater productivity, more honesty, unity and peace (v. 3). Crabb writes about the impact confrontation can have when it comes from a person who recognizes, in humility, their own brokenness:

Broken people can say hard things and we appreciate it, because they find no joy in the power of superior knowledge or superior morality. They take no pleasure in their being right and our being wrong. God’s glory matters to them, and it matters more than anything else. They are not proud of their wisdom. They don’t put their insight on display to win applause.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 171.

## *Loving Your Way through Conflict*

Few tasks a leader faces are more emotionally or mentally challenging than that of managing conflict. And yet, conflict is a fact of life in this world, so it's crucial that a person in a leadership position learn how to manage it with an eye toward positive closure. Over the course of a career, every leader will have countless opportunities to work with others through relational, philosophical and methodological differences. On occasion those differences may lead to personal strife, and the leader's opponent may appear to be an enemy. At such times the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount will take on added significance:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Matthew 5:43-45

On Christmas Day, 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. It was based on this very passage of Scripture, and the sermon's title was “Loving Your Enemy.” Through the course of his sermon, Dr. King suggested three ways by which we can do just that.

First, we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. Such forgiveness doesn't mean that we ignore the wrong committed against us. Rather, it means that we will no longer allow the wrong to be a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness, according to King, “is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning.”

Second, we must recognize that the wrong we've suffered doesn't entirely represent the other person's identity. We need to acknowledge that our opponent, like each one of us, possesses both bad and good qualities. We must choose to find the good and focus on it.

Third, we must not seek to defeat or humiliate our opponent, but to win his or her friendship and understanding. Such an attitude flows not from ourselves, but from God as his unconditional love works through us.<sup>8</sup>

As followers of Christ who seek to lead as he led, we must remember that the more freely we forgive, the more clearly we reveal the nature of our heavenly Father.

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