Resolving Conflict and Tension

Leadership roles and principles

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Perceptions about conflict:

- Almost always viewed as negative, a blemish on the expected tranquility of organizational life and relationships, a disruption of order and a negative experience.
- A battle between competing and incompatible interests.
- Often regarded as defining the entire relationship.
- Involves a struggle between absolutes—right and wrong, good and evil.
But conflict in an organization can be beneficial.

One of major reasons businesses fail or decline is that they cannot readily adapt to changing environments.
Benefits of conflict:

- Realization of alternative ways of thinking and behaving.
- Clarification and growth in a relationship.
- Increased confidence.
- Less anger and depression.
Benefits of conflict:—cont’d

- Greater respect from and for others.
- Greater self-respect.
- Improved team atmosphere.
- More collaboration, less competition.
- Reduction of fear.
Diversity—in perceptions, needs, values, power, desires, goals, opinions. In dealing with conflict the purpose should not be to remove the differences but to use them constructively.
Basic elements of conflict:—cont’d

- **Unaddressed needs**—one or both parties ignore other’s needs, obstruct the meeting of needs, or experience incompatibility over what the parties deem essential.
Basic elements of conflict:—cont’d

- Perceptions—of self, other, situation, expectations, threat. (For SDAs: the interpretation of Scripture)
Basic elements of conflict:—cont’d

- **Power**—the capacity to act effectively and ability to influence. How power is defined and used plays a role in almost every conflict. Misuse of power to control or gain advantage leads to damaging conflict...

- **Caution:** Resolving conflict by the “power over” pattern is ultimately ineffective and nurtures the potential for reaction or undermining.
Conflict resolution or management?

- Conflict management: refers to processes that regulate conflict behavior.
- Conflict settlement: a temporary arrangement or procedure for dealing with a specific problem.
- Conflict resolution: the problem is cleared up, a joint agreement that is self-implementing, does not sacrifice any genuinely important value.
Bible counsel on resolving conflict:

- “..endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” — Ephesians 4:3
- “...that they may be made perfect in one.” — John 17:23
- “...let each esteem others better than himself.” — Philippians 2:3
- “First go and be reconciled to your brother.” — Matthew 5:24
- “If your bother sins against you, go...” — Matthew 18:15
- “...forgiving...as God...forgave you.” — Ephesians 4:32
- “...speaking the truth in love...” — Ephesians 4:15
- “...apostles and elders came together...” — Acts 15:6
Bible examples of conflict resolution

- **Matthew 18** (Solve personal differences as privately as possible)

- **Acts 15** (Jerusalem Council—clarify essentials)

- **Acts 15** (Paul and Barnabas—restructure an arrangement)
Traditional approaches to conflict resolution: negotiation, mediation, arbitration. Each approach seems to reward the party who could find a way to get more out of his/her/their demands, or who could make fewer concessions, or who could perform better on conflict resolution competition. These resolution strategies are primarily adversarial rather than collaborative.
Ineffective conflict resolution:

- **Conquest**: Often uses power in destructive ways, he who has the power at the start usually has an advantage, polarizes attitudes, “loser” is necessary, does not heal relationships.
Avoidance: Tempting to believe that conflict will disappear if ignored. Merely postpones necessity of dealing with conflict. Deprives opportunity of personal growth and redefinition of relationships.
Ineffective conflict resolution:

- **Bargaining**: Each gives up something but remains unsatisfied. Defines power in terms of what one can coerce from the other. Fails to assess needs, values, perceptions, goals and feelings of participants. Tends to focus on arithmetic of negotiation, obscures the relative values of needs and interests held by the parties.
Ineffective conflict resolution:

- **Bandaid**: Quick-fix approach. Creates the illusion that fundamental issues have been addressed. Often produces a heightened lack of confidence in conflict resolution procedures. Parties involved do not develop a process of addressing future issues.
Ineffective conflict resolution:

- **Role-player**: Boss-subordinate, teacher-student, parent-child, etc. Relates to roles and structures rather than to persons. Perpetuates a fixed relationship that blocks needed changes. Options for resolving conflict are reduced. Creates an adversarial relationship.

Encouraging constructive conflict:

- Encourage people/groups to articulate differences and opinions
- Let people know that differences are not necessarily a threat.
- Mixed membership on committees. Include people having different views.
- Listen to newcomers—fresh perspective, not accustomed to status quo.
Encouraging constructive conflict:

- Engage committee members in analysis, evaluating options.
- Deal with one issue at a time.
- Don’t tolerate inappropriate behavior—name calling, attribution of motives, discrediting another person, getting personal.
- Practice fairness—be specific, honest, allow for response.
The importance of communication

“How” things are said is important.

“Words have the power to both destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world.”

—Buddha

“In the right key one can say anything. In the wrong key, nothing; the only delicate part is the establishment of the key.”

—George Bernard Shaw
“Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” — Ephesians 4:25
Which statement is better?

“I love you but you always burn the toast.”

OR

“You always burn the toast but I love you.”
Which statement is better?

“It was wrong of me to get so angry, but your behavior really frustrated me.”

OR

“Your behavior really frustrated me, but it was wrong of me to get so angry.”
Eight essential steps:

1. Create an effective atmosphere—your personal preparation, timing location and initial opening statements. Avoid locking yourself into rigid demands of what the solution must be. Choose a time that does not give an advantage to one. Choose a place that is non-threatening. Try to create a partnership atmosphere.
2. Clarify perceptions—is the conflict over one isolated event or over a consistent pattern of events? Is it over values or preferences, needs or desires, goals or methods. Identify the specific components of the relationship. Begin working on a component that stands a good chance of being resolved. Avoid stereotyping of other party. Use good communication skills
3. **Focus on needs not demands**—individual and shared needs. Try to outline and prioritize specific needs.
4. **Build shared positive power.** Avoid negative power—focuses on attempts to gain advantage over the other, emphasizes power over rather than power with, requires a loser or a subservient rather than a partner. Positive power seeks to promote the constructive capabilities of all parties involved in a conflict.
8. Look to the future, then learn from the past. Every relationship has a past, present and future. Try first to focus on the present-future. Temptation will be to focus only on past because that is where injury, suspicion or mistrust began to occur.
Eight essential steps:—cont’d

6. **Generate options.** Look for more than packaged standard responses. Generating options can often break through preconceived limitations.
Eight essential steps:—cont’d

7. Develop specific action steps. Not satisfactory to merely identify a desired outcome.
8. Make mutual benefit agreements. Become a caretaker of the partner’s welfare. Clarify specific responsibilities. Understand and respect the needs of each other.
Acknowledgements:

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- Notes from conflict management seminar (Randall Wright) conducted at General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, August 13, 1996
- The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution, Dudley Weeks, Tarcher/Putnam, 1994