Conflict Management:
Resolving Conflict and the Need to Confront

Steven Eliason

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Confronting – Cross-cultural Differences

People in the Western nations often use confrontation as the major technique to assert themselves as well as to resolve conflict. On the other hand, I have noticed that in Asia and even among Asians in the United States, confrontation is only done if all else fails. In fact, many may not ever confront others with their own points of view.

Resolving Conflict versus Need to Confront

Apart from the above, there is also a significant difference between resolving conflict and the need to confront. Conflict resolution is needed to deal with disagreement on issues.

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Differences turn into conflict when involved parties feel threatened by the loss of something valuable. Confrontation is only needed when one is clearly sinning or behaving in a way that offends or hurts another – but even that should be prefaced by some careful communication. The lessons that we work so hard on perfecting in the cross-cultural settings can also be applied in non-cross-cultural ways with family, co-workers and teammates.

My Course on Teams

Two expressions from a course I teach on Teams apply when managing conflict: "If we always agree, one of us is unnecessary" and, "If we always disagree, both of us are unnecessary." Because it is actually in the healthy resolution of conflict that progress is made, it shouldn't be feared or avoided.

The value imparted in the course as described above may be acceptable to a Western audience. I need to check whether such views will hold good in other cultures.

At the same time, we also need to remember that international diplomacy will force all nations to develop such attitudes in their effort to resolve conflicts across nations.

Seven Core Beliefs

Ken Williams of International Training Partners, a ministry which provides biblical training for Christians serving across cultures has designed a workshop with the title "Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills." It is a workshop designed to help individuals deal with several aspects of interpersonal relationships, one of which includes conflict management. Seven core beliefs were listed, most of which are also mentioned in other readings on the subject. I give below these seven statements and use them as an outline for my reflection on the subject in this article.

Conflict Is Normal in Close Relationships

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First, "Conflict is normal in close relationships." Differences are necessary for synergy. Synergy is the benefit that healthy working relationships create. Some fear conflict, but the only real danger is the manner which we handle them. Conflicts do not have to be destructive, and can actually draw people together. But leaders must understand that THEY are fundamentally responsible to see that conflict is handled properly. We must not pull the "God's chosen authority" trump card whenever there's a conflict. You will be missing the opportunity God is giving you be a better team and a better leader. This doesn't mean that conflict should be common, but that it does happen, and shouldn't be viewed as a sign of dysfunction or feared as a sign of a broken relationship.

Healthy Relationships can't be Built on Compromise – Collaboration Is the Key

Second, "Healthy relationships can't be built on a 50-50, absolute compromise philosophy."

This is really just organized passivity. It pathetically tolerates disagreement and doesn't bring resolution to the conflict. 50-50 might work on some issues (like splitting a pizza), but it can't be standard operating procedure for us. There is no guarantee that the compromises worked out today will hold good for tomorrow and beyond. New interests and situations and new players on the field bring more potential for conflict and we may never be able to devise compromise all the time.

Collaboration is the ideal solution when facing conflict and relates to the nature and quality with which people work together. It goes beyond cooperation, which is simply a willingness to combine effort for a collective result. Collaboration involves submission, a willingness to learn as well as to give, a willingness to trust one another, to grant permission to the other and receive permission from the other in order to achieve what would otherwise be individually unachievable. A remedy to disagreement will likely mean at least a partial surrender of your own preference for the benefit of the group. Collaboration is NOT passive /aggressive compromise.

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A Commitment to Honesty

Third, "A commitment to honesty is essential." This means openness to the point of personal vulnerability at times. We must not be dishonest, but in our honesty we mustn't be rude either, because this further complicates the situation and communication. Lovingly and clearly, to the best of your ability, express yourself. Allow the other to ask clarifying questions so the points of contention can be identified. The other side of honesty is a willingness to listen to others when we disagree or are personally challenged. To resolve conflict, it is crucial to be committed to being guileless without being rude or insensitive. Trust cannot be built or rebuilt without it.

High Stress Lowers Our Tolerance for Conflict

Fourth, "High stress lowers our tolerance for conflict." This is wonderfully expressed by the saying, "It was the straw that broke the camel's back." Be aware of stress and its effects, recognizing the weakness that one or both parties might be operating under. Don't attempt to deal with major conflicts while in stress overload; sometimes retreating is good strategy, and this is not the same as passivity. "Retreat", as a military term, doesn't admit defeat, but honestly assesses the situation and realizes that a temporary loss of territory may be necessary to accomplish the ultimate victory. I think Satan does this in each of our lives as a form of deception. Tension reduces flexibility, and resolving conflict demands flexibility.

Spiritual Resources Are Vital

Fifth, "Spiritual resources are vital." Our conflicts generally take place in the realm of the mind, the way we think about something. In fact, I'd say be wary of turning it into a spiritual issue until the truth is known about the participants and the circumstances related to the conflict. Immediately turning it into spiritual warfare is a cop out if we haven't used our minds to address the truth factor. So we need to ask ourselves the question, "Could we agree on someone we both trust to provide counsel?" Alternative perspectives can bring much needed clarity, and keeps the issue the issue, not the people involved.

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But the Spirit is never disengaged, so another question might need to be asked: "Could there be something I need to repent of?" We must assess our behavior to be sure we're not hindering the Spirit. We, ourselves, can often be the biggest barrier to resolution because we're not imitating Jesus. Don't jump into spiritual warfare until you've addressed the first order of battle, which is the war within.

Although use of the word Spiritual may not be acceptable to atheists and agnostics, they also will be able to use terms such as internal scrutiny, mind-deliberation, seeking truth, etc.

Managing Methods Vary with Cultures

Sixth, "Managing methods vary with cultures." Most cultures use mediators for issues that Westerners would normally deal with themselves. Mediation may be misused. Yet mediation at various levels, village, social group, etc. has been the preferred mode of dealing with disputes for many cultures. On the other hand, confronting based on some interpretation of Matthew 18:15-17 is widely encouraged and cultivated in the Western nations: "15 If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

Sadly, Westerners often pride themselves in more completely following the Matthew 18 passage concerning reconciliation, but this is really not the point of this section. If the conflict is with someone of another culture, we must learn how conflicts are normally handled in their culture. This is a good lesson to ask about right away in your language and cultural studies, before you have to practice it!

If the conflict is with a compatriot, beware of assumptions. It's easy to forget what cultural hat you're wearing, and you may overdo it and come across like an especially annoying American (or an especially confusing one if you're acting like a national). Our methods may

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need to be adjusted to account for the degree of bonding one has with the host culture. Even within the same culture, conflicts can be dealt with in completely different ways by individual families so awareness of these differences should be noted and included in the conflict resolution process.

Disagreements Can Be an Opportunity to Build One Another Up!

Finally, the seventh statement related to conflict resolution is "Disagreements can be an opportunity to build one another up." Draw attention to that which you agree on, because chances are there are more of those anyway. Seek for the greater issues that may exist beyond the specific disagreement. Those are the ones to really watch for, because those are the ones that break up relationships.

Many Ways to Resolve Conflicts!

There are many ways to resolve conflicts. But we must understand that conflicts may have many underlying factors such as internal psychological factors, religious beliefs, sectarian misunderstanding, denominational rivalry, economic interests, social status including caste divisions imposed at birth, regional rivalries, etc. Modern life is full of conflicts, both inherited and newly created. Conflict creates stress. Conflict generates anger. Conflict may lead to killing and suicides, etc. Resolution and management of conflict must become our priority in every walk of life.

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