

# CONFLICT MANAGEMENT for FAITH LEADERS

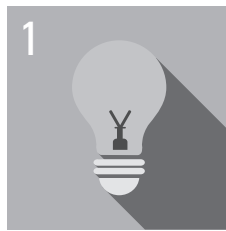
Houston E.  
Thompson



# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	9
<i>Introduction</i>	11
1. Understanding Conflict	13
Defining Conflict	15
Reframing Conflict	16
Conflict as Opportunity	21
2. Assessing Conflict	24
Understanding the Conflict	27
Influencers to Conflict	30
Stressors to Conflict	33
3. Framing Conflict	35
Motivational Forces	37
Strengths Perspective	39
Systems Thinking	40
4. Managing Conflict	45
Handling Conflict	46
Preparation for Conflict	49
Managing the Conflict	52
Conflict Management Model	54
5. Managing Conflict with Complacency	55
The Use of Complacency	58
Complacency Is Not a Cop-Out	61
When to Be Complacent	62
The Perils of Not Choosing Complacency	66
6. Managing Conflict with Confrontation	69
The Use of Confrontation	70
Confrontation Is an Intentional Choice	77
7. Managing Conflict with Communication	81
The Use of Communication	85
Principles of Communication	88

8. Managing Conflict with Coordination	93
The Use of Coordination	96
Truths about Coordination	100
9. Managing Conflict with Cooperation	104
The Use of Cooperation	106
Components of Cooperation	109
10. Managing Conflict with Collaboration	115
Components of Collaboration	120
Truths about Collaboration	123
11. Choosing a Technique	128
Deciding to Engage	130
Knowing Oneself	134
12. When to Negotiate	137
Guiding Principles	143
When the Conflict Cannot Be Resolved	144
13. A Leader's Example	151
The Example of the Leader	153
Criteria for a Leader's Actions	155
Preserving Relationships	159
14. Maintaining Unity	164
Striving for Unity	167
Fostering Restoration	170
<i>About the Author</i>	172
<i>Notes</i>	173



## UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT

■ He was a young pastor who had just moved to a new church. This was his second church after a couple of successful years in his first assignment. It should have been an ideal opportunity for him to grow professionally and help the church grow the kingdom. Within three months, the young pastor found himself struggling. At a recent board meeting, the church board gave him a list of things he should do and a list of things he should not do. While he was a little surprised, he took it in stride until he heard the entire list. Included in the list of things to do was requiring his wife to stay home during the day to answer the church phone. Included in the list of things he could not do was using his vacation to go hunting. There were several other similar issues on both lists.

The young pastor left that board meeting deeply disturbed and questioning his call to this particular church. On really bad days, he even questioned his call to the ministry. How could he have been so wrong in believing he was in the center of God's will? Why would God call him to a church like this? The questions continually flooded his mind and eventually the conversations he was having with his wife.

Over the next few weeks he sought counsel from trusted friends and experts who specialized in assisting clergy with difficult situations. This young pastor formulated a response to the board based on the wise counsel he received and his own perspectives about reasonable expectations. In the days leading up to the next board meeting the young pastor prayed earnestly that his response would answer the board members' questions, eliminate their concerns, and allow all of them to get on with ministry.

The day and time of the board meeting arrived. At the appropriate place in the agenda, the young pastor responded to the demands and expectations the board members laid out in their lists at the prior meeting. He gently, but emphatically, addressed their concerns issue by issue. Using every technique of effective communication he had learned, he tried to be as relational as possible but as clear as necessary. In the midst of this, he knew he needed to maintain his Christian and pastoral integrity, yet he did not want to surrender to the unreasonable expectations of the board.

Needless to say, this board meeting was a definitive moment in the relationships between that pastor, the board, and the church. While every effort had been made to bathe the meeting in prayer and every word carefully chosen, a line had been drawn. The pastor's response was not well received. The

conflict had begun for this pastor, and for the most part, it defined the remaining time he served that church.

## **Defining Conflict**

When we hear the word “conflict,” we think of scenarios much like this young pastor and the church mentioned above. Generally, our minds race to a situation, circumstance, or event where two or more people are at odds with each other. Conflict usually conjures up thoughts of unfavorable circumstances. It may be ill or ill-harbored feelings toward someone or a group. Conflict may be a disagreement, sometimes a sharp disagreement, with someone. It can be the opposing view of a decision that was made or an action that was taken. Conflict can be anything that disrupts equilibrium, throwing off the harmony we sincerely seek as people of faith.

Generally speaking, the knowledge of conflict in our midst stimulates negative feelings. Our thought patterns begin to whirl around, making us wonder what went wrong and ask “what if” questions. For some, emotions go into overdrive, bouncing from faith to fear depending on what we are thinking and feeling at any given moment. The reality of conflict is often the foundation of uncertainty.

From a secular point of view, our reaction to conflict may be explained through the development of norms and mores in our society. We have been enculturated to understand conflict as disagreement, dissension, bickering, fighting, and the like. If we looked up the word “conflict” and its synonyms in a dictionary, we would discover that many of our modern-day definitions define conflict as we have above.

In a secular context, we may embrace conflict as something that happens in life. If there are people or decisions, there will

be conflict. An evangelist friend of mine, who also did general contractor work, was describing concrete and how it cracks: “There are two kinds of concrete; concrete that is cracked, and concrete that is going to crack.”<sup>1</sup> The reality of life is there is going to be conflict; if not today, in the future.

For people of faith, it may be harder to embrace this reality. We read the Scriptures, endeavor to understand them, and embrace them as precepts by which to live. We are challenged with the call to holy living that includes loving one another not only with a brotherly love but also with an agape love—a self-giving love that prefers others over self. In our finite understanding, there is a disconnect between agape love and conflict. If I love you with a self-giving love, how can I have conflict with you? If my heart is pure, how can I be at odds with a vision, a decision, a person, or anything else? If I am holy, am I not committed to seeking unity, oneness, and consensus in all things? For people of faith, accepting conflict as a reality of life is difficult if not heresy.

The truth is, conflict is going to happen, even in faith communities. As surely as concrete will crack, conflict will occur. Where there are people who have assembled together to worship or to do ministry, there will be differing opinions and perspectives. Where you have differing views, you inevitably will have conflict.

## **Reframing Conflict**

In the church and other faith-based communities, we quickly blame conflict when things are not going well. If progress or growth is slower than hoped, we are tempted to blame it on some issue founded in conflict. When we lose a family for an unexplained reason, we want to blame a conflicted relationship with

the pastor or someone in the church. When finances are down, we question if someone is upset and withholding the tithe. The list goes on, but the culprit is seemingly the same—conflict.

What had the young pastor done over the three short months leading up to those board meetings that warranted the board issuing two lists of directives? Why did this pastor need to expend time and energy addressing a list of directives that seemed so unreasonable? Had he offended someone? Was he a mismatch for the church? Had he challenged the board members with something that caused them to react the way they did? The answer to these questions is a resounding “no.” This young pastor had not done anything to deserve what happened. Then why did it occur?

The board’s aggressive lists of directives were not personal. The church board was not reacting to something this pastor did or didn’t do. The truth is, in three months the board members didn’t really know him, nor he them. They were speaking from prior experiences and of times when perhaps they felt they were taken advantage of or their pastoral relationship was compromised. They were not maliciously trying to disrupt the life of this pastor, discredit his integrity, or make his life miserable. They were trying to protect their church and ensure that the pastoral relationship they hoped for would be secure.

Unfortunately, the young pastor did not interpret the church board’s actions as they were intended. What felt to the board like reasonable expectations felt to the pastor like micro-managing his life and that of his family. After all, did the board really have the audacity to tell him he couldn’t use his vacation to go hunting? What may have been well intentioned turned into something much different—conflict.



This church's immediate conflict was born within the time frame between two board meetings at the intersection of directives and response. The church board members probably felt they were just sharing more about their expectations. For this pastor, it was clearly an assault on the consensual contract they agreed on when he accepted the invitation to pastor the church. In addition, it felt like an encroachment on his integrity. Unfortunately, from this pastor's perspective this was a full-fledged attack and the conflict was real.

As leaders, the conflict we often sense is not directly focused on us; however, by virtue of our leadership role we find ourselves in the line of fire. Somewhere in the history of the church or organization something happened that hurt someone, compromised trust, or cast a cloud of doubt on the integrity of the leader. While people of faith should not harbor ill feelings, the memories and emotions of prior experiences impact the way people view and embrace future experiences. The truth is, the leader at the time is the one who deals with the wake.

Ironically, the church noted above may not have recognized that what just occurred at the meeting felt like an assault to the pastor and could be construed as conflict. These board members may have felt they were just being good stewards by addressing issues that they perceived to be problematic in the past. Again, it was not personal; it was just the church trying to be the church the way it perceived it needed to be. For this young pastor, he happened to be the leader and consequently bore the brunt of the confrontation.

Every leader is at risk of being engaged in conflict. Sometimes, this conflict will be such that the leader is involved personally either as the one implicated or the one who incited the conflict. Not every communication, decision, or action is going

to be received with enthusiasm by everyone. Occasionally, just by the pure virtue of doing what we are called to do, someone is going to take offense and we are going to find ourselves in the midst of tension.

There will be other times when the leader is not directly involved; however, by occupying the role of the leader he or she will become part of the process to manage or resolve the conflict. People look to leadership for wisdom, guidance, and answers. While leaders know they do not have all of the answers, those who follow often think they do. People turn to faith leadership when they need support, encouragement, and assistance.

There was a strong evangelical church in an urban area that for decades was touted as one of the most sincere, authentic, evangelical churches in the community. The church was engaged in frontline ministry to the community. The parishioners were provided many opportunities for discipleship. The church was growing. By every measure, this was a great church. People in the community knew of the church, respected what it stood for, and appreciated what it did.

The time came when the long-tenured pastor retired. A new pastor was called to the church, and things appeared to be going well, at least for a while. It was soon obvious that the “honeymoon” was beginning to wear off. This great church, long known for its authenticity, was beginning to have problems. Rumors began to circulate throughout the faith community about the church’s struggle to find its equilibrium with the new pastor. Some people were not happy with some of the changes being implemented. According to the rumor mill, this church was beginning to disintegrate.

It wasn’t long until a small faction of people in that church started talking about other options available to them. The most

logical choice to some was to pull out and start a new church. Once this group left, others began to leave the church. Some joined the new church. Several found other churches of similar faith to join. No one really knows how many left who may have ended up not going anywhere.

This great church was facing some dark days. By the time the exodus was over, many families had left the church. The faithful who remained stayed the course, but the loss of so many created undue hardships. The church had a hard time continuing all of the ministries previously offered. Morale began to decline. People in the community were talking negatively about the church. What was once a thriving church was now a church surviving the aftermath of conflict.

What happened? How could such a great church suffer so much? What could be so horrible that it would cause a mass exodus of people? Did someone do something intentionally to sabotage the church? Did the people overreact? Was the new pastor the wrong pastor? The list of questions goes on and on.

The reality is everyone believed he or she was doing the right thing. The long-tenured pastor felt it was time to retire. The new pastor was leading with confidence and conviction. The people felt their expectations were appropriate. When the time came for some of the people to leave the church, they left feeling as if they should either help start the new church or go to another church. The bottom line is everyone believed he or she was doing the right thing at the time he or she did it, and yet it resulted in what was perceived as conflict.

This church suffered immensely. The new pastor ended up leaving the church in just a few years. The church struggled with resourcing ministries. Finances were tight. The reputation

of the church had been compromised. Yet one could hypothesize that no one did anything that was ill willed.

The moral of this story is people are not always ill intentioned. As a rule, parishioners are not strategically planning how to stir up a hornet's nest or plotting how to hurt a pastor. Likewise, leaders are not scheming on how to demoralize their followers. Generally speaking, leaders and their followers are well intentioned. They are looking out for what they believe to be in the best interest of all involved. The issue is that diverse opinions do not always align with what individuals believe to be in their own best interest or that of the church. When this happens, conflict can occur.

## **Conflict as Opportunity**

It is important for faith leaders to understand that conflict does not necessarily have to be a negative. We do not have to run and hide, nor do we need to prepare for battle. Dr. Charles Perabeau, professor of sociology at Olivet Nazarene University and a bivocational pastor, says, "Conflict may be viewed as opportunity. It does not have to be a bad thing; it can be something from which good can come."<sup>2</sup> As faith leaders, we want and need to change the lens through which we see conflict.

Two leaders had worked together informally for approximately five years. Their relationship was collegial and professional. They had a few lunch meetings together, discussed similar professional ventures, and genuinely had an interest in the well-being of the organization with which both were affiliated. There were even conversations of hope that they could work jointly on a major project someday.

One day, one of the leaders was part of a committee that was making decisions about who would be assigned to what

task groups in the organization. These appointments would be driven by a multitude of factors, including skill set, content knowledge, and interpersonal relationship skills. The committee was taking very seriously who would be assigned to what group assignment. It wanted a group who could effectively complete the task and who could work together well. Every committee member weighed in with his or her perspective and expectation about the group assignments. Each member also identified who would best serve which group.

When the committee meeting was over, the other leader who was not part of the committee ended up not being assigned to a group. When the assignments were announced, he was devastated. He fully expected to be in a lead role, if not leading one of the groups. At first he was calm, but as time passed, it began to bother him considerably. In a moment of extreme frustration, he accused the committee members of not recognizing his ability, devaluing him, and hindering his ability to make a more significant contribution to the organization. None of this was true, but it was the way he saw the decision. It became very personal for him.

As time passed, opportunity presented itself for the two leaders to discuss what happened openly and honestly. The one who was not assigned expressed his hurt and disappointment. He said that he felt underappreciated and at times used. The one who served on the committee shared how the process unfolded and how the committee arrived at its decisions. While both leaders had different perspectives, each was willing to be open minded and hear the other's view. When the leader who was not assigned understood the complete process and rationale, he acknowledged his conclusions were in error. He recognized that it was not personal and that the committee was just taking seriously the work it was charged to do.

Many times conflict provides a framework for seeing a situation through a different lens. We may have looked at a program, a ministry, or a person one way for years. Then something happens that forces us to think, see, or act differently. When this occurs, we have a choice. We can call this difference conflict, or we can embrace the difference as an opportunity. It really is a matter of perspective.

When we move beyond seeing conflict as only a negative from which we anticipate negative outcomes to seeing it as an opportunity, we can more likely anticipate positive outcomes. They will be different for sure. We will think differently. We will see things differently. It may even change the way we do what we do. In the end, we will have capitalized on making the most out of what was before us. Conflict can be the driving force that moves us to doing something spectacular.

Conflicted circumstances contain opportunities to demonstrate grace and compassion, reflect Christ's character, and model Christian behavior. Rather than viewing conflict as a negative situation in which we must engage for better or worse, we can reframe it and see it as an opportunity to effect positive change. Through the attitude and actions of the leader, conflict can be managed in a way that hopefully creates a win for everyone involved.

Leaders will find themselves in the midst of conflicted situations. It is part of the job! How we view it and what we do with it will define our leadership. If we react with negative emotion and actions, the conflict will fit the definition of our popular culture. If we act with Christlike character and grounded wisdom, we can reframe the conflict and make it the next opportunity on the horizon.

"I wish I had read this book before starting my twenty-plus years as a human resource professional and also serving as a board director for not-for-profit organizations. *Conflict Management for Faith Leaders* offers a new and refreshing approach to conflict management."

John M. Keigher  
Director of Systems and Human Resources  
Midwest Transit Equipment, Inc.

Is *conflict* a dirty word? Does it bring to mind images of disagreement, fights, and shattered relationships? For ministry leaders, the likelihood of conflict comes with the job, but the result does not have to be destructive.

*Conflict Management for Faith Leaders* is about handling conflict in a way that is positive and constructive. With this book you will discover multiple techniques for assessing and managing conflict and learn guidelines for choosing which technique to use in a given situation.

A practical resource for pastors and ministry leaders, *Conflict Management for Faith Leaders* acknowledges that leadership brings with it the risk of opposition. Packed with useful insights and stories based on the experiences of other faith leaders, this book is the ideal tool when the risk of opposition becomes reality.



HOUSTON THOMPSON holds graduate degrees in church management and social work and a doctor of education degree. In 2005, he was awarded the Professional of the Year Award from the Southern Indiana Chamber of Commerce. In 2007, Nazarene Bible College honored him with the Alumna Distinguished Achievement Award. He currently serves as a dean and directs the doctor of education in ethical leadership program at Olivet Nazarene University.

RELIGION / Christian Ministry / Pastoral Resources



BEACON HILL PRESS  
OF KANSAS CITY

