

Embracing Healthy Conflict

Leadership Behavior: Leaders Make It Better

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Matthew 18:15-20

Most of us fear confrontation and choose to avoid conflict rather than embrace it. The consequences of unhealthy conflict are catastrophic; fractured relationships, dysfunction, unproductive teams, divided organizations. Fear of these things is why we often choose to avoid conflict rather than employ it. We are afraid of losing a relationship so we choose to accept the frustrating status quo rather than to take the risk of challenging it.

Here’s the deal. **If you care about the person, you confront the problem.** Learning to embrace moments of healthy conflict helps prevent major division.

It’s true in a marriage. Ignoring minor frustrations or excusing small offenses may keep a sense of peace for the moment, but those frustrations compound. They swell over time and eventually reach a tipping point. The inevitable blowup could have been avoided if the couple had chosen a minor, difficult conversation sooner.

Talk about small issues before they become big issues!

Embracing Healthy Conflict Means:

- **Embracing Truth**

As Christ followers, we are pursuers and proclaimers of truth. Truth by its nature is confrontational. It calls out sin. It confronts broken systems. It critiques performance. However, we must always keep in mind that the aim of truth is always to set people free. That means when we avoid conflict we withhold freedom.

Therefore, we must always seek to speak the truth in love.

- **Embracing Growth**

True growth is painful!

It's human nature to seek the path of least resistance. Unless pushed, we naturally choose comfort. It is not until the pain of remaining still becomes greater than the pain of moving forward that we get up.

This is why a coach has to encourage their players to push through pain to find the growth on the other side. Great leaders challenge those they lead.

Your team needs your feedback. They need to be challenged. Likewise you need to welcome feedback and be challenged as well. Without it we remain where we are.

- **Embracing Excellence**

We get what we inspect not what we expect. Excellence means giving our best. Embracing excellence on your team requires a willingness to call out lack of excellence when you see it.

If you have a volunteer who lacks good personal hygiene, a team member who comes across abrasive or a leader who consistently arrives late and is unprepared you may be tempted to excuse their error. After all they volunteer their time and confrontation may lead to them being upset and leaving.

However, ignoring errors is embracing mediocrity. The cost is that high capacity leaders will stop volunteering and new guests will move on.

Remember our leadership value, leaders make it better and leaders are better together. Be a faithful coach and have the conversation. If they listen, you've found a leader who is ready to excel. If they will not listen, you've weeded out a bigger problem.

- **Embracing Health**

When you're hurt or offended, don't delay conflict. Go to the person quickly. Have the hard conversation. When you set the tone for your team of embracing healthy conflict and requiring them to do the same, you create a culture where your team chooses the small pain in the moment rather than the catastrophic pain down the road.

Your decision to embrace conflict will change the entire trajectory of your staff and organization.

Make sure that when you confront, you confront with the right heart and words. This is not a time to allow your hurt or offense to speak, but in humility, care enough to confront and bring resolve to the situation.

The Matthew Model

Jesus gave a sound biblical model to follow when addressing conflict:

- 1) **Go With Humility**

Even if you believe your position is "in the right", healthy conflict is not about winning an argument. It is about restoring the relationship.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Philippians 2:3–4 (ESV)

2) **Speak With Grace**

Healthy conflict means having a conversation, not a lecture. The aim is understanding. Nearly all interpersonal conflicts are differences of opinion with nuances and experiences that influence our view point.

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Romans 12:16 (ESV)

Season your conversation with grace. Listen with the intent to understand.

3) **Follow The Steps**

Jesus said to first go alone, then with a brother, and then with the church.

- Leaders must first **attempt to resolve the conflict with an informal, personal, one-on-one conversation**. Go to the individual, alone and begin with this question, “Help me understand...” Then listen. Make sure you fully understand them before you share your perspective. Remember the aim is to leave the conversation with **clarity** about what happened and a **commitment** on how to move forward together.
- When the conflict cannot be resolved alone, it is time to **bring in a godly and wise third party**. Ask, “Will you agree to go with me to meet with...”. Take care in choosing that third party. A pastor or leader who is concerned about the growth and wellbeing of both you and the individual and will not take sides, but can remain neutral is ideal. Remember the aim of the process is restoring the relationship not repercussion.
- If and only when the first two attempts have not brought about a resolution, it’s time to **involve the leadership of the church**. Bringing the issue before our executive team of pastors and elders would be inline with bringing the issue before the church as Christ commanded in Matthew 18. Ask the pastor who oversees your area of ministry if the issue rises to this level and follow their guidance.

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Colossians 3:12-14

4) **Engage, Don’t Avoid**

Finally, remember that conflict doesn’t just “go away”. People being quiet about their disagreements is not a sign that a situation has been resolved. Take initiative and ensure that relationships are restored.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Ephesians 4:25-27

Questions:

1. Embracing conflict means embracing TRUTH, GROWTH, EXCELLENCE, and HEALTH. Which of these do need to embrace and focus on the most in your own life and area of leadership/ministry oversight?
2. Concerning the point on “Embracing Growth”, are you more inclined to give feedback than to receive feedback? If it is difficult to receive feedback, ask yourself why it is difficult. Remember, creating a healthy culture within your team is based on mutual respect, love and honor. It is because of this that we should give feedback as well as receive feedback. As leaders, we need to lead ourselves first and walk in humility.
3. Give a theoretical example of how walking through the Matthew 18 model might play out in your own leadership teams. Is the process clear? Are there any points of concern or confusion?
4. On a scale of 1-10, rate the overall health of yourself and your team when it comes to conflict. Why did you score the way you did? Which area(s) needs the most attention and improvement?