

Coping with Conflict

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It had been a while since I had talked with this pastor. He explained to me that he was under a lot of stress as were the other pastors in this multi-staffed church. "If you were here, we would have let them go a long time ago, but it seems that nobody has the courage to deal with it."

Another close friend is in conflict with a person at work. He told me that when things are smooth, he gets along famously, but when he collides or is in ongoing conflict with somebody it is very difficult for him to function well, and he flat out doesn't know what to do or how to handle it. Could I help him; give him some advice? I could see the stress, frustration, and pain written all over his face.

Something I saw on a web site from Leadership Network, referred to an interview with pastors concerning the top five things they thought were lacking in their seminary or Bible school training. Leadership development is usually at the top of such lists, but on this particular survey, the number one skill they felt short-changed on was "Conflict Management."

Not knowing how and/or the unwillingness to deal with conflict is a major issue that is undermining organizations and eating people's emotional lunch. I am running into it everywhere I go. The two examples above could be multiplied many times over if spaced allowed.

I cannot imagine anything more devastating to effective leadership than the refusal or inability to resolve conflict. To be frank, I meet very few leaders who honestly, gracefully and promptly deal with conflict when it raises its ugly head. I don't mean this to be unkind, but many leaders are "Relational Cowards." Sometimes the reason given for not dealing with it is, I don't want to be unloving. Not dealing with it is the unloving thing to do. Away with the mistaken idea that love is never conflicting with a person. "Truth telling is more important than peacekeeping...the well-being of the other person is more important than the current comfort level in the relationship...peace at any price is a form of deception from the pit of hell. A relationship built on peacekeeping won't last. Tough love chooses truth telling over peace keeping and trusts God for the results."
Bill Hybels

Some seem to play the hide-my-head-in-the-sand game and hope it will disappear before they come up for air. Others live in total denial that there is a problem; can't believe there's a problem; don't want to believe there's a problem; would rather move on than face the problem (many do). Christian churches and organizations are being ripped apart by not dealing with a problem person or resolving conflicts. Still others have no

experience or model in dealing constructively with conflict that is costing them or may cost them their leadership edge.

Let me set the record straight before I go on. I am not Mr. Expert on this subject. I have had my share of cowardly moments for which I have paid dearly. I will more than likely have a few more before Jesus calls me home. I strongly desire and will (with dependence on God's grace) no longer sweep conflict under the carpet, put my head in the sand or my finger in the dike and look the other way. It is (I believe) unbiblical and shows lack of spiritual leadership and integrity. Having said that, allow me to share a few things that help me in "Coping with Conflict."

1. Make a commitment before the Lord to face and deal honestly, lovingly, sensitively and decisively with conflict. For years I carried a card with me that said, "Courage and conviction to collide and confront." It was a reminder to me to be courageous and not back down too fast when I collided with people on issues, or when, (after prayer, thought and counsel), I decided I needed to take the initiative and confront someone.
2. Be prepared to confess and ask for forgiveness for your part in causing the conflict. I want to begin by acknowledging my part in causing the seeming impasse in the relationship. Not so that the other party will confess theirs, but because I, without realizing it, have probably contributed to the conflict
3. Get all the facts. When I am doing it correctly, I ask lots of questions, without accusing or placing blame. Demonstrate a sincere desire to get to the bottom of the conflict by listening and trying to understand
4. Do it privately. The rule of thumb is, confront privately, praise publicly. Never confront or air a conflict (for the first time) in public. Matthew 18 gives us the process to follow. I have seen times (hard to believe it actually happened) where a brother or sister was confronted in a church service or a staff meeting. Bad news, poor wisdom "I don't know what the secret to success is, but I do know what the secret to failure is and that is to trying to keep everybody happy." Comedian Bill Cosby

In closing, Luke 6:26 in The Message, "There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests...your task is to be true, not popular."