

## **Navigating Conflict**

*-adapted from the book "Leading Leaders" by Mac Powell*

*-additional information provided by Mountain West Church*

### **Introduction**

If you are leading a group of people, at some point you will experience conflict. Disagreements are inevitable in teams. But conflict doesn't have to be destructive or divisive. God can actually use conflict to produce greater levels of understanding, compassion, grace, and unity. As a leader of leaders, you may not be directly involved with the conflict, but there are times you will be expected to help navigate it. It's like being asked to step in and defuse a bomb! It is a dangerous but important task. We must handle these complex situations in ways that reflect biblical principles of healthy community and that honor those involved.

### **Deepen Your Character: Patience**

Leaders must be gentle when navigating conflict and bear with others' shortcomings with the higher goal of developing their spiritual maturity.

### **Develop Your Competency: Navigating Conflict**

Manage conflict in a way that honors God and those involved.

### **Deepen Your Character: Patience**

There are many technical skills involved with navigating conflict, but they must be paired with patience. Galatians says that patience is a fruit of the Spirit (ESV). That means it is supernaturally imbued in us when we allow the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts and minds. When those you are trying to lead are argumentative and difficult to work with, it can try your patience. But remember that conflict is often a symptom of spiritual immaturity. What is your patience quota in regard to the spiritual development of those you are leading? Are you disappointed when you don't see much progress right away? Can conflict derail your long-term goals for the group?

Paul likely asked himself similar questions. The church at Ephesus, like many early churches Paul was discipling, had its fair share of conflict. At the heart of the city was a famous temple to the Greek goddess Artemis. Many people converted to Christianity because of Paul's preaching, but many others did not like the impact Christianity had on their previously all-pagan community. One prominent silversmith, Demetrius, saw his business suffer because his customers, who previously bought items used to worship Artemis, were converting to Christianity. Paul knew it would be tough for Christians to grow in this environment, so in his letter to the Ephesians he stressed the gentleness, humility, and forbearance needed to navigate conflict so their faith would grow. When your patience is tested, it reveals your character, and this was of utmost importance to

Paul. As you read the following Scripture, meditate on what the author wishes to communicate, and answer the questions below. Allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you and challenge you as a leader in this area so that you deal with conflict effectively and thus continually change the culture of your organization.

### **Ephesians 4:2-6**

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. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

As you think about demonstrating patience in the midst of navigating conflict, what part of this passage stands out the most to you? Why?

Think of a time you saw conflict management in a personal, ministry, or business setting handled in an inappropriate or unwise way. How was impatience part of the problem? What was the outcome?

What are the behaviors unique to you that demonstrate your impatience with others? (For example, raising your voice, talking "down" to others, etc.)

To assess your patience with others, look at the following statements based on Ephesians 4. Think of a recent situation where you tried to navigate conflict among two or more people. Reflect on your attitudes and behavior. How would you grade yourself on these traits:

- I practiced **humility**, listening before I spoke and putting their need to be heard first.
- I was **gentle** in the way I spoke, choosing my words and my tone of voice carefully.
- I was **patient** when they frustrated me, disagreed with me and/or the mediation process took much longer than anticipated.
- I was willing to **bear with** temporary immaturity in order to develop the group spiritually.

Think about an action step you need to take to grow in this area.

Having examined the character trait of patience, we can now begin to work through the core competency for this module: **Manage conflict in a way that honors God and those involved.**

## **Navigating Conflict Among Team Members**

There are times the leaders you are overseeing will experience conflict with someone on their team or someone in their group. When necessary, your goal is to step in and follow a biblical process that will lead to a restoration of a healthy relationship. But that isn't always easy, and at times it's not even possible because of the responses of those involved.

When conflict arises, people's first inclination is to run, blame, or punch back. And when you are in the middle, attempting to navigate the conflict for others, you too can be tempted to be driven by emotions rather than patience. In order to model handling conflict from a position of truth and grace, you must counteract those emotions. You must help each person see God's perspective, honor each other's perspectives, and act to preserve the unity of the relationships and the team. When handled carefully and skillfully, conflict can be good for teams. It can help people understand each other better and develop a closer relationship.

When my children were little, navigating conflict was a common occurrence for me as a father. My two youngest, Jordan and Brianna, were about as close as two siblings could get. But as much as they loved each other, there were times they would still get into arguments. On more than one occasion, I would be sitting in the living room when one of them would run in and start tattling on the other.

Two best friends were suddenly at a standoff as enemies. I wanted to help them navigate their conflict, rather than solving it for them, so I would have them sit facing each other and ask each one to explain to the other why they were upset. Inevitably, Jordan would begin to tell Brianna why he was upset, but within a few seconds he would turn to me and say, "And, Dad, she ..." At this point, I would stop him mid-sentence and explain that his challenge was with his sister, not with me. I redirected his focus and reminded him to talk to her directly. Then I would ask Brianna to share her side. Like her brother she would eventually turn to me, explaining why she was upset.

Each time I stopped them I would coach them on their tone. I would advise them not to use accusatory words and instead practice listening to each other. The more they would talk to each other, the more they understood each other's point of view. If they "apologized" but didn't really mean it, I would call them on their insincerity!

Then I'd have them talk it through "until you feel better about this." Then there was that moment of breakthrough, and they would say sorry from a sincere heart. At that point I would encourage them to hug, telling them "I want you to understand that conflict should always end in an embrace." I wanted them to learn that if you couldn't hug afterward, then there was likely still a hint of resentment built up in the relationship.

I've used the same principles and approach when navigating conflict between spouses, team members, or key leaders in things conflict between spouses, team members, or key

leaders in the church. Working to help people drop their guard, seeing the other perspective, and pursuing true reconciliation are applicable principles, whatever our age. People are uncomfortable confronting conflict and often will make concessions or compromises they really don't want to make just to get out of the difficult conversation faster. As a skilled conflict navigator, don't just listen to the words people say, read their posture, their body language, and the "spirit" they are demonstrating as well.

When conflict is handled biblically, it should lead to deeper levels of understanding and intimacy. But for this to happen, it's important that you understand the source of conflict, the dangers of unresolved conflict, the different styles of communication, and the steps to help you navigate the conflict in a biblical manner.

### **The Source: Why We Experience Conflict**

Why do people experience conflict? James spells it out: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" (James 4:1). The ultimate source of all disagreements is selfishness. We're hardwired to want our own way! Learning to see and accept others' perspectives is a part of the spiritual maturity process. But since not everyone is at the same point on the spiritual journey, we can easily find ourselves at odds with someone who disagrees with us.

While selfishness is the source of conflict, miscommunication and opposing personality types feed that source. Sure, there are times a core problem needs to be worked through. But I have discovered, most of the time, the "issue" really isn't an issue at all. It's a misunderstanding or a personality difference that's causing the trouble. Once communication is clarified or personality quirks are understood, the arguing parties often find they actually agree on the main issue!

Disagreeing parties can have a healthy conversation and work in a spirit of unity in order to create a positive plan of action that honors God. This will require collaboration, compromise, and maturity from all those involved.

### **Consequences of Conflict**

When conflict is not handled well, there are at least three negative effects:

#### **1. Loss of relationship**

Team culture can become toxic if conflict isn't dealt with appropriately. People can become cynical, fearful, and self-protective. Pressure builds up in the team that has to come out somewhere: people begin to express unhelpful opinions on the matter and dishonor the people involved rather than hold their tongues. If not handled correctly and quickly, long-term relational damage can take place. That's why you must respond to conflict with urgency!

#### **2. Loss of respect**

When people are defensive or acting in self-protection, they will do and say things that hurt others. Sometimes, in an effort to make themselves look good, they do things to

make others look bad. And this type of immature response causes others to lose respect for the individual behaving this way. Once respect is lost, it is hard to regain.

### **3. Loss of momentum**

There is nothing like a disagreement to halt the forward momentum of a group or a team. They can be making great strides toward the vision, when suddenly a disagreement becomes a distraction and the progress comes to a halt. Instead of giving attention and effort to the vision, the focus is not on the problem.

## **Understanding Communication Styles**

Everyone tends to have a default conflict management mode, and these are summarized in four different communication styles. Understanding these four styles will help you grasp why someone is reacting the way they are and help you adapt your approach in course-correcting the situation.

### **Communication Style 1-Passive**

Those who use this style tend to be uncomfortable with conflict and confrontation. For this reason, they will try to avoid conflict by sup.

Pressing their feelings. They may be hesitant or even fearful of speaking up and sharing their opinion. Often they believe their feelings aren't De. Resentment is building, even though they remain quiet of. Resentment is building, even though they remain quiet in a conflict situation. They may even find it difficult to make eye contact.

### **Communication Style 2- Aggressive**

The aggressive style is the opposite of passive. Those who use it are very verbal and confrontational. They do not hesitate to speak their mind and often do so in a way that feels like an attack. They can communicate in ways that hurt and intimidate the other person. They may struggle with listening because they are more concerned with expressing their view and getting their way.

### **Communication Style 3—Passive-Aggressive**

The passive-aggressive communicator is tricky because they appear passive on the surface, but in fact they are acting out of anger. They are very subtle but you can recognize their conflict management strategies: sarcasm, denying that there is a problem, trying to sabotage the reconciliation process, blaming others, or procrastinating in order to "send a message."

### **Communication Style 4-Assertive**

The assertive style is used by someone who truly wants to seek reconciliation. They honestly acknowledge the problem and express a desire to collaborate for a solution. They are honest about their feelings but in a way that honors the other person. They work hard to not have an accusatory tone. They speak respectfully and are willing to

compromise in the process of navigating the conflict. This person seeks to understand, not just be understood.

Which communication styles have you seen evidenced in your current group or team you're leading? How has that diversity of styles affected team culture?

### **Seizing the Opportunity**

It may sound contradictory, but conflict is always an opportunity for growth. However, some leaders are so afraid of conflict that they try to defuse it without using it to the team's advantage. Conflict always comes with strong opinions and strong emotions. That's why handling it can be intimidating and uncomfortable. When you're in a room and people are expressing strong, differing opinions, emotions can escalate and cause damage. Don't let emotions get out of control. But also remember that your single goal is not to defuse the conflict; it to use the conflict to deepen understanding and intimacy of those involved. Defusing it without truly getting to a place of mutual understanding doesn't promote growth. I admit it's not something I ever look forward to, but when conflict arises, I've discovered that my approach determines how the process plays out. Let's look at the steps of a positive approach to conflict below.

### **Steps for Positively Navigating Conflict**

Let me make a disclaimer: if you are serving as a volunteer leader, it would be wise to consult with the pastoral staff leader you report to and alert them to any situation of conflict you are dealing with, so they can coach you through it if necessary. But remember, they have entrusted and empowered you in this role. Prayerfully following the steps below can help you navigate the conflict from the time you schedule a meeting to begin to deal with the conflict, until the time the problem is resolved.

#### **1. Choose to deal with conflict quickly**

When you are alerted to the conflict, work hard to get people together for a meeting as quickly as possible. Paul advises us, "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry (Ephesians 4:26). The longer we allow conflict to go unaddressed, the greater the chance things will become distorted and escalate out of control. Remember, there is more than just the relationship of these individuals at stake. Disunity in the body can affect the broader church and at times even have consequences that impact its mission.

Be careful not to engage in one-party conversations. It can be tempting to just talk to one party and get their perspective. This could cause you to have a bias as you attempt to navigate the conflict. Work hard to get both parties together for an open, honest discussion.

#### **2. Get a discussion going**

Avoiding the situation makes it worse rather than better. When one of your leaders is struggling with conflict and has asked you to get involved, get the parties together to talk

to each other. James warns us, "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger' (James 1.-19 SV). Your objective is to get the discussion going and help the individuals understand each other's perspective.

My two boys got into a major disagreement as young teens. When I had listened to both of them describe the problem, I realized that the primary issue was they had a different perspective on the situation. So I took a coin that was black on one side and white on the other and held it between my thumb and index finger so each could only see one side of the coin. I asked them what color the coin was. Jordan answered, "White." Brandon answered, "Black" I turned the coin around and said, "You are both right. You just have different perspectives." Then I explained to them that this was the case with their conflict-neither one was right or wrong; they just had a different perspective on the situation. Once they understood the other's perspective, they were much more gracious about the situation. Your job as a leader is similarly to help each person see the other perspective. Often the source of disagreement is a matter of perspective or preference rather than right versus wrong.

### **3. Set the tone for the group**

While those who are at odds with each other may get heated during the discussion, you ultimately set the tone and direction by establishing upfront a clear outcome for the situation and clear guidelines for your time together:

- i. Clarify that reconciliation and unity is the objective** - I once met with some parents who were very angry at our youth pastor for a programming decision he made that affected their teens. Things had escalated intensely by the time I got involved and they were ready to go to war when we finally met. As I opened that time of discussion, I read Proverbs 15:1, A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." I explained upfront that although they might not feel like it right at that point, a few days ago, they all loved each other and got along. I shared that I believed everyone had been hurt in this circumstance and said, "If we all are patient and honest, we can work toward understanding each other and walk out unified once more"
- ii. Pray** - Praying together in the meeting invites the Holy Spirit to guide each of you through the process. It's sad, but, prior to your meeting, neither of the parties may have even prayed about the conflict, inviting God to bring resolution. Most of the time disagreeing parties are more concerned about protecting themselves than praying for reconciliation.
- iii. Watch your own tone** - If you are not careful, your own emotions can get swept up in the conversation and you can unintentionally display frustration, anger or irritation. It's essential, as you engage the parties in conflict, that you manage your own reactions. See yourself as a thermostat that helps set the environment.

**iv. Give simple ground rules** - You can establish your own ground rules for the meeting, but here are some rules I've found helpful:

- We are going to focus on the facts.
- We are going to be honest about our feelings.
- We are going to seek to understand each other.
- We are going to act in love toward one another.
- We are going to give our very best effort to reconcile.
- We will keep the discussion only among those who are a part of the solution and not talk about this outside to others who are not a part of the solution.

Stating these rules upfront will help better ensure (but not guarantee) people act in a mature manner.

#### **4. Ask each person to listen to the other**

Remember that the best way to resolve conflict is through effective communication. Sit down with both parties. Ask them to share their perspective with each other, and challenge them to listen carefully. Choose one person to go first and share the facts from their perspective, as well as what they are feeling. Remind them of Paul's words to the Ephesians: "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Ephesians 4:15-16

Ask them to commit to being a truth teller, rather than suppressing their thoughts or aggressively attacking the other person.

#### **5. Work toward resolution and reconciliation**

After both parties have shared their perspectives, you can begin to ask questions and work toward resolution and reconciliation. Once you've heard both sides, you will be able to spot their differences. Be careful at this point not to minimize anyone's feelings. Remember, as far as they are concerned, their perspective is their reality. The following are a few techniques you can use to process what they just heard and help bring about unity:

- Ask each to restate what they heard the other party say. This will help you to see if they were really listening and understanding
- Ask clarifying questions. Use your curiosity and empathy to ask questions that could lead to greater understanding.
- Ask for solutions and see what they come up with together.
- When you seem to be making no progress and people are getting frustrated, stop and pray.



## **6. Elicit help from a more senior leader**

There are times the parties involved may make it difficult to resolve the issue, despite your best efforts. If you feel the issue is escalating and sin is not being confessed or recognized, then it is wise to go to the leader you report to and engage them in the process. Jesus gives us this counsel: "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they 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 they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Matthew 18:15-17

By getting a more senior leader involved, you are simply following the steps Jesus prescribed to help bring unity and reconciliation to the situation.

You may not be entirely comfortable dealing with conflict, but as a leader of leaders you play a critical role in bringing greater levels of unity to the group.

What do you think are some common mistakes leaders make when navigating conflict?

Which of the six steps for managing conflict have you mastered?

Which of the six steps are your weakest? Think of one positive outcome that would result from your growth in this area.

Navigating conflict is unavoidable where people are involved. But conflict that is dealt with graciously, honestly, and quickly can strengthen teams in the long run. Even if team members or leaders need to step away from a team, conflict can fuel growth. View conflict as an opportunity for growth and mutual understanding.