

Conflict Resolution **(Adapted from WEC *United We Serve*)**

Scriptural Guidelines

The Apostle Paul insisted that we make 'every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Ephesians 4:3). That unity does not mean we must always agree and share the same opinion, but we should always seek peace.

Interpreting Matthew 18:15-17

This popular passage for resolving conflict is often, unfortunately, interpreted through the eyes of our own cultural backgrounds.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" is often interpreted as a command to confront, face to face and privately, regardless of the social environment from which the offender may come. When personal confrontation fails, the authority rule is applied: "take one or two others along". When that fails public confrontation is applied.

Before rushing ahead, perhaps we should remember that this advice was given "to a specific group of people in a specific social environment, applying universal kingdom principles for specific social action." (Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture*). All conflict may not be satisfactorily solved by one culturally specific formula.

Other Scriptural methods of handling conflict

Even Scripture shows different ways of handling conflict and restoring peace.

- In 2 Samuel 3, a *mediation* method was used to restore peace. Messengers, presentation of gifts and a feast brought about the desired peace.
- Acts 15 shows a more *formal* process taking place with open confrontation. Mediation was not part of this process.

So, perhaps we should be open to different ways of handling conflict. We should take into consideration the cultural background of the person with whom we are dealing. More care ought to be taken, when applying the Matthew 18 passage, not to limit our interpretation and actions by our own personal cultural experience.

Recommendations for handling team conflict:

1. Be flexible. Missionaries who are rigid in following their own cultural ways and who refuse to adapt to either their host culture, or their fellow-workers, are not appreciated.
2. Learn to use all our faculties. Observe in order to understand what others are thinking and feeling and why they think or feel that way.
3. Avoid being overtly direct. Be firm concerning the issue if necessary, but 'soft' in dealing with the people concerned. We should keep relationships intact. By softening and adjusting our ways we can be less direct. Ask others for their viewpoint first. Westerners should not be too quick to assume that public or passive assent to their proposals means 'Yes'.
4. Be willing to take time. Don't bypass the consensus process when seeking to make a decision. It is better to take longer to make a decision but have a broader consensus once made.

5. Check understanding. Encourage two-way communication. Careful listening is imperative. Listen to what is being said, what is meant. Ask questions for clarification, paraphrase, and ask for feedback. Break up into discussion groups to work through issues. Then get the response of the group relayed to the whole meeting. This will encourage those reluctant to speak (from a cultural viewpoint or a perceived lack of English ability) to share, where they would not in a larger group.
6. Watch non-verbal communication - gestures, body-language, space, eye contact, touch and body contact, tone of voice, clothing, grooming, use of silence, long pauses, signs of embarrassment, of feeling ill-at-ease, or of being in disagreement.
7. Allow all parties to save face. This is a critical issue in many cultures. Look for creative ways of dealing with the conflict which ensure preserving the personal honour of all involved. This does not mean giving in on important substantive issues or looking for the lowest common denominator. But it does mean being sensitive to the needs of others, and being willing to make minor compromises. Phrase agreements and proposals in such a way that none are seen to be “losing”.
8. Build on-going relationships. Set the foundation for building good relationships before the process of conflict management begins. When differences do arise, resolve them in a way that will help, rather than hinder, future relationships. If the issue under dispute is of secondary importance, be willing to give in for the sake of the relationship.

Other simple tips for handling conflict

- Pray for the other person.
- Try to see his point of view.
- Learn to say, “I’m sorry”, “I was wrong” - without adding, “But you...”
- Clarify each other’s objectives without getting heated.
- Avoid confrontational positions - accusations, mentioning old grievances.
- Stick to the present issue. Have all the facts on hand.
- Seek solutions to differences without compromising principles.
- Keep lines of communication open.
- Make a practise of talking to people, rather than about people

Personal Responsibility in Resolving Conflict

When all is said and done, we must each take responsibility to resolve our conflicts. We cannot be held responsible for our differences, especially if those differences are part of our upbringing, but we are responsible for our attitudes.

Our differences provide opportunities to broaden our understanding of others and to mature us in our relationships. If there is bitterness and an unforgiving spirit it must be dealt with. We must confess such wrong attitudes and pray for the other person involved. This leads to inner release and freedom to minister to others with whom we differ. (Jo Anne Dennett, Thriving in Another Culture)