



Managing Conflict Well

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The “C” Word

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The “C” Word

It took the hard way for me to learn
the right way to handle conflict.

by Janine Petry



I remember the meeting like it was yesterday. A woman in leadership at our church was asked to oversee the planning of a girls’ youth retreat.

To support her in this, several of the younger women—myself included—were asked to join her at a meeting to chart out the weekend.

The meeting began well, and as it progressed, a young woman with a dominating personality emerged as the group’s leader. The meeting flowed smoothly, the retreat was planned quickly, and the meeting was soon adjourned.

Several days later, the church youth pastor approached me to discuss the meeting.

“I just wanted to make this clear,” he said. “We have already have leadership in place for the teen retreat. You were only asked to help with ideas, not to take over.”

Okay, so it was me. I was the dominating young woman. And I was shocked by the youth pastor’s confrontation. I didn’t even know there was a problem. After all, the meeting ran smoothly, and everyone was in agreement. Or maybe it just seemed that way to me.

In retrospect, I wish the conflict had been handled differently. The youth pastor’s comments left me hurt and embarrassed. The woman I had offended never approached me, and I was too wounded to bring it up to

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her. We just waited for it to disappear. And it was a long wait.

But it’s not as if I can’t understand why it happened the way it did. Let’s face it. Most people don’t like conflict—leaders included. We don’t even like to say the “c” word, let alone deal with it. Now a leader at the church myself, I’m as guilty as anyone of wanting to avoid it at all costs. But whether we say it, or see it, or not—conflict is normal, and at times necessary. In leadership, we just need to be ready for it.

Managing Conflict Well will help you do just that. Here you’ll find articles from authors who know what you’re dealing with and can help you overcome struggles related to conflict and conflict resolution. As you work through the packet, you’ll learn to see conflict as a tool that, when used skillfully, can promote growth, provide clear direction, and create strong relationships.

Remember, you’re not alone. A wise leader once wrote, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

I like to imagine he learned that the hard way, as most of us have. The important thing is that we learn, even if we don’t use the “c” word.

Blessings,

Janine Petry

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PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

The Conversation You Dread

A constructive approach for those difficult confrontations

by Denise Van Eck

After a staff meeting, Sue whispered, “Can I speak to you?” We slipped into the next room, and she closed the door. “I have a problem with you I need to address. The ministry calendar came out yesterday, and you scheduled something on a night that I planned to do a training. I can’t believe you’d do this without talking to me. You always do this! You never ask me ...”

On she went, angry at being shut out of a decision she should have been a part of. I was dumbstruck. Another person was responsible for the colliding dates, someone that Sue was mad at a lot. I didn't want to add to the tension in their relationship. I also felt she had every right to be frustrated, so I decided to absorb her anger, apologize, and promise to make the appropriate correction.

That was the first in a series of bad decisions in that conversation. My attempt at an amiable apology was flattened by Sue’s need to make sure I “got it.” I got defensive; she talked faster and louder. It ignited a full blown argument. Out came every annoyance, every slight that had occurred in our year of working together. Both of us ended up crying and desperate to end this nightmare conversation.

Of course, most confrontations don’ end so dramatically. In fact, many



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are worse—both parties walk away having maintained their dignity, but seething. At least Sue and I could not hide from the fact that we had a problem. The disaster made me determined to improve the way I handled leadership's inevitable difficult confrontations. Here's what I learned.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare!

One of the most dangerous inclinations in confrontation is to do it immediately—when you're agitated. Sometimes we're so angry we can't stop from venting. A better idea is to plan for the difficult conversation.

- 1. Clarify your intentions.** Is your goal to set him straight? Get your way? Make sure she knows you're in charge? For a confrontation to be effective, the purpose must be to find truth. Entering the conversation believing you already see the whole picture is to court disaster. Approaching a confrontation as a way for everyone to grow, instead of an opportunity to "fix" someone, paves the way for success.
- 2. Begin with empathy.** Empathy opens a pathway for learning to occur. When preparing for a difficult conversation, I ask myself: *Is there any way to show empathy here? Can I put myself in their shoes in some way?* That allows me to confront without the heat of anger. Confronting out of anger leads to reactive behavior and reduces the potential for a successful outcome.
- 3. Is this a matter of taste or truth?** Paul tells us to speak the truth in love, not force our preferences on someone else. *Am I upset because something is wrong or because I don't like it?* I was once all set to confront a small group leader when I asked myself this question. I finally had to admit that I was dealing with a matter of taste, not truth. The leader wasn't violating Scripture, just not doing something the way I would. And weeks later, it became evident that my way would have been the wrong way.

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4. **Clarify the issue.** Try to narrow down the central issue to one word. Is it *trust*? *Confidence*? *Competence*? It's tempting to list all the things we're upset about. But narrow it down and keep it clear. "You've been late to the last four staff meetings. That behavior is communicating disrespect to the rest of the team." Identify what's at stake and communicate it truthfully and as objectively as possible. That keeps the conversation from dangerous rabbit trails.
5. **Hold up the mirror.** Get real with yourself as you prepare. How have you contributed to this issue? Are you bringing any of your own issues into it? Is the person you are confronting exhibiting behavior that you struggle with yourself? Own up before you show up.
6. **Project the consequences.** Look ahead a few weeks, months, or years. What will happen if the situation goes uncorrected? Who will be affected and how? What would a good result look like? How will the future be shaped by a positive outcome? It's important to identify what is at stake, and to be able to communicate it truthfully and as objectively as possible.
7. **Trust the Holy Spirit to do his job.** It's tempting to feel that it's all up to me to get the issues solved. The truth is, we can't control what another person thinks, feels, or believes. We can bring truth and love, but it is the Spirit of God who brings change to a person's heart.
8. **Initiate the conversation.** After going through these steps, it's time to take action. It's helpful to construct an opening "statement" that reflects your preparation. Write it down and read it through until it's clear in your mind.

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Getting It Right

Vicky was a popular and skilled small group leader. It was devastating when I got a call from someone who knew her well informing me of a moral issue that Vicky was hiding. If that was true, I would have to ask Vicky to step down from leadership. Not the easiest of conversations to have. The potential for disaster loomed large before me.

After working through the process, I had a conversation that began something like this: “Vicky, I have to speak with you about something that I’m sure will feel embarrassing and uncomfortable. I guess we’re both going to feel that way for the next few minutes. I received a phone call from someone who told me that you are struggling with _____. If this is true, you must be going through agony struggling with this and keeping it secret. If it’s true, it also means that I can’t allow you to lead a group until you’ve worked through it. I want to work through this thoroughly so you get every bit of help you need. How do you feel about this?”

Understandably, she was shocked and embarrassed, but she immediately confessed and told me her story. We talked and prayed for an hour. She stepped down from leadership and began her journey of facing this struggle. Today she again is a key leader. She later thanked me for our “beautiful conversation.” She said she had never been confronted in a way that made her feel loved and respected instead of accused. My preparation had paid off and the Holy Spirit had done his work. That horrible experience with Sue years before had led to a better way to handle those difficult confrontations.

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Thought Provokers

- *In the section titled, “Prepare, Prepare, Prepare,” which of the eight steps comes most naturally to you as a woman? Which of the steps do you feel is the most difficult for you, and why?*
- *Think back to a difficult confrontation you’ve been through. How would using the author’s advice have helped in that situation?*
- *If you’re facing conflict right now, brainstorm a plan that incorporates the steps above to deal with it. How can you use these steps to break down barriers between you and the people you lead?*

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