

Levels of Conflict

(An Overview of Conflict Management)

This condensed diagnostic instrument, based on the work of Speed B. Leas of the Alban Institute, contains a Conflict Intensity Chart which:

- gives you a quick overview of the levels of conflict
- assists you in making a determination of the state of a given conflict
- suggests the skills that would be needed at each level
- provides relevant resources to further your skills in conflict management

The objective in managing conflict is to lower each level (*above the first*) to a more manageable level, if possible. Please note the following features of this chart:

A. Levels are not discrete

Recognize that overlaps of characteristics often occur. While the chart organizes the distinguishing characteristics of each level, the intensity levels will vary from individual to individual and group to group. This requires a careful examination of a broad data base before deciding the conflict level.

B. Characteristics are broadly indicative

The diagnosis of a particular level of conflict ought to be derived from looking at all characteristics, rather than one or two that seem to dominate. Conflict may emerge at all levels of intensity and may move through the levels at varying rates of speed.

C. Caring approach is essential

A caring, sensitive concern for the people affected by the conflict is assumed to be uppermost. The personal support of pastors, spouses, church leaders and church members, as well as those persons involved in the conflict intervention, should receive primary consideration at all conflict levels.

D. Team approach should be considered

The suggested leadership strategies acknowledge that no one person may have all the skills needed to manage a higher level of conflict. Other team members are needed to share insight and (*especially at higher levels of intensity*) to share the emotional stress of conflict intervention.

E. Training is required

This chart helps only to identify levels of conflict and to briefly sketch the strategies usually required to manage each level. It is recommended that anyone wanting to provide effective intervention at even a level one conflict situation receive some basic conflict management training. Some persons will want to go on to receive additional training so that they are equipped to handle levels two and three. Levels four and five usually require the objectivity and skill of outside, professional consultants in conflict management.

LEVEL ONE: Problem to Solve

CHARACTERISTICS:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. ISSUE | Real disagreement; conflicting goals, values and needs, etc. |
| 2. EMOTIONS | Short-lived anger, quickly controlled; parties begin to be uncomfortable in the presence of other(s). |
| 3. ORIENTATION | Tends to be problem-oriented rather than person-oriented. |
| 4. INFORMATION | Open sharing of information. |
| 5. LANGUAGE | Clear and specific. |
| 6. OBJECTIVE | Solving the problem. Move toward unanimous agreement. Utilize collaborative style. |
| 7. OUTCOME | Collaborative agreement if possible. Win/win final resolution with acceptable, mutually agreed-upon solution. |

SKILLS NEEDED:

1. Trust/rapport building skills.
2. Ability to think logically.
3. Good listening skills.
4. Working knowledge of church structure, polity, and organization (varies per denomination).
5. Problem-solving and decision-making skills.
6. Consulting skills.
7. Knowledge of available resources.

LEVEL TWO: Disagreement

CHARACTERISTICS:

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| 1. ISSUE | Real disagreement; mixing of personalities and issues; problem cannot be clearly defined. |
| 2. EMOTIONS | Distrust in the beginning. Caution in association; less mixing with "the other side". |

3. ORIENTATION	Begin personalizing the problem; shrewdness and calculation.
4. INFORMATION	Selective hold-back of information on both sides.
5. LANGUAGE	More vague and general; " <i>Some people...</i> " " <i>They...</i> " hostile humor, barbed comments and put-downs.
6. OBJECTIVE	Face-saving; come out looking good. Tend to move toward consensus. Not yet win/lose conflict.
7. OUTCOME	Attempt a collaborative solution; or negotiate an acceptable agreement; win/win, but with a real effort.
SKILLS NEEDED:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All skills required for level one, plus... 2. Analytical skills. 3. Understanding of power dynamics issues. 4. Mediation skills. 5. Self-awareness skills.

LEVEL THREE: Contest

CHARACTERISTICS:

1. ISSUE	Begin the dynamics of win/lose. Resistance to peace overtures. Focus on persons representing the enemy.
2. EMOTIONS	Not able to operate in presence of "enemy"; however, admire worthy opponent. not willing to share emotions/feelings constructively.
3. ORIENTATION	Personal attacks. Formation of factions/sides. Threat of members leaving. Need a third-party consultant.
4. INFORMATION	Distortion is a major problem. Information shared only within factions.
5. LANGUAGE	Overgeneralizations: " <i>You always...</i> " " <i>We never...</i> " Attribute diabolical motives to others.
6. OBJECTIVE	Shifts from self-protection to winning. Objectives are more complex and diffuse; clustering of issues.

7. OUTCOME

Decision-making -- mediation, compromising, voting.

SKILLS NEEDED:

1. All skills required for levels one and two, plus...
2. Designing and negotiating contracts.
3. Clear recognition of one's own limits.
4. Understanding interaction of personality types.
5. Facilitator in group process.
6. Skilled in developing a clear process of decision-making.

LEVEL FOUR: Fight / Flight**CHARACTERISTICS:****1. ISSUE**

Shifts from winning to getting rid of person(s). no longer believe others can change, or want them to change.

2. EMOTIONS

Cold self-righteousness. Will not speak to the other side.

3. ORIENTATION

Factions are solidified. Clear lines of demarcation. Last place for constructive intervention by a third-party consultant.

4. INFORMATION

Limited only to the cause being advocated; will not accept/listen to contrary information.

5. LANGUAGE

Talk now of "principles" not "issues". Language solidifies into ideology.

6. OBJECTIVE

No longer winning; now eliminate others from the environment. Hurt the other person/group.

7. OUTCOME

High probability of split within the organization with a possible loss of persons from the organization.

SKILLS NEEDED:

1. All skills required for levels one, two, and three, plus...
2. Ability to assess need for additional skill building.
3. Proven experience (track record).
4. Knowledge of broader, more specialized resources.

5. Ability to find and make use of professional organizations and resources.
6. Careful adherence to organizational structure and polity guidelines (legal and authority issues).

LEVEL FIVE: Intractable

CHARACTERISTICS:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. ISSUE | No longer clear understanding of the issue; personalities have become the issue. Conflict is now unmanageable. |
| 2. EMOTIONS | Relentless obsession in accomplishing the objective at all costs. Vindictive. No objectivity or control of emotion. |
| 3. ORIENTATION | Sees person(s) as harmful to society, not just to the offended group or person. |
| 4. INFORMATION | Information skewed to accomplish the objective at any cost. |
| 5. LANGUAGE | Focuses on words that imply the destruction and/or elimination of the other. |
| 6. OBJECTIVE | To destroy the offending party/persons; i.e., to see that the fired pastor does not get a job elsewhere. |
| 7. OUTCOME | Highly destructive. Use of compulsion to maintain peace. May be necessary to remove one or more parties from the situation. Higher authorities may need to intervene. |

NOTE: It is generally acknowledged that at this level no reconciliation is possible. The consultant's purpose is to minimize the damage of the conflict and enable the person/group/institution to function again.

SKILLS NEEDED:

1. All skills required for all other levels, plus...
2. Adequate personal support system and strong inner resources. Able to practice personal stress management.
3. Careful adherence to institutional rules, boundaries, legal restrictions, authority structures

etc.

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