

Relationships

Using Conflict to Strengthen Working Relationships

by Bill Johnson

That title sounds like an oxymoron. Conflict is what strains, even destroys, some working relationships, doesn't it? That is the perception of many folks and so they work to avoid conflict or deal with it in indirect ways. I would like to offer some suggestions about conflict that may be helpful in improving your working relationships, maybe even your personal relationships. But in order to make my point I will ask you to suspend your views about conflict, at least until you finish reading this.

Whenever two (or more) persons interact with each other, there is the possibility of conflict. Conflict, as I define it, occurs when there are two ideas, values, styles, or approaches competing. And that happens all the time. Conflict seems to be a very human activity about as common as eating and sleeping. Yet most of us are concerned, if not troubled, by the presence of conflict in any of our relationships. Conflict is viewed as something to be minimized or avoided altogether. Many of us view conflict as a sign of something wrong, as a failure on someone's part.

Another way of understanding conflict, and one that I would like to recommend, is that conflict is inevitable between persons, and rather than being a problem that we must fix, it is a healthy, constructive aspect of human relationships. If there is a problem associated with conflict, it is not the clash of ideas or styles, but it is the way in which we try to deal with that clash.

Think about a situation in which there were no conflict, where everyone

agreed about everything, approached every decision in exactly the same way. Rather than being idyllic, that picture conjures up some boring, if not horrifying images. Think of the loss of creativity and innovation that would result if there were no conflict. Think of the loss of variety and diversity which we would suffer if there were no conflict. Constructively utilized, conflict can be the source of creative breakthroughs, of enriched life experiences, and even morale-boosting encounters with others.

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Perhaps we need to consider letting go of, or at least rethinking some of the following attitudes toward conflict:

1. Conflict is a sign of personal failure.

Many of us believe that rational, mature adults don't have conflict with others, that if we are completely objective about issues and interactions that all conflict can be avoided. The true rational view is that human beings are not completely objective, and even if they were, there are plenty of situations where two views or approaches both make sense. Rational, mature adults can and do have legitimate differences with no failure involved.

2. There is a solution to every problem.

Many of us believe that there is always a right way or a best way to resolve any dispute or to settle any difference. So when conflict occurs it can be viewed as the failure to work hard enough to find the right answer. For many situations there are only different answers offered by different people with different perspectives. Dealing with those differences allows those perspectives to be fully explored and examined, which can, in turn, lead to new discoveries and better solutions. Or, in some cases, such an exploration may result in no resolution, simply agreeing to disagree. This outcome can be a healthy and functional position from which to operate a relationship without forcing an artificial resolution, which may be satisfying to no one.

3. Conflict will disappear if it is ignored.

This belief is insidious in that it forces the suppression of insight and inspiration in many of us, replacing those gifts with a superficial harmony – having the surface appear to be smooth and unruffled, while underneath the waters may be churning. This pretended harmony can't last forever. Conflicts that are not dealt with do not go away; instead they bubble and boil until they express themselves in surprising and inappropriate places and times.

Changing these three attitudes can create the opportunity to understand how to use conflict in creative and constructive ways to achieve new learning, to motivate progress or change and to

strengthen a relationship by encountering another person at a deeper, more intimate level.

The first step in using conflict constructively involves understanding the source of a particular conflict. What two ideas or approaches or values are really competing. Some of the most unproductive and confusing conflict is the result of two persons not understanding what the conflict is about. To get clear about the source, you must ask yourself what your own view is. What is your approach or idea? What value are you clinging to in this difference of opinion with someone else? You must be able to share that view with the other person or persons in such a way that they have the possibility of really understanding your view. You cannot assume that they understand what you think or feel deeply just because it is so clear to you. Next, you must work equally hard to understand the other's view. This means more than just hearing once, but really listening to it, taking it seriously, considering it as legitimate and full of possibilities.

Often when care is taken to really understand the source of the conflict, the parties discover that their ideas are not competing at all, that they were talking about different things altogether, or that they had been guilty of assuming the other's view. Many times this attempt to really understand the source of the conflict does uncover real differences, not just assumed ones. And this discovery sets the stage for the potential benefits of utilizing conflict. Real differences can lead to new learning, better solutions, and enriched understandings. None of those benefits can be realized if the time and care has not been taken to discover what the differences really are and to create a context in which the conflict can be dealt with.

You are ready for step two which is to deal with the conflict in some constructive manner in order to move to a different level of understanding and interaction. There are different methods for using conflict and each of these methods is appropriate to certain situations. One approach is to **harmonize** the conflict by redefining the issues so that the differences dissolve or become unimportant. This method is often in use when, as a result of understanding your point of view fully, I see that my view can accommodate yours, that the differences are not as great as they first appeared. Or I may discover that while our differences are real, your position is strongly and passionately felt and mine is not. I may decide that my working relationship with you is much more important than this particular difference in

viewpoint. And so I accommodate to your approach. In making this accommodation I am harmonizing the conflict between us. This is not the same as avoiding or suppressing the conflict. In harmonizing the conflict, the issues between us are clear, and I choose to focus on the similarities between our positions, or I choose to adopt your position. Such a conscious choice is much different from pretending to agree. When I harmonize with you over some particular difference, the difference dissolves.

A second method is to **negotiate** the differences between us in order to discover some compromise position with which both parties can live. In this approach clarity about the differences is very important. The goal of this method is to produce a specific agreement or understanding, a contract of sorts, which will govern the way we deal with this particular issue going forward. I get some of what I want or value and so do you. Sometimes these compromises while functional are not particularly satisfying, but other times the compromise actually turns out to be a suitable approach which has drawn on the strength of both points of view.

The third approach is to **engage** the conflict. This method involves fully accepting the conflict and using the differences as an opportunity to forge something new. In this method I want to persuade you to change your mind, to see things as I do, and you want to do the same. The resolution of engagement often occurs in that way - that one is genuinely persuaded to the other's view. But a third possibility also occurs, which is to breakthrough to a new position, not a compromise, but a genuine new way of understanding or doing, different from either of our positions at the beginning of the conflict. This engagement approach is controversial for many. They associate it with everything that can be negative about conflict. The problem may lie more with the unskilled and ineffective attempt to engage conflict than with the engagement method itself. The basis of the effective use of this approach is to respect the other person, treat his/her position as legitimate, keep the discussion focused on the issue, and emphasize listening. Generally, when conflict goes awry, it is because these simple principles have not been observed.

Let's consider a situation in which many church musicians may find themselves and see how these thoughts about conflict can be put

Relationships

into practice. You are a trained musician; you know good music and feel that you exercise good judgment in selecting the music for your choir to sing and for the hymns in worship. The conflict comes in the form of a pastor or choir members or members of the congregation who want you to sing or play their favorite hymns or perhaps do some of the new contemporary music that has become so popular. You resist these requests because you feel that much of this music is not well-written and not theologically sound. How can you use this conflict situation positively?

The temptation is to avoid the conflict by periodically giving in to these persons who are making your life complicated. So, you schedule their favorite hymn or anthem. You try one of the contemporary pieces, but your heart is not in it. Maybe they will just go away. Sometimes they do go away, but the church and your work with the church's music program is the poorer for it.

To start with let's look at the source of this conflict. It may be exactly what it appears to be, namely they want a different selection of music than you do. But the source may be something else. It may be that they want to have input into the selection process, that they want to be included. And for you it is possible that the source is not the content of the music but a perceived challenge to your authority as director of music. If you attempt to deal with this conflict only at the content level, you may miss the real point.

Once you are clear what the conflict is really about, what are some ways to deal with it constructively? If you **harmonize** this conflict, you might begin to see that even though this music is not your favorite it does speak to certain people. Your willingness to broaden your selections can send a positive message to those who have made these requests. If you talk to them about why you choose what you choose and what you like about the music they have requested, you not only can strengthen the relationship with them, but you may be able to open them to a

greater appreciation for the music that you use on a regular basis.

The conflict could be **negotiated** by agreeing to sit down with the party or parties involved and come up with a process for the congregation to make recommendations for music to be used in worship. Perhaps you can create a small group to review plans for worship and have input concerning what music is appropriate to the theme and purpose of the various worship experiences in your church. And through this new structure you may gain greater support and understanding for what you are doing with music while those who want to broaden the selection process see some of their desires included in the planning.

Or let's pretend that this issue exists between you and the pastor. The pastor wants certain music in worship and you are not comfortable with those choices. Once again it is important to be clear about the source of the difference. Is it the music per se, is it who is in charge, or is it about a concern to have more participation in worship? You believe the issue for you is the content of the music and you decide to **engage** the conflict because it is a continuing problem in your working relationship with the pastor. Remember when you engage a conflict it is your intention to persuade the other person, in this case your pastor, to your point of view, but in order to engage constructively you must be willing to hear the other's view and treat it as seriously as you want him/her to treat your view.

The key to have successful, positive engagement is not being a great debater, but being a really good listener - listening to be sure that you have properly identified the real source of the conflict, listening to be sure that the other person has accurately understood what you're saying, and listening to truly hear and understand what their view is. If you work hard at listening and respecting the other person and his/her view, even if you do not agree with that view, you will emerge from the engagement feeling better about the issue, yourself and your relationship with the other person.

If you engage your pastor in this manner, you have the opportunity to gain

his/her understanding of the music you select. No one may have clearly explained the musical reason behind the choices. The pastor may become a bigger supporter of what you are doing now that he/she understands why you do what you do. You may discover that the pastor wants to do more contemporary music because of its apparent success in attracting persons who do not respond to more traditional worship forms, including some of your "good" music. The breakthrough from this conflict may come as you and the pastor talk about how to use music to appeal to visitors and newer members without abandoning your musical tastes. It is possible, of course, that you may continue to disagree on this subject, at least for now.

In each of these scenarios something positive has come from the utilization of the conflict. You may have increased understanding of your approach, you may have new supporters, you may have increased participation in the planning of music in worship, you may have contributed to enhancing new members' and visitors' experience in worship, you may have cleared the air and improved your working relationship with your pastor or key members of your choir. None of these outcomes is likely if you avoid or bury the conflict. Instead you feel frustrated by a nagging problem. Those who want changes feel ignored or estranged from you and/or the church. Another staff member feels there is an issue constantly in the middle of your working relationship which is unresolved.

Differences occur wherever human beings encounter each other. Those differences will not go away; our lives would be impoverished if they did. But if we can learn to use those differences, work with them, understand them, and move beyond them, we can reap great rewards for ourselves and for those around us.

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