

Conflict Resolution in the Local Church

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Conflict abounds in human relations. It can be intense, and it is usually unpleasant. In a time of conflict people often do not know how to help themselves or, if they know, are so caught up in it that they find themselves to be ineffective. What can you do in light of this situation? A great deal, as it turns out! Conflict does not have to ruin lives. There are many ways to respond to and resolve conflict constructively.

However, in the heat of the moment, it is difficult to bring these principles to bear in a systematic way. This requires mental and emotional discipline. We talk about being disciplined in Bible study, prayer and other “spiritual disciplines,” but not in the process of engaging and resolving disputes. To do so requires effort. It is quite easy to get anxious or frustrated and walk away from conflict. Further, to stop what we are doing and be disciplined about engaging a conflict constructively requires an investment of time and energy. Often we say to a group, or to ourselves, “We don’t have time to do this now,” but do we come back to it? Or we say, “This will sort itself out,” or “Time heals all wounds,” but frequently such statements betray giving in to a lack of discipline. To stay with a conflict through the process to reconciliation, or to manage a conflict constructively over time, is no easy thing.

Several years ago, I received training as a professional mediator. Since that time, I have participated in resolving numerous conflicts and had the opportunity to reflect on them at length. I have also delved deeply into the literature of social psychology and formal conflict resolution studies, especially that based on game theory, to examine in detail the structure and dynamics of many types of conflict. Here I will share the results of some of my work. In particular, I will discuss the implications of competitive versus collaborative behavior in the management and resolution of conflict.

First, we must describe the environmental conditions out of which the collaborative process called mediation has grown. It is important to understand historical context in this situation, because the failure of America’s primary method of dispute resolution has a great deal to teach us about the attitudes we inherit in efforts to resolve conflict. Further, by understanding how and why the mediation process works in a more formal setting, we will be able to see how to apply it to contexts that are more informal and to conflict resolution in general.

Mediating Versus Adjudicating

It used to be the case that serious disputes went to court as lawsuits. The American court system is an adversarial process. The parties plead their cases and the judge decides what to do. This is an example of a solution imposed by a neutral third party. There is a winner and a loser, and often the winner takes all. The parties in such cases

often have little say regarding the details of the final decision. The terms of settlement are in the judge's hands. Little if any give and take between the parties is possible. As a result, fine-tuning the terms of settlement to fit the lives of the parties is not an option. Compliance with judges' decisions often had to be compelled by court order. Another undesirable outcome from use of the litigation process is the delay in reaching a settlement, due to endless appeals in an attempt to "win" in a higher court by having the original decision reversed. In addition, a settlement imposed by a third party often did not allow for the underlying causes of the conflict to be addressed or the relationship between the parties involved to be repaired. In effect, the emotional charge of the conflict continued for each of the parties. I pay you X or you do Y, but we are still angry at each other. Both of us still believe we are right. This seems tolerable when the parties are impersonal entities, such as corporations or government agencies. However, when the parties have to live with each other afterwards, as is the case in disputes involving labor relations, neighborhoods, churches, and families, the conflict festers under the veneer of a resolution. The chances are high that the emotional content of the conflict will remain the basis for people's feelings about, and actions toward, others. It might even increase. This is particularly true if the "winners" of the court case glory in their victory and feel as though they can act with impunity toward the other party in the future. The court case itself may be "settled," but the conflict lives on, anger and resentment are nursed, and hostilities will likely erupt again at another time. Round one is over; round two is still to come.

Because of these features, plus the time-consuming backlogs and high costs of using the court system, the courts have been searching for more effective ways to settle cases. Processes developed for this purpose are called Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Mediation is a type of ADR. It was first used in labor relations, then in neighborhood and community disputes, and is now being used to resolve divorce, child custody, and many other types of civil litigation and interpersonal conflict. It is more cost-effective, quicker, and the parties get an outcome that they are more likely to accept. It also offers the parties the potential for reconciliation and personal growth. In biblical terms, mediation might be called peacemaking.

Mediation provides parties with a structured process of conflict resolution based on discussion, problem solving, and negotiation. Instead of a judge imposing an arbitrary decision, a neutral third party, the mediator, assists the parties in working through the issues in the dispute, empowering them to structure a settlement that can be mutually agreed upon. Because the parties must come to terms *together*, such settlements have a high rate of compliance by the parties. In addition, the processes address the underlying issues that generated the conflict in the first place. Thus, underlying issues can be resolved, relationships can be repaired, and reconciliation can take place. The courts, it seems, have discovered the process Jesus advocated in *Matthew 18:15f*.

In return, given the intensity, even seeming intractability, of the disputes the courts deal with, they have given back to the church a wealth of techniques that are applicable not only in resolving litigation but also in helping people in everyday disputes, the kind that pastors encounter continually, day in and day out. Pastors should note, for example, that mediation is a healthy process for moving families through the crisis of divorce.

Neutrality in the Role of the “Third Party”

A word must be said here about the role and ethics of the so-called “Third Party.” Third parties, those who facilitate the process or are engaged in the work of mediation, do not suggest or impose “solutions.” Rather, they facilitate the discovery of possible solutions by the parties themselves. Pastors and qualified lay people are often called upon to play a mediating role in conflicts. Thus, familiarity with the best practice of mediators, and the role of the neutral party is important for healthy conflict resolution in the church.

Ethical standards of behavior for professional mediators are codified by the American Bar Association. Of greatest importance for our review here is the necessity of third party neutrality. A neutral party has no vested interest in a specific solution and is not perceived as biased by any of the other parties. The role of the neutral party is to assist the parties through the process of conflict to resolution, and at the same time to avoid being co-opted into the process as a player. Remaining neutral is a difficult challenge, especially when parties are appealing to the neutral party for validation of their facts, perceptions, or agendas. No one can do it perfectly, but with practice and attention to what is appropriate to the role, the skill will build over time. The most important thing is to *know yourself*, know what you believe, know how you respond to people and their options. Learn to recognize what buttons might get pushed while you listen, and think through how not to get hooked into the dispute. You are the grantor of a level playing field. If you find yourself angry with one party, or advocating a position, step back and evaluate whether you can continue in a neutral role.

How could a pastor do this in a church? Two main points should be remembered.

First, while it is true that you may know the parties involved in a dispute, that may not, in and of itself, indicate significant bias. Be aware of what you want to happen, whom you like, favor, or dislike. Be aware if you seek the approval of one of the parties, or if one of the parties is perceived as a solid supporter of your ministry and the other party less so. Be honest with yourself and with them about this. Previous relationships with any of the parties must be described, and you must be sure that it will not color your judgment. If you are unsure, do not participate in the neutral role; rather, bring someone else in to help. Don't be afraid to hand a problem off to a colleague or consultant. Never be unable to say, “I don't think I can remain neutral here; we should get someone else to help.”

Second, if there is a serious controversy in your congregation and you want to make your own views known, bring in a third party from the very outset. Having a stake in the outcome of a dispute, that is, a desired outcome, and then taking on the role of the “neutral” facilitator is the fastest way to corrupt the process.

Observations on the Best Practice in Conflict Resolution

In addition to what I have observed and learned through the practice of mediation, a second foundation of my research comes from the academic study of human behavior across several disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, international relations, and negotiation studies, to name a few. Each from its own perspective has addressed the question: Is there a way to predict, scientifically, how people will react to each other in and through a conflict? Structured situations, called games, were designed to test the consistency of participant’s responses in conflicts. From those experiments, observations were drawn and principles compiled that describe the elements of conflict. Once these elements were defined, methods for management or resolution could be set out, tested and refined. Of particular importance for this essay are the types of communication that occur routinely in conflicts that:

- (a) Cause a conflict to escalate, that is, worsen to the point that a resolution is unlikely.
- (b) Facilitate the de-escalation of a conflict, that is, allowed the parties to move toward a resolution.

Based on these observations, professionals in dispute resolution have developed tools and tactics for helping parties work through a conflict constructively. Interestingly, these tools work as effectively in a dispute between neighbors as they do in disputes between nations. Although the following comments come largely from my own observations and experience, they are consistent with the best and most advanced research available.

What, Specifically, Is Conflict?

We have been created as communal creatures, and so we experience varying levels of interdependence in our lives. Membership in the community gives us a sense of belonging and purpose; an innate sense of value is placed on our feeling good about belonging. On good days we celebrate that as community. Membership in a community also helps us work together to achieve larger and more complex goals than we could achieve alone. We do this by sharing resources and dividing up work.

Within this interdependence, we navigate our way around and through conflicts all day long. Rules, norms of behavior, both formal and informal, help us avoid having to negotiate with others to get through simple common transactions, such as deciding who goes first at a traffic signal. Polite behavior and a good deal of turning the other cheek help keep our interpersonal conflict to a minimum. Inevitably, though, breakdowns in communication occur and conflicts arise.

The Latin word for conflict literally means, “to strike.”¹ When we are struck, a force hits us. Thus, conflict can be defined generally as a situation or issue that forcefully encounters us, and we become engaged in it. The process of engagement may be gradual or sudden.

Conflict is not all bad. It can tell us what is important to us; it tells us what we value, what we need, what we desire to have happening around us (sometimes we do not even know a thing was important to us until we find ourselves fighting for it). Conflict can be constructive in some ways, if managed skillfully, but all too often, we find that it devolves into something destructive. Some people, having been hurt, become conflict avoidant because it is just too scary for them to engage with another with whom they disagree. Unfortunately, ignoring conflict tends to cause it to worsen, not get better.

Conflict, though fluid, can be described as having levels of intensity, and there are many ways of categorizing them. The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary² lists three keywords in the definition of conflict that give us insight into its levels of intensity:

- *To contend*: This might be the gentlest level of conflict. When we contend over something, we can usually work through our differences without too much trouble. We contend with things throughout our day with minimal investment or discomfort.
- *To clash*: Here we have greater intensity; more is at stake, and so we are willing to be more aggressive about getting what we want. This level requires more of our energy and creativity to resolve. When we clash with someone, we experience greater distress.
- *To fight*: Now we find ourselves involved in verbal combat, the degree of intensity is escalating, spiraling upward with each exchange. We might be wondering how far this go will: will someone back down or give up? Will someone blow up, causing things to get out of control even nasty? At this level, the relatively smooth flow of life is disrupted, and we experience real angst and the associated emotional and physical symptoms. At this level, adrenaline plays a key role in our responses, and the fight or flight response kicks in.

To these three key words, I would add *war*. War is the ultimate form of conflict. War is the use of violent force to compel another to do our bidding or be destroyed in the process. War is the essential breakdown in the human ability to solve problems. One might say, “Just kill them; problem solved!”

Therefore, conflict has various levels of intensity, and we respond to each other with various degrees of intensity as well. Each level of conflict uses corresponding amounts of resources, time, and energy (both physical and emotional) and tests our ability to interact with others. Conflict can also test our ability to use power and leadership

appropriately. It causes us to examine our principles and beliefs, to ask what it is we need and how far we are willing to go to get it. When parties are willing to invest far more resources to “win” than the benefit they would accrue from any potential agreement, sociologists say that they are “entrapped.”³ In this case, having conflict in their lives might be the real need being served rather than the content of the particular dispute.

The level of the conflict will be determined by the orientation of the parties, the degree of polarization with which the issues are framed, and the kinds of tactics the parties are willing and allowed to employ. Let us consider each of these three determinants in turn.

1. The Orientation of the Parties

We live in a competitive society. Resources are limited and we must compete for them with others. This can be a good thing, insofar as it helps us clarify what we need and why we should get it. Further, competition can motivate us to get things done. Competition also causes us to refine our physical and mental skills so that we can accomplish our objectives. We compete for the time and attention of those important to us. We compete for money to accomplish the material goals we desire. We compete for stimulation, recreation, and entertainment when we play games.

Likewise, we compete to be heard; that is, we compete in the realm of ideas. Competition in the realm of ideas forces us to refine our ability to communicate more effectively with others, to influence others, and to persuade them to see things our way. Only then can we count on them to give us their support.

“Friendly” competition has its own unique tone and ground rules. In friendly competition between groups there is a willingness to include everyone. Although such competition may have a winner, the tone is collaborative, and we enjoy playing and being with one another in a friendly, yet challenging way. When we compete for resources within a family or a church, there is an assumption that fairness and the benefit of all will constrain what any one party will get. We don’t win at the other’s expense, or in a way that harms or injures the people close to us. In such situations, we limit how much we ask for or expect to get. This is often called asking for a reasonable amount. We also limit how far we will go to get it; this is called playing fairly.

To draw an analogy, when we engage conflict in this same “friendly” way, we are committed to a resolution that is good for everybody. This approach is sometimes called looking for a win/win situation. It is part attitude, part commitment to the welfare of the other party, and part agreement not to use tactics that are aggressively one-sided. In our society, however, most competition has quite a different tone and is based on the win/lose model. With win/lose competition comes aggression, especially when losing costs you dearly. Uncontrolled aggression can easily turn into hostility,

which in turn carries an undertone of impending violence. We see aggression expressed as a key element of competition in business and politics as well as throughout our culture.

The market economy currently provides the dominant rubric for defining American culture. It is a highly competitive win/lose environment. In this model of social interaction you do not compete with a friend, or an opponent, you have an adversary, even an enemy. The underlying mantra driving activity in the market is, "I will get what is mine!"

Moreover, the impact on our culture of books such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has been tremendous, especially in business. The new business paradigm, one of aggressive competition and business as war, has exposed millions to elements of tactical thinking. Yet, on balance, very little ethical critique has accompanied this shift. Ethical attitudes and the actions that follow from them are often seen as mutually exclusive to effective use of tactical advantage. In many cases, "playing nice" or "playing fair" are seen as weaknesses, and hindrances to success in modern business competition. Business is war. Accordingly, business planning now takes place in the war room, and negotiation and problem solving between parties are seen as elements of warfare. In such situations the one who shouts loudest and longest, the one who plays the hardest, wins.

In the realm of ideas, such combat has created a significant shift in the way we communicate with one another. As advertisers compete for our dollars and product loyalty, we are barraged with offers for better services. Rarely, however, are we given sufficient information to evaluate those offers objectively. Marketing has always involved hyperbole and spin as contrasted with detached objective analysis. This activity can be as seemingly benign as sharing only the positive aspects of a product while withholding information about a product's limitations or flaws. It can be as malignant as the use of unreasonable exaggeration, partial truth, or outright deception. In the end, however, we become accustomed to information presented in a skewed fashion, and we learn to do it ourselves in order to be "successful."

Arguing forcefully for what you believe, that is, trying to persuade others to adopt your point of view, is not destructive in and of itself. However, it can become so when conveying the quality and benefit of one's ideas is abandoned in favor of a win/lose mentality. When dialogue turns into debate, and the genuine exchange of information stops, we are no longer describing, discussing, or evaluating the best, most helpful ideals so that we can put them into practice. Rather, we are engaging in a one-sided argument in an attempt to press a specific idea. Rather than discussing the benefits of various positions we are experiencing a form of verbal combat. In such cases, critique gives way to counter assertion in an attempt to tear the other position down. It becomes almost impossible for us to reflect on the ways a position might be helpful,

may legitimately challenge what we believe, or may require us to alter a position we have become heavily invested in defending.

Much of the discussion we encounter on television and in other public discourse is illustrative of such verbal battle. We encounter problems when we import this behavior into our personal lives and use such tactics with people we must live, work and worship with. Such behavior also has serious implications during a conflict. If the attitude of one party is to win at any cost, or win at the other party's expense, that party may present a highly biased, one-sided explanation of the conflict. In return, the other party will usually become defensive, and may engage in verbal combat over the information presented. Often a person will express frustration with this tactic by saying that the whole picture, i.e., "the truth," is not being presented. If exchanges like this are allowed to continue, trust between the parties will erode.

If you are working with people in a conflict, allow both parties to tell their versions of events without interruptions. When they are finished, try to reconcile only those items that prevent them from moving forward. Remind them that we all describe our experiences of events differently.

The ability to steer parties away from hostility and defensiveness is key to progressing toward conflict resolution. The rebuilding of trust is also vital if progress is going to be made. Thus creating a shift from an attitude of win/lose to win/win, from competition to collaboration, is the first and most necessary step in the process of resolving conflict. A good way to facilitate that shift is to point out the inevitable damage that will occur to all parties if the behavior continues. I tend to think that people seek help with conflict because they recognize, on some level, that they are trapped in a destructive process and want to get out of it. That motive provides powerful advantage in setting both a constructive tone and effective ground rules for moving forward.

2. The Degree of Polarization with which the Issues Are Framed

You may have noticed that, increasingly, the media frame things in polarized terms, especially when covering politics. When presenting a topic, we are given representatives from the extremes to present their points of view. This presentation style adds to the perceived level of conflict and in turn heightens our sense that something is happening, that this is "news." In fact, the debate may have been going on over decades with little change. What we see are people at each other's throats, rather than people who are seeking agreement and are willing to talk constructively together. I have the impression from the media that in politics agreement is a near impossibility. Clarity of position, as contrasted with polarization of positions, is helpful when we must cast a vote for or against a proposition. Voting by nature is a competitive, win/lose process. The clearer the positions, and the more they are different, the easier it is for us to know what we are voting for, and against.

In a conflict, however, when issues for discussion are consistently framed as opposites (opposed to each other), it is difficult to move parties together without all parties feeling that they are compromising excessively. Few positions *need* to be framed as mutually exclusive. If possible, state the conflict as a problem to be solved, rather than positions that are opposed to each other. We can work together to solve problems more easily than we can compromise our views. This is called reframing. A frame, intellectually as in art, constrains the point of view in which things are seen. Polarization, as a type of frame, has a great deal of impact on our approach to an issue, what kind of discussion will ensue, and the type of outcomes that are possible.

You will encounter people who simply will not budge. This is particularly true in situations where the issue is abstract, represents an expression of their values, and is tied to their sense of self. I often wonder whether such behavior isn't mostly defensive, to avoid the possibility of change. For such people looking at things in another way is too scary; it is almost as if even considering a change is a betrayal of themselves or God. It is rare for them to engage in a true dialogue. Here we encounter the power of repetition to engrain positions in people's minds, to make it almost impossible for them to change their opinions. If the parties remain stuck in their original language, people can still agree to disagree on important issues and choose not offend or hurt one another. Just because we do not agree, even on important things, does not mean we are entitled to treat each other with disrespect. In a conflict, I would bring the discussion down to the practical by asking, "How are we going to behave so this conflict isn't erupting into our daily interactions?" Often I suggest the parties make discussion of the topic out of bounds.

3. The Kinds of Tactics the Parties Employ

What causes conflicts to escalate? Aside from environmental/situational elements that are beyond our control, several behavioral factors come into play. Below I list some of the behaviors and tactics that contribute to escalation. It might seem a matter of common sense not to behave in any of these ways, but it is amazing how often you will find them arising in daily discourse.

- Personalizing the conflict, making it about the person rather than the issues or the behavior of the person. This tactic includes character assassination, labeling, mocking the person and attacking his or her credibility per se rather than the credibility of the other position and information. In politics, this is called the smear campaign, or mudslinging.
- Overmatching in a verbal exchange, as opposed to a reciprocal response. In this situation, our response is more aggressive, or out of proportion to the tone and content of what the other party is communicating. It can signal a desire or willingness on our part to fight.
- Exaggerating the consequences of adopting the other party's position. Saying something like, "If you do that the whole world will fall apart."

- Making cutting remarks, using sarcasm, put downs, name calling, trying to make the other party look silly.
- Using a condescending or patronizing tone.
- Bullying or threatening.
- Interrupting people while they are talking. This is a sign of disrespect and a signal that you are not listening to what they other party is trying to communicate.
- Characterizing the other's position in a derisive way. This shows disrespect for the person's integrity; it is also the first step from persuasion to propaganda.
- Creating linkages between positions that are not necessarily linked, especially when the linked item has negative connotations, such as, "Everyone who believes x also believes y." This tactic is a form of guilt by association, either with an idea or with other people. This is a form of stereotyping and prejudging that signals to the other party that you have made up your mind and are not really listening to what they have to say.

Useful Questions To Ask When Approaching a Conflict

1. Who are the parties, the people with an interest, the ones who have a stake, or are involved? The primary parties are the ones driving the conflict. They are the ones who are most invested in it. Others may be on the periphery, and still others may have been drawn in against their will.
2. Where is the locus of the conflict? Here are some examples:
 - Within an individual being played out with another or a group
 - Between individuals
 - Between an individual and a group
 - Between individuals in different groups but not necessarily between the groups themselves
 - Within a group
 - Between groups

Remember, the larger the group the more formal the process of discussion becomes. Note the differences, for example, in the formality of meetings from consistory, to classis to the general assembly. Also note that there are always discussions in the meeting, in public, on the record, and those that take place outside the meeting in private: e.g., in the parking lot or parlor on the phone or via email. Interestingly enough, instant text messaging now allows for private conversation to take place discreetly in the public meeting!

3. What is the dispute about, what issues are in play, what is this really about?
Examples:

- Who should lead, or how power should be shared or used

- Priorities, how resources should be allocated, including money and how a pastor's time and attention should be used
- How to respond to a situation or issue
- How planning should be done
- Trust, especially a situation when people do not like each other very much.

4. Where does the conflict come from? Is there anything of significance that helps explain why the problem is coming up now?

5. What personality types are involved and how might each approach the conflict? What was their relationship like prior to the conflict?

6. How are the issues framed? How could they be reframed?

7. Have all the issues been identified? Can they be separated and organized so that they can be engaged one at a time? Do any need to be clarified? Are all the issues out in the open? Are there any hidden agendas or unacknowledged issues? Remember: sometimes the presenting issue is not the core issue.

What Is Going on Here? Four Levels

I often describe these levels of behavior as a train. The process is like the train on the tracks. It is laid out and it moves forward. It is how we get from point to point. The content is what is in the boxcars of the train. It is the topic matter, what we are dealing with. The interpersonal level can address either process or content. We might have feelings about train rides, we might have feelings about riding the train with others, we may not trust the conductor or engineer (which would indicate loss of neutrality on the part of the third party). All of those feelings are examples relating to the process. We might be very uncomfortable with how we feel about the cargo. It could be inert or explosive, and we might have strong feelings about the baggage other people put on the train. Those are interpersonal issues having to do with the content. All are at play throughout a conflict. If, however, the process issues can be separated and agreed upon at the beginning, the conflict will be easier to resolve. There is no reason to wait until a conflict heats up to address how it will be dealt with in an organization. How we interact with each other in times of stress is always better addressed sooner rather than later, in the midst of difficult discussions.

A process for conflict resolution can be designed by a third party and imposed or suggested to those involved. Alternately, the parties themselves can design it. One might introduce the first option by saying, "In such situations, I find it helpful to proceed in this way. . ." or, "This is what I propose we do." The second option could be raised by asking, "How do you want to proceed?" or "How do you want to handle

this?" Often parties are looking for guidance on good, fair process. If they are using a process that is inherently unfair, it is appropriate to intervene.

Fair Process Questions to Ask, and Elements to Include

Ask if everyone will be treated fairly by this process. Whom does the process favor? Does anyone have an advantage because of the rules? If anyone is being excluded or needs to be asked to join the process, you must work to ensure fairness.

When making choices about the scope of a discussion, be aware of what content you are excluding and why. Share that information with the parties/group.

Ensure that the process is free from manipulation by any of the parties. No one party should be allowed to influence the process unduly or to manipulate the rules in such a way that others are silenced.

Allow people to voice objections and to make suggestions in forming the process.

Be sensitive to power imbalances and the different ways people are likely to participate in the process. Ensure that everyone will have the right to be heard, not just the most assertive persons in the group.

All the relevant information should be presented in as unbiased a way as possible. No one should be allowed to hold pertinent information back. In addition, participants should be allowed to ask questions.

Agree to keep the discussion respectful and civil, and enforce the ground rules.

Tactics to Be Used in Engaging a Conflict Constructively

Effective communication is of the utmost importance in conflict resolution. If you are formulating your next comment while the other person is talking, you are probably not listening for more than a flaw in the argument. Inasmuch as impromptu communication is imperfect and positions will often be exaggerated in an attempt to persuade, you will find flaws to attack, but you will miss the larger point of what the other is trying to communicate. In addition, you may forget that by talking with you at all the other person is trying to connect with you. This pattern of poor listening is sometimes called "talking past one another." Try to stop your inner voice, listen, take notes if necessary, do not interrupt, and think before you speak. Use a time of silent prayer to gather your thoughts and listen for God's still small voice behind the din of the arguments. If you cannot do that, suggest a cooling off period, or get the help of a neutral third party to guide you in talking together.

Remember to have respect for each other. It is easy to stop respecting a person if you do not agree with what he or she is saying or trying to accomplish. Often respect has already been eroded on the path to conflict. If you offer the other party a new helping of “benefit of the doubt,” respect may take hold again. If it does not, you have lost nothing and have been gracious, more credit to you.

Desire to achieve an agreement acceptable to all or most, and to make necessary efforts and compromises to reach that agreement. This is a choice you make, a stance from which all actions will follow. We must choose to seek reconciliation rather than nursing anger.

Identify common ground and interests. Often, remembering what we have in common, even if it is primarily the stress of the current situation, is enough to create a bridge between us.

Understand the other parties’ points of view, and if possible why they feel strongly about this situation. Ask what is at stake for them, and then ask yourself: If this were at stake for me, how would I react?

Check out assumptions, especially about the others’ motives. We tend to assume that people mean to hurt us, especially in a conflict. Be open to the possibility that we sometimes hurt one another without intending to do so. Try to make a habit of reading people’s actions in their best light, rather than in their worst. We often do not know people’s motives for things unless we check with them.

Share information, listen responsibly, ask open-ended questions, and engage in effective problem solving. This includes getting information you need and may not have on hand.

Be creative; try different ways of coming up with options. Brainstorming is a commonly used process in which people generate ideas (no matter how silly they may sound) for several minutes, then evaluate them for practicality. Try with all your heart not to become rigid about the way your goals must be achieved.

Be willing to compromise or give something up as an act of good faith. Even a small shift in attitude and tone can have a dramatic effect on others. Do not underestimate a small act of conciliation or even a conciliatory comment. Often these small moments can mean the difference between reaching an impasse and moving forward.

Seek a balanced position. As the song goes, “We can’t always get what we want, but if we try sometimes we can get what we need.” Choosing to seek a peaceful coexistence means compromise and accommodation. It means giving up our “me, me, me,” greedy urges. It requires an openness to saying “yes, I can give you that.” I tell parties at a

mediation, “You will not walk out of here with everything you want, but if we succeed you will all be able to live with what you agree on, and you will know that every option has been explored to meet as many of your needs as possible.”

Minimize negatives. If getting what you want causes a problem for someone else, be ready to do what you can to ameliorate that impact. There may be a way to minimize harm or have the other’s needs met in a different way.

Allow one another to save face, or at least agree to disagree or set the issue aside.

Hold talks on neutral ground, and/or invite a neutral third party to facilitate the discussion.

Advice for Those Acting as Third Parties, or Mediating Influences in Conflict

As a third party you can call people on their behavior. By that I mean describe and educate them about what is in bounds and out of bounds. This can be a part of the process that includes learning more effective behavior. Be ready to suggest an appropriate way for them to express themselves, and be judicious. People resent being corrected.

Allow people to vent their feelings. Cutting them off just traps all that frustration inside, and it will probably come out later, at the worst possible moment. In addition you risk sending the signal that you do not take their feelings seriously. This will lead to their being frustrated with you, neutralizing to some extent how much you are able to help. You must have their trust to be effective, and this means listening to the intensity of their feelings. Venting can also give you clues as to what is going on under the surface of the dispute.

Set the tone and ground rules for communication and call unhelpful behavior out of bounds. You are the referee, but all parties must make every effort to abide by the rules. You cannot take responsibility for their behavior.

When things get heated, be ready to say, “Stop!” Then redirect the conversation in a constructive way. Declaring an impasse is also an option. An impasse does not mean that there is no solution to the problem; it means that at the moment these parties are not able to find a solution. Declaring an impasse sometimes has the benefit of causing the parties to reinvest in the process and try harder to succeed.

Beware of the following types:

- Those who are looking for a fight. They will almost always behave in such a way as to get one.
- Those who have a chip on their shoulder, and those who are already angry from dealing with other disputes. They will happily transfer that anger onto you and the present situation.

- Those who are offended if you ask questions. I find this especially true of some professionals who are used to holding power. They sometimes come to feel they are above explaining themselves or the reasons for their actions.
- Those who have no intention of seeking a resolution. They will simply rebuff you or stonewall, repeating the same thing again and again. Such people are not honestly engaged in the process, but may wish to appear to be.
- Those who are emotionally imbalanced. If mental or emotional illness is involved, no amount of reason will prevail. It is best to try to be gracious with such people but to minimize the amount of turmoil they can cause in a group.

Conclusion

I have listed many elements that determine whether a conflict will be engaged constructively or destructively. In conclusion, let me give a brief summary of collaborative versus competitive behaviors and of how one set leads to reconciliation and the other to estrangement.

<u>Collaborative Behavior</u>	<u>Competitive Behavior</u>
Supportive and caring attitude and behavior toward others	Unsupportive, potentially hostile attitude behavior toward others
Even-tempered and empathetic responses	Readiness to respond in an aggressive manner
Sharing responsibility for the problem and solution	Denial of responsibility for the problem and solution
Scrupulously fair process	Willingness to exploit any advantage
Fair play, no striking back	Willingness to use reprisals, to hurt, to punish
Readiness to explore possibilities and offer options good for all parties	Readiness to make demands, utter threats, and seek victory for one's position
Remaining flexible	Remaining stuck
"We are all in this together; we will stay with it until we find a win/win."	"There are only good guys, us, and bad guys, them. We <i>will</i> win, so they <i>must</i> lose!"

The world around us is teaching us to be more and more competitive in our daily interactions and more and more aggressive in the way we engage conflict. Without

reflecting on this trend and putting alternative conflict resolution skills into practice we could easily be engulfed by such ideas. They are striking our culture with significant force. In the end, the choice of how we respond is ours.

ENDNOTES

¹ NSOED: *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* on CD-Rom. Oxford University Press, 1996.

² Ibid.

³ Donelson R. Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 2nd ed. (California: Brooks/Cole 1990), 367.