

How should I handle conflict in the group?

When the Conflict Involves You; Practical guidelines for leading in a difficult situation

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Conflict is a normal part of small-group life. In fact, if we don't have conflict, someone is not being honest. People are just too different from one another to avoid it completely.

Personally, I do not like conflict. It makes me feel, well, conflicted! At the same time, I believe that understanding the nature of conflict and being prepared to deal with it as a small-group leader, coach, or staff person is essential for people's spiritual growth and for a small-group ministry to thrive.

The following guidelines have been helpful for me in dealing with conflict, and I hope they can help you as well in your small-group leadership role.

Know How You Deal With Conflict

The old adage, "Physician, heal thyself!" truly applies here. Leaders who understand their own conflict management style approach conflict in an informed way. We all have strengths and weaknesses in dealing with conflict. Whether we will be helpful or a hindrance may depend on our understanding of what we bring to the conflict table.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Inventory is a helpful tool for understanding the various conflict management styles. What is your primary style? Do you compete or collaborate? Do you compromise and accommodate or try to avoid conflict completely? No one style is right for every situation, but understanding your primary response will help to keep conflict in perspective.

I like to avoid conflict. When I confront it, I first look for a compromise. Knowing that about myself has been important when I need to die to my "preferred" conflict management style in order to do what is best for others. I remember well when I needed to confront a small-group leader about talking too much.

I tried tactfully, gently, and indirectly to approach the subject. The leader looked me straight in the eye and asked, "Betty, what are you trying to say to me?" My astonishment at such a direct approach must have been written all over my face because the leader leaned forward, touched my arm and said, "Please, I need to hear this from you. Tell it to me straight."

Adapt to the Other Person

I learned a valuable lesson in the above situation. Though I wanted to avoid conflict, this leader needed me to be direct and confrontational. In dealing with conflict, we need to consider the conflict management style of those we deal with as well as our own style. We need to adapt to the people with whom we are dealing. This does not necessarily mean compromising—though it might—but it means communicating in a manner in which they can understand and relate.

Pray!

This may seem like a no-brainer, but it needs to be underscored. The potential for conflict to be destructive is huge. It is hard to be objective as a leader. We all have biases and personal viewpoints. There is great temptation to defer to our preferred outcome rather than to facilitate an honest confrontation of an issue. It takes being submissive to the Holy Spirit's leading to keep us honest and in tune with what God desires.

Think Gray and Listen

Discerning where God is leading in times of conflict includes reserving judgment until we have all the evidence. It is what The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership calls "thinking gray." Most issues are not black and white. We need to listen carefully—for feelings as well as facts—and to reserve judgment until all parties involved have had a fair hearing. Doing this builds trust. It also gives us the time needed to sense where the Holy Spirit is at work.

Differentiate between Problems and People, Issues and Emotions, Facts and Feelings

The statement, "A problem well-defined is a problem half-solved" is especially true when dealing with conflict. When the focus is on the problem, whether a difference of opinion or perspective, the parties involved can together often reach a compromise or collaborate to come to a better outcome than each would have come to alone. We simply mediate and ask questions to clarify the issue. In such a case, the conflict is substantive and can be positive. It becomes an opportunity for growth and change.

Sometimes, however, the conflict is due to a personality conflict, and emotions run too deep to come to a positive outcome. When people begin attacking people instead of problems, the conflict is affective and, if left unchecked, can be highly destructive.

One of the most difficult things I have ever had to do is remove a volunteer leader from leadership. I did not do so lightly, but it became apparent that the leader in question was using a top-down, authoritative approach to intimidate people into doing what the leader wanted. Those who did not comply were personally undermined, belittled, and discredited. Everyone in the small group was up in arms. When I confronted the leader, I was personally attacked as well.

Be Willing To Take a Stand

When the above happened, I was tempted to apologize and back down. After all, avoidance is my primary conflict management style. However, this was not about me and it was not about the leader in question. It was about the issue at hand and the people affected by the conflict. The leader had supporters who were waiting to see how I would handle what had become a major problem. I needed to carefully and positively address the impasse at hand, to isolate the problem, and to address it without attacking any of the people involved.

Then, I needed to take responsibility for the decision I made. I called a special meeting of all the people involved to explain my decision. The leader chose not to attend. I remember well that a highly-respected member of the group and an advocate for the leader I had removed came and talked with me after the meeting. She admitted she was "loaded for bear" and ready to let me have it for the decision I made. Instead, she thanked me and said, "I have even more respect for you as a leader because of how you handled this situation." No one needed to know the nitty gritty details of the conflict, but everyone needed to know it was handled prayerfully and with integrity, addressing the problem without attacking any person involved in the conflict. We can only do that on our knees.

Look For a Win/Win Solution

I looked desperately for a win/win solution in this situation, but found none because the leader in question could not get beyond blaming others and attacking them personally. In conflict, a win/win is always the solution of choice. It safeguards the dignity of the people involved, respects the diversity that God created, and allows for a difference in perspectives.

Isolating what we can compromise on helps us to be able to hold our ground on those things that are non-negotiable. A win/win requires that both parties seek the good of the other, not just their own. One cannot dig in one's heels and declare, "I'm right and you need to come over to where I am." When that happens, someone loses. Though there may

be principles we cannot compromise, there are usually extraneous circumstances that we can. When we can collaborate to come to an even better outcome, that is the best win/win of all.

Leave the Results to God

In the end, we do our best in dealing with conflict and leave the results to God. Not everyone will like us when we mediate conflict. That is the price of leadership. The leader I removed from leadership has never spoken to me again. That is painful for me, but I followed the above steps and did as I believe God directed me. Though the leader may continue to blame me, I have peace in knowing that the group involved benefited from my willingness to make that hard decision. The group itself thrived under new leadership.

Being faithful and obedient to God's call in leadership is the most important part of dealing with conflict. That is what God honors most.