The High Cost of Conflict

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>
> *Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional.*
>
> *-Max Lucado*

Unresolved conflict in the workplace is expensive on many fronts. The decrease of productivity, having low morale, the forming of unhealthy alliances, the resulting turnover rate, and the ever-increasing danger of violence have spawned numerous workplace policies, procedures, and training seminars. The concept of a disgruntled employee, volunteer, or customer "going postal" is on the mind of leaders everywhere.

However, what you will not hear in this article is that conflict is wrong or unnecessary; it is actually quite the opposite. Conflict can be a critically important component in the formation of high-functioning teams. Diversity of viewpoints, experiences, personalities, and skillsets can make an environment ripe for conflict, but this diversity is also the engine that pushes organizations up and forward. The key is knowing how to allow the right amount and the right kind of conflict into the system without letting it escalate into a damaging dispute. To do this, we must understand the different root causes of conflict.

7 Root Causes of Conflict

1. We Want Something We Can't Have

Human history records horrendous conflicts that escalated to battles and wars that devastated entire regions of the world until one dominant ideology prevailed over another. The Bible addresses this very point when James, one of the disciples of Jesus, wrote, *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight"* (James 4:1-2). The bottom-line is if we allow

our natural selfish tendencies to be the driving force in our life, we will get ticked-off whenever we don't get what we want, and then we will do whatever has to be done to get it. Even if nine out of ten people on a team have learned to manage these selfish impulses, there will still be problems because of the one.

2. Personal Values Are Challenged

The way an individual views integrity will inevitably shape his or her personal code of ethical behavior. However, within every organization, there are lines in place that define its ethos and culture. The norms of the workplace and right and wrong are determined by what is expected; a form of "groupthink" takes hold. Conflict arises when these expectations clash against personal values. This clash can be intensified when religious teachings and cultural values based on ethnicity and nationality are added to the mix. For some, the conflict surrounds the pace and priority of the work they do, in which case the amount of hours someone is in the building may matter more than if they "fudge the numbers" a bit or put a twist on the truth to maintain the allusion that "all is well." When one's personal integrity clashes with the expected outcomes from the manager or the larger group, expect conflict to arise. When my son was interviewing for a job, the interviewer was testing for this very dynamic. My son was asked about certain scenarios in which he would be willing to allow the company's welfare to determine his values. He replied, *"Of this one thing you can be sure, I will never lie for you, but I will never lie to you."* He got the job!

3. Role Ambiguity

Titles and pay grades can only prevent some role confusion. Circumstances often create opportunities for others to exercise their talents in someone else's territory, and thus the classic power struggle is born. (Of course, conflict can also happen if someone feels they are stuck doing someone else's responsibility.) Jealousy and intimidation can easily spark conflict. Ambiguity occurs more frequently within environments where there is more fluidity and less rigidity about titles. The absence of hierarchical structure can have large upsides when creating collaborative teams or doing joint projects, but beware if some good-spirited competition starts to turn towards conflict. Some members can start to secretly sabotage the work of others. To reduce role ambiguity, some work groups actually use a Team Charter to crystallize various roles, responsibilities, and expectations. This allows the team to stay focused on the stated objectives.
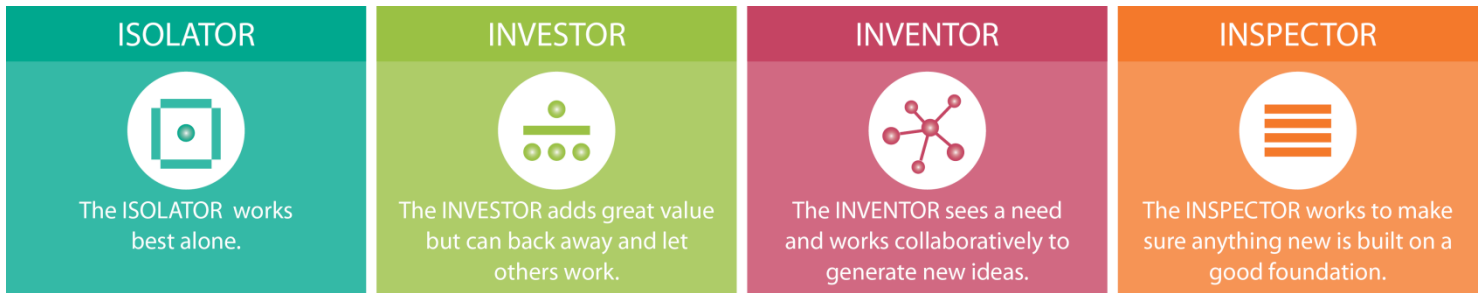
4. Asset Allocation

I once worked in a church setting where the policy on the use of equipment and facilities was on a first-come, first-served basis. In theory, it was a good policy. It rewarded those who were disciplined enough to plan ahead. The Youth Pastor was such a clever person; he booked the use of the church's gym every Saturday night a year in advance. He reserved the use of the church's two new vans every weekend. He planned his budget to front load the most expensive things early in the fiscal year before the budget got lean towards the end of the year. He was a genius! Right? Since he had all those things reserved, he had control of those assets. If you wanted to use them, you had to go seek his permission. Well, most weeks, the vans sat parked, and the gym was empty. BUT the policy was being kept perfectly. Conflict ensued! Good planning involves having a holistic view of the assets to be shared and making sure everyone is able to access the resources they need to accomplish their part of the task. A shared calendar can go a long way to reducing this type of conflict.

5. Work Styles

It is fascinating to observe how different people learn, work, think, and express themselves. After experiencing a few personality charged conflicts in your organization, you might be tempted to think that if we could just group people of similar styles, we would have a workplace panacea. Wrong. We need the variety of styles to balance out the limitations inherent of any one style, not to mention the monotony of working with people just like ourselves!

Understanding these differences and actually appreciating this diversity goes a long way to keeping conflict from erupting. I have observed effective leaders fail in many different areas on the work style spectrum. The problem occurs when work styles clash rather than complement. For instance, some people need the structure of strict deadlines while others love the thrill of getting things done at the last minute. There is a plethora of books, articles, and instruments to expand your learning on this subject. The Center Consulting Group also offers specific testing for work styles and team chemistry based on self-reporting and input from others. The following graphic defines four of the different work styles that team members may experience.

ISOLATOR	INVESTOR	INVENTOR	INSPECTOR
The ISOLATOR works best alone.	The INVESTOR adds great value but can back away and let others work.	The INVENTOR sees a need and works collaboratively to generate new ideas.	The INSPECTOR works to make sure anything new is built on a good foundation.

6. Perceptions

My wife is far-sighted and I am near-sighted. Because we each have a different strength with a corresponding weakness, we make a pretty good team. Without our glasses, we perceive the world differently. She can read road signs in the distance, but I can read menus. She keeps me from missing my exit, and I can tell her to order the chicken cacciatore. But when we both think we are absolutely right and the other person is totally wrong, there will be the inevitable conflict. What is at the core of the problem? Perceptions. Perceptions are simply cognitive pictures that are stored in the brain. They develop as a result of a complex combination of factors including concrete experiences, cultural beliefs, and social influences. Perceptions are often treated as "the truth" from those who hold them even if the perception is inaccurate, therefore making them very powerful. Perceptions can be changed, although not easily, through honest dialogue and changed behaviors.

When tensions are rising, increase communication by documenting why you have the perceptions you do and by actively listening to the viewpoints of others. Most of us have the tendency to try and connect the dots and make early conclusions in order to validate our own assumptions or perceptions. Therefore, the more "dots" of communication there are, the more likely you will be to arrive at an accurate conclusion or course of action.

Try using the following perceptual positioning exercise to help you test the validity of your perceptions. Attached to those perceptions are normally strong emotions. Ultimately, it is best if the facts govern the emotional aspects when it comes time to find solutions. But if others feel they have not been heard or their position is not fairly represented, it will be a challenge for them to let go of their emotions long enough to reveal the real nature of the problem to be solved.

Running the Bases of Perceptual Positioning

The best communicators have developed the skills to perceptually reposition themselves to see a situation from multiple viewpoints resulting in better critical thinking, problem solving, and resolution.
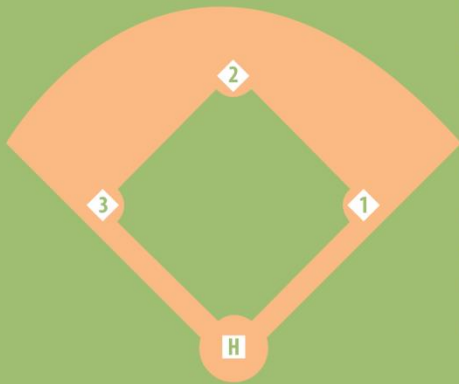
Instructions:
Put four pieces of paper on the ground and literaly move from base to base recording your thoughts, ideas, and conclusions. Changing physical positions can help change perceptions. In conflict resolution, a moderator can help the conflicting parties to walk through this process until they come to an amiable and wise agreement.

At each base, ask the following questions:
What do they WANT?
What do they NEED?
What are their CONCERNS?
What are their CONSTRAINTS?
What are their PRESSURES?

FIRST BASE: Your View
Articulate accurately how you see a situation. Provide rationale for your opinion that is NOT emotionally charged or skewed by personal bias.

SECOND BASE: Their View
Put yourself in the "other guy's shoes". Without sarcasm, honestly try to express the logic, motive, and goals of those who oppose or disagree with you.

THIRD BASE: Observer View
Like a jury, objectively weigh the merits of each of the positions and make a decision about what seems like the best/wisest scenario or conclusion for the organization.

HOME PLATE: Stakeholder View
Did the leaders act maturely and in my best interest? Or did their egos get in the way of making a good decision?

7. Conflicting Definitions of Success or the "Win"

I have a friend who is a printer, and I remember seeing this sign in his front office.

WE OFFER 3 KINDS OF SERVICES
GOOD – CHEAP – FAST
BUT YOU CAN ONLY PICK TWO
GOOD & CHEAP WON'T BE **FAST**
FAST & GOOD WON'T BE **CHEAP**
CHEAP & FAST WON'T BE **GOOD**

The sign is clever and correct. The customer is forced to pick two and forfeit the third. Likewise, leaders can inadvertently communicate conflicting goals which in turn causes conflict. For instance, one staff member might be pushing his team to meet deadlines because conveying speed is the most important goal, while another staff person might be telling his team that excellence is the top priority, and the business manager may be tightening

the purse strings to keep things within the budget. The result is confusion and conflict.

Resolving Conflict

Not surprisingly, organizations, like friendships, can grow stronger as a result of conflict being resolved appropriately. When respect is gained, trust can grow. Consider adopting this four stage approach to conflict management.

Stage 1: Preparing for Resolution

Conduct a self-examination. I once had a doctor tell me to wake up every morning, take a good look in the mirror, and if I see <u>three</u> of anything, to give him a call ☺. If you have been in leadership long enough, you can easily go back and remember the conflicts you have experienced. Some were painful and have left scars that you can still see when you look inside. The good news is that you learned something. You now know what NOT to do as well as valuable principles to use when conflict happens the next time. It is good to remember that the standard is not perfection but peaceableness. If it is not egregious, dangerous, or unethical, you can choose to let some things go. You can choose not to be offended. Responding impulsively when someone hits a nerve in us emotionally can ratchet up conflict quickly. Try practicing the Principle of First Response.

Principle of First Response

"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." –Proverbs 15:1

SITUATION #1: REACTION

Someone says or does something to offend you.

You fire back!

The situation escalates.

SITUATION #2: RESPONSE

Someone says or does something to offend you.

You give a soft answer, kind words, apology, or invitation to resolve this without drama.

The situation is calmed.

"Live in harmony with one another...Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." –Romans 12:16-18

Reflect on these questions:
- What are my hot buttons?
- Am I being too sensitive?
- What defensive routines show up first when I sense a conflict coming?
- What attitudes are warning signs that I am beginning to escalate the conflict?
- What is the best case scenario for how this conflict ends?

Install smoke detectors. Good leaders can smell smoke before there is a fire. Early intervention has saved many from the lingering negative effects of when conflict gets out of control. There is a tendency for people to ignore the first signs of conflict hoping it will get smoothed over quickly. Other managers jump in too early and too hard which drives the problem below the surface to smolder. Usually, this latent conflict shows up insidiously in unpredictable environments down the road. However, it can be difficult for managers to differentiate between healthy banter and a fuse being lit that will go KA-BOOM in a couple of hours, days, weeks, or months. It is easier to maintain trust and morale than it is to try and rebuild it.

"Confrontation is a precious gift. When it is withheld, teams deteriorate, performances fail, families break apart, and companies go bankrupt. The lack of appropriate, effective confrontation is fatal to communities, and it can be lethal to individual men and women."

-Jon Ortberg

I saw this type of intervention beautifully managed by a flight attendant on a flight from Nashville to Philadelphia. Sitting five rows in front of me were two people exchanging words with some heat in them. It was a man and a woman, but they were not married. I could feel the tension rising quickly, and I was pretty sure she could take him. I was just waiting for the first swing when down the aisle comes a tiny flight attendant who might have weighed 90 pounds (if she was carrying a brick or two). Without hesitation, she stood between them, and with a deep, loud bass voice said, "This ends here, and it ends now! Do I make myself clear?" In typical Nashville style, they both sheepishly said "yes ma'am" and sat down. Our whole section cheered and they sat in their seats without a peep for the rest of the flight. Problem solved!

Try talking it out in private. Airing grievances in public is a mistake to be avoided. Nobody likes to be embarrassed in front of peers or made an example of in public. You are showing respect to the person when you suggest a neutral private setting. However, if you need to emphasize your authority over a direct report, a manager's office may be appropriate. Some experts suggest arranging the furniture so that there are no physical objects like tables between you. Eye-to-eye contact with no more than an arm's length between the two parties dramatically increases the likelihood of positive body language that will create an environment of openness rather than hostility. Usually, destructive conflict is about feelings not facts. Therefore, practice using "I" statements instead of "you" statements that put others on the defensive because they feel like they are being attacked. Instead of saying, "You make me so mad," rephrase it like, "I feel really frustrated when you ____." Take responsibility for your emotions and reactions. Let the other party do the same. You might be surprised to find that when you are sharing how you feel in certain circumstances, the real emotion is fear not anger. If an amiable agreement to solve the conflict cannot be found in private, it's time to agree to get others involved. Hire a skilled facilitator if necessary.

Come prepared to offer and hear alternative proactive solutions. Being prepared for a resolution means you acknowledge you will likely have to sacrifice something to get to a win-win. Conflict is not always about negotiation. Frequently, there is an absolute right way, an absolute wrong way, or the boss' way. However, most conflict has an element of give-n-take in order to move toward <u>pro</u>covery. In <u>re</u>covery, the parties must do remedial work (rehash the past) to recover what was lost in the conflict. Creating procovery alternate solutions is based on future desired outcomes. In recovery, there needs to be an explanation of the past so blame can be assigned. In procovery, the group can practice what I like to call "blameless resolution." Because it is future focused, positive assumptions are made about the very things that have caused the conflict. The following example shows how to find a <u>pro</u>covery solution.
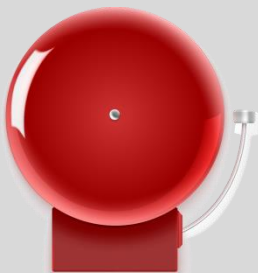
Laura is aggravated because Rick is the last one out of the office at night, and she believes he forgets to adjust the air conditioner before he leaves. Therefore, she comes in early and has to "freeze" for two hours because of his inconsideration. Rick thinks the cleaning crew may be to blame too.

Procovery Solution: *We will purchase a programmable thermostat! Let's meet again in two weeks to see if the solution is working.*

Entering the boxing ring. One summer, I took boxing lessons. We trained three days and sparred two days each week. At first, I didn't think I was that good, but the trainer at the gym just kept encouraging me. Each day, he would pump me up like I was going to be the next heavy weight champion. We invested in all the equipment to keep me safe, but my Dad finally convinced me that the only reason they wanted me in the program was so the "real" boxers had a real person to hit instead of a punching bag. After several busted lips, numerous black-eyes, and a flattened nose that summer, I realized my Dad was a lot smarter than I had given him credit for. However, the thing I remember best from boxing is which corner I was supposed to go to when the bell rang at the end of a round. Even though 90 seconds in the ring is not that long, I couldn't wait for that bell to ring. I was safe there.

Similarly to the boxing ring, when conflict occurs in our life, we need to know what corner to head towards. The chart that follows explains several important dynamics to be mindful of as you are preparing for conflict resolution. In conflict, we want to show BOTH high value for the relationship AND address the needs we have personally. This is especially true if the conflict includes personal attacks.

Maintaining Healthy Relationships
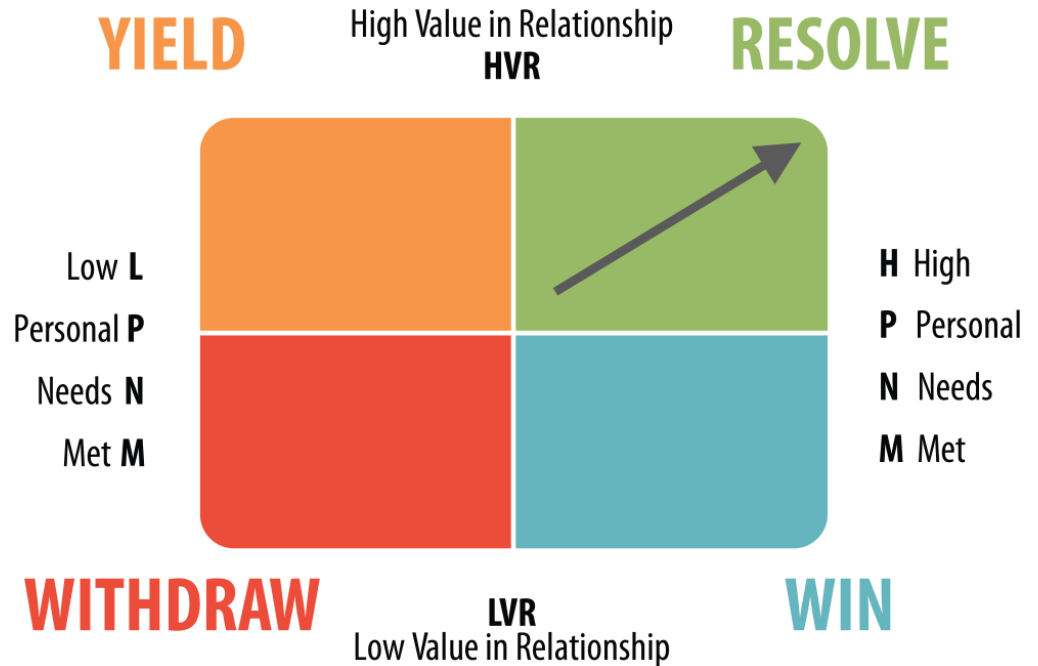
WIN

I MUST WIN: Individuals who go to the corner of **LVR + HPNM** do not value the relationship, and their own ego needs drive their need to "win" in the conflict regardless of the cost to others. Controlling is essential to this self-serving individual who believes the organization exists to serve him. They make life difficult for others until they get their way. This profile fits the immature leader, the narcissistic boss, or the domineering spouse.

YIELD

I YIELD TO YOU: When a person retreats quickly to the corner of **HVR+LPNM**, they highly value the relationship and will relinquish their own needs and desires to maintain the relationship. A person with this profile is likely to feel insecure in their relationships or in their job. They may be enamored with the strong leader type or simply be a highly compliant person even though this corner leaves them feeling unfulfilled in the long term.

WITHDRAW

I QUIT: When the conflict reaches a certain point, the **LVR+LPNM** folks will withdraw and head for the door. This type of person will more easily abandon the relationship and their responsibilities because they find little satisfaction in them and do not value them. They often have a lack of passion for the mission and organization. They are in the classic lose-lose situation. They may sit stewing in silence, or they may slam the door on their way out. In either scenario, they have checked out.
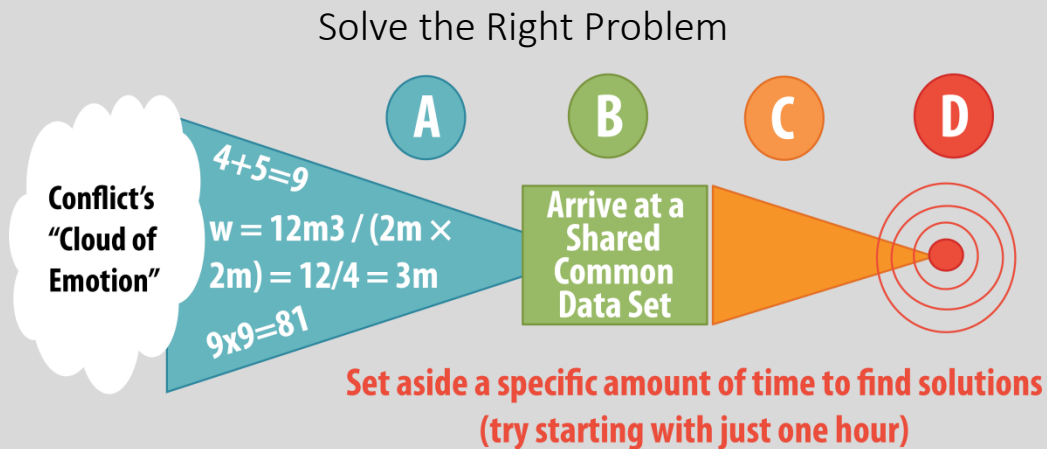
RESOLVE

I RESOLVE: When **HVR+HPNM** intersect, you have the best case scenario. When high personal needs are being met and the value of the relationship increases, the very process of resolving conflict makes you a better person, and your team or family reaps the benefits. Win-win happens best when this corner is chosen in advance. Predetermine that this is the corner where the greatest gains happen. Understand it requires compromise, openness, and integrity to get there. Teams that adopt this "RESOLVE corner" as their preferred choice BEFORE conflict erupts tend to make the greatest gains. High Emotional Intelligence enables this person to thrive in most organizations.

Stage 2: Solve the Right Problem

Once the preparations for conflict resolution are in place, the next stage is to understand the situation correctly and solve the right problem. It is baffling at times why otherwise well-intentioned, hard-working people can't seem to resolve conflict in their midst. My role as a consultant at The Center gets me a seat at the table in many organizations that have become totally engulfed in conflict. I listen, I ask a few questions, and then I listen some

more. Before long, the problem is so obvious to me that I can't believe they have so much time, effort, resources, and heartache wrapped up in this issue. I am not implying that the answer is always easy, but the solution is usually quite apparent. I use the chart below to help groups answer the right question and therefore solve the right problem. This step alone can go a long way to resolve the conflict as it helps the team see the facts more objectively and with less emotion.

Solve the Right Problem

Conflict's "Cloud of Emotion"

$4+5=9$

$w = 12m3 / (2m \times 2m) = 12/4 = 3m$

$9 \times 9 = 81$

Arrive at a Shared Common Data Set

A   B   C   D

Set aside a specific amount of time to find solutions (try starting with just one hour)

A Write down only <u>factual data</u>. No perceptions, opinions, or solutions can be offered yet. Spend 50% of your time collecting all the facts in Step A.

B Agree upon a shared set of <u>facts</u>. Spend no more than 10% of your time here.

C Narrow down the <u>interpretation</u> of the facts. What do the facts mean? What has become clear from the facts? Spend no more than 20% of your time here.

D Find <u>solutions</u> using your shared intelligence. If you spend more than 20% of your time here, you did not allot enough time in the other segments.

What I like about this process is that it creates opportunity for voice in the system without having a free for all. Each time segment allows input that is germane rather than providing a platform for circular reasoning, joining the bandwagon of the chronically discontent, or simply spewing toxic accusations to keep the organization in a state of chaos.

Important Note:
Knowing when to let go and give up is not always easily discerned, but sometimes, it is the right thing to do. For a variety of reasons, some conflicts end in separation, and that is OKAY. When you have made serious attempts to reconcile but have failed repeatedly, or the differences are so deep that

no middle ground is acceptable, it is best to release yourself and others from further obligation. This may mean someone is transferred to a different department or asked to leave the organization. In certain cases, separation can be the healthiest resolution. In the Bible, separation was necessary to accomplish what God had intended. I can think of over 20 of these illustrations with little effort. There are enough examples throughout history to convince me that a valid strategy is to agree to disagree and part company. One classic dispute in the scriptures happens between Paul and Barnabas. These two close buds were committed followers of Jesus, but they disagreed about how to use another person in their group. The best scenario for them was to divide, and God blessed them both!

Stage 3: Codify the Agreement

I find it is important for two reasons to have a written record of agreements made. First, conflict often behaves like a forest fire. Just when you think you have it under control, it flares up again. As time passes, a root of bitterness can still be growing just under the surface, waiting for an opportunity to trip up the peace that was agreed upon. Second, commitments without measurements become meaningless. Most often tangible agreements need to have tangible action plans to turn them into realities. It is essential to have clarity rather than ambiguity about what is expected now and in the future. Sadly, these expectations are often best articulated in separation agreements rather than peace treaties. It's one thing to shake hands and smile at each other; it's an entirely other thing to begin working together collaboratively. Consider using something like the following chart to capture the commitments.

We Have an Agreement!				
Agreement Statement				
What will be better in the future?				
What are the metrics of success?				
	Person 1	Person 2	Person 3	Person 4
What have I agreed to NOT do?				
Early indicators that the agreement is failing				
Dates for check-ups				

Stage 4: Celebrate

Forgive me if this stage sounds over simplified. The truth is we get exactly what we honor. One of the best ways to encourage strong relationships and organizational health is to celebrate the victories. When a conflict resolution process works well, celebrate it. What leaders recognize and champion is what others will emulate. A wise leader will let others have time and space to try and resolve their differences before stepping in, and when they succeed, the leader will take time to celebrate with them and acknowledge the contributions everyone made toward reaching a good solution. This can build team cohesion and confidence in their problem solving skills and can help avert further conflict.

Quick Reference Questions for When Conflict Occurs

1. What/who do I believe is the primary source of the conflict?
2. Is this a disagreement or is divisiveness present?
3. What has actually been lost in the conflict so far?
4. Am I personally a part of the conflict?
5. Is the conflict involving a dispute between individuals or a group?
6. Is the conflict involving staff members or programs of this organization?
7. Does this conflict put the organization at risk?
8. Who else should be informed about this conflict?
9. What should be my role, if any, at this time?
10. Is there a conflict of interest present by anyone representing the organization?
11. Do I have any legal responsibilities as a result of this conflict?
12. Is anyone in danger?
13. Are there well-established principles or policies that are being overtly violated?
14. Is the conflict simple or complex in nature?
15. Should outside expert help be sought, and if so, what kind of help?
16. Is there a long-term pattern of conflict?
17. What are the next three to five steps that should be taken?

Taking the Next Steps

Identify three areas where you feel you could improve your skills in conflict resolution.

1.

2.

3.

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