

DEALING WITH CONFLICT IN GROUP MEETINGS

When people serve on committees, giving time and energy to meetings and decision making, they want to feel that their effort is meaningful and needed. They also would like the experience to be conflict-free. Too often conflict takes away the positive feelings and even threatens the results. Conflict can mean that growth is taking place. The way in which conflict is managed can make the difference between destructive and productive conflict.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this two-and-a-half hour workshop is to help church leaders accept that conflict is inevitable in church groups and to discover ways of managing conflicts for positive results.

TIME FRAME: 2.5 hours with two 10 minute breaks

BASIC WORKSHOP OUTLINE

- I Introduction and Overview (*15 minutes*)
- II Defining the Problem (*15 minutes*)
- III Assumptions for Working Together (*15 minutes*)
- IV Causes of Conflict within a Group (*15 minutes*)
- V Reducing Conflict Levels (*15 minutes*)
- VI Stages of a Conflict in Groups (*10 minutes*)
- VII Making Meaningful Decisions (*15 minutes*)
- VIII Creative Ways of Managing Conflict (*15 minutes*)
- IX Summary, Evaluation, and Closing (*15 minutes*)

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

- Bibles
- nametags (optional)
- newsprint and markers
- masking tape (secure permission to tape materials to the wall)
- Prepare charts on newsprint, for overhead projectors or Powerpoint for II, III, VI, and IX.
- Create signs, each with one emotion (Angry, Fearful, Confused, Challenged, and Annoyed) listed and post them around the room.
- Photocopy handouts.
- Think of an example of conflict disrupting the work of a group. You may want to take examples from current news stories. Be careful not to use a current issue affecting your group.

CONDUCTING THE WORKSHOP

Note: Information for the leader to share or paraphrase appears in italics.

I Introduction and Overview (15 minutes)

Welcome the group. After sharing the purpose and outline of the workshop, ask participants to stand beneath the sign that best expresses the feeling they experience when faced with conflict. Once people have gathered under each sign, allow for introductions, if participants don't know each other, and invite them to discuss their feelings.

Explain: Too often the issues get talked out but the feelings do not, yet it is the feelings that cause us to handle conflict as we do. The feelings are often bigger than the issue so unless we address the feeling level, we can see why conflict can be devastating to a group.

Share an example of conflict and ask participants to identify the feelings at work.

II Defining the Problem (15 minutes)

Divide participants into small groups. Distribute Bibles and 1 sheet of newsprint, tape, and markers to each group. Have participants open to Acts 15:36-41 and introduce the story: *In this story, we see Paul, the task-oriented evangelist, coming up against Barnabas, the person-centered pastoral type. The disagreement was so strong between them that they parted company. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed for Cyprus; Paul took Silas and headed through Syria. The local church commended both to the grace of God.*

Invite the groups to read the text and respond to the following questions:

- How does the scene fit your understandings of the early church?
- With whom do you find yourself siding? Why?
- Why were these two highly committed Christian leaders unable to agree?
- If you had been present, how would you have entered into the process?

Reconvene and ask each group to share its insights with the larger group.

III Assumptions for Working Together (15 minutes)

Post or otherwise display the following list:

Basic Assumptions for Effective Church Committees

1. Conflicts will be resolved with the church's well-being in mind.
2. All members will be committed to working toward consensus.
3. Power is shared; each person has an equal vote.
4. Everyone involved is important; so are their opinions.
5. The issues involved are not as important as the relationships.
6. Conflict will be resolved meaningfully because we'll work on it together.
7. Each person will be willing to share in finding a solution to any conflict within the group.
8. Each of us has a real stake in the outcome.
9. Each one's input will be valued, heard, and considered.
10. Each one will accept and publicly support the group's decision.
11. Decisions will be announced as group decisions.
12. Evaluations will be made; resolutions will be celebrated.

Ask participants to review the list and reflect on the following questions:

- What kind of group would exist if everyone subscribed to these assumptions?
- Is it realistic to expect committee members to endorse these assumptions?
- How well could you serve in your present position if these assumptions were shared?
- What difference would such an understanding make for a committee on which you presently serve?

IV Causes of Conflict within a Group (15 minutes)

Invite the group to brainstorm causes of conflicts in committees. Ask a volunteer to list the observations on newsprint to free you up to moderate the discussion. The following list of conflict causes might be helpful if the group has trouble getting started.

- differing goals
- limited resources
- personality conflicts
- divergent expectations
- control issues
- lack of assertive leadership
- misplaced hostility
- hidden agendas
- lack of prayer
- lack of focus/direction/purpose
- lack of preparation

After brainstorming, invite participants to consider the following questions:

- What does the list say about how we relate to one another in church work?
- Where is there room for the Spirit's leading within all this?

Summarize: *Differences are normal and natural; how we handle them makes the difference between growth and chaos.*

INVITE PARTICIPANTS TO TAKE A 10 MINUTE BREAK.

V Reducing Conflict Levels (15 minutes)

Divide the group into fours and distribute Handout #1. Ask the groups to reflect on the list of conflict causes they came up with in light of the steps and guidelines in Handout 1. Invite them to consider how the guidelines might help prevent conflict. Invite them, then, to discuss how the steps might help committees process conflict.

Ask the groups to consider ways in which the guidelines might be implemented in their churches. If you are working with participants who are from the same church, consider asking them to come up with an action plan for implementing conflict guidelines and disagreement steps in their church.

VI Stages of Conflict in Groups (10 minutes)

Distribute Handout 2 and review the stages of conflict.

Explain: *Good conflict management involves taking people from problem to resolution without having to go through antagonism, contest and combat.*

Ask participants to read Scenario 1 and then evaluate how the church members handled each stage of conflict, using the following questions:

- Could the church have headed off combat at any point in the process? If so, how?
- Once the conflict was in full swing, how might they have handled each stage?
- Was the identified conflict the real or only conflict played out in this scenario?
- If not, what were the real conflicts at play?
- Is the conflict over?
- How might the church be proactive with regard to these conflicts?
- How can the church prepare itself to handle conflicts in the future?

Bring the discussion home by asking the participants to discuss the following questions:

- Does your church have a built-in system for handling conflict?
- Can you think of a time when conflict was handled effectively?
- Are there any unresolved conflicts that you are aware of in your church?
- How would you encourage your church to be proactive in addressing long-term, unresolved conflicts?

VIII Making Meaningful Decisions (15 minutes)

Explain: *Many conflicts among individuals and within committees center around the church's decision-making. Constitutions and bylaws can help, but even when these standards are followed, conflicts can still arise. An intentional decision-making process can reduce the number and intensity of conflicts. We are going to review a process that can be utilized in making all types of decisions.*

Distribute Handout #3, “Steps in Meaningful Decision Making.” Walk the group through the process. Invite input, questions, and suggestions for modification. Invite participants to pair up and discuss how this process might have worked in a past decision or how it might work in a future decision. Allow each member of the pair to speak for 3 minutes then reconvene and ask volunteers to share what came out of their discussions.

INVITE PARTICIPANTS TO TAKE A 10 MINUTE BREAK

VIII Creative Ways in Managing Conflict (15 minutes)

Invite participants to put what they have learned into practice by dividing into groups of 4 and exploring Scenario 2 on Handout 2. Stress that there is no single correct way to handle any situation and ask them to identify possible steps for handling the situation in Scenario 2. Give them 6 minutes to work, then ask each group to summarize their approach.

IX Summary, Evaluation, and Closing (15 minutes)

Distribute Handout 4 “Evaluation” and allow a few minutes for participants to complete the questions. Allow a few minutes for open feedback then thank the group for their participation and for their commitment to dealing with conflict in healthy, effective ways. Read Psalm 133 aloud or distribute Bibles and lead the Psalm responsively as a closing prayer. Close with a brief word of prayer, asking that God’s grace would be revealed in how each participant approaches conflict in their churches.

For Further Help

A Lay Person’s Guide to Conflict Management by Speed B. Leas, Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1979.

Peace Skills: A Community Mediators Manual by Ronald S. Krabill, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Resolving Church Conflicts: A Case Study Approach for Local Congregations by G. Douglass Lewis, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981.

Consult Reconciliation Ministries, National Ministries, P. O. Box 851, Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851 for additional information. NM 809 Written by Emil J. Authelet, Jr., revised 2006 by Cassandra Carkuff Williams © National Ministries, American Baptist Churches, USA, 2006.



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Steps for Reducing the Potential for Conflict

1. Provide clear job descriptions for everyone.
2. Provide adequate training for each person's role.
3. Clearly identify goals and create a statement of purpose for the group.
4. Negotiate, define, and clarify expectations of each member and for each meeting.
5. Make sure everyone understands how the group fits within the larger system.
6. Ask for prayer support beyond the group.
7. Spend time in team-building and do long-range and short-term planning together.
8. Allow for differences in working styles and thinking styles.

Guidelines for Working through Disagreements

1. Listen before speaking (John 7:52; Proverbs 18:13)
 - Treat each other respectfully, believing that everyone desires to be faithful.
 - Listen to various points of view and listen, rather than plan your response.
 - State what you think you heard and ask for clarification before responding.
 - When it is your turn to speak, stick to the point and be respectful of time limits.
2. Speak in love and take responsibility for your perspective. (Ephesians 4:15)
 - Share concerns directly with those with whom you have disagreements.
 - Focus on ideas and suggestions, rather than on motives or knowledge base.
 - Share personal experiences only to clarify your opinion; recognize that your experiences and/or feelings are not normative or authoritative for the group.
3. Maintain the unity of being one in Christ. (Ephesians 4:3)
 - Insist on staying in community with one another.
 - Identify points of agreement as well as disagreement.
 - Seek conclusions informed by your places of agreement.
 - Respect the rights of conscience—people have the right to disagree.
 - Do not tolerate aggression, intimidation, spiritual superiority, or manipulation.

Six Stages of Conflict*

- 1) problem
- 2) disagreement
- 3) antagonism
- 4) contest
- 5) combat
- 6) resolution
- 7) evaluation
- 8) celebration

Good conflict management involves taking people from problem to resolution without having to go through stages 3, 4, and 5.

Scenario 1

The finance committee is faced with a budget deficit and it is only mid-year. Cuts have to be made. The committee tries to handle it, but as a result disagreement arises; so they pass the decision to the executive committee. The executive committee recognizes that some persons want to use this opportunity to cut the pastor's salary so drastically that he is forced to leave. Not wanting to make the decision, they pass it on to the congregation. The congregation begins polarizing into pro-pastor and anti-pastor forces. When it comes to a vote, the pastor keeps his salary, the budget gets cut, and the factions retrench for another round at a later date. The battle subsides but there is no real victory to celebrate.

Scenario 2

You are serving as the youth committee in your church. The youth director has approached you with a problem. While on their last outing, a camping trip, several of the older kids moved their sleeping bags during the night so the boys and girls could be near each other. Nothing more took place, but when they got home some of them bragged about "sleeping co-ed." Some parents are very upset. A few are asking for the director's resignation. They want a meeting with your committee, ASAP! How will you handle this situation?

*Sources: *A Lay Person's Guide to Conflict Management*, Speed B. Leas (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1979) and Emil J. Authelet, Jr., *Training Time Workshop 811*, 1995.

Steps in Meaningful Decision Making

- 1. PRAY**, not for the triumph of your own viewpoint, but seek the Spirit's help to listen attentively, speak honestly, and remain open to God's vision.
- 2. STUDY** the facts related the issue/problem as well as related issues to make sure you have a clear picture.
- 3. OBSERVE** all the options involved and their consequences. Identify potential concerns.
- 4. PROJECT** what each option would mean/involve.
- 5. CONSIDER** what feelings are involved and the intensity of those feelings. Allow feelings to inform the process, but do not allow persons to use their feelings to dictate results. Ask whether or not the feelings will derail the work toward a consensus.
- 6. DETERMINE**: the best option if consensus is not possible; who is willing to take ownership of the decision; whether or not the best option can be implemented; and if it is in church's (not an individual's or subgroup's) best interest.
- 7. ACT** on the decision or **TAKE A PAUSE** to be sure you want to move ahead without consensus. If you do not want to move ahead, **REVIEW** together "Guidelines for Working through Disagreements" (Handout #1) and **RETURN** to Step 1 of the process.
- 8. EVALUATE** the process. How well did it work? What did you learn? How could it have been done better? Be sure to include those who disagree with the decision in the evaluation of your process.
- 9. CELEBRATE** what you accomplished and more importantly, your unity in Christ even in the midst of differences and difficult decisions.
- 10. PRAY** for ongoing openness; for God to guide you in restoring any injured relationships, and for unity, recognizing that not everyone will be able to embrace every decision.

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EVALUATION

Thank you for participating in this workshop. To help us improve on the presentation, please take the time this questionnaire for your workshop leader.

What have you learned from today's time together?

What part of the workshop are you most eager to share when you get home?

What helped you the most?

What was not as helpful for you?

How could the workshop have been improved?