

# Support and Confront: The Art of Managing Conflict

Os Hillman • Conflict Management

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One of the most difficult things a person has to do sometimes is confront another individual. In the workplace we are often faced with conflict arising from issues related to actions taken by an individual that directly impact us in some way. How do we effectively communicate concerns to another person in a way that does not alienate that person, but still allows us to confront the issue?

Today, as never before, there is a significant degree of intolerance for those who differ with us. Often we take it personally when others disagree with us. This can alienate us and lead to a polarization of the relationship. One thing I have noticed is that in America we have a more difficult time sharing our differences without it leading to a break in the relationship. We often feel that if we have emotion around the issue, it will only lead to a break in the relationship. Other cultures like the Italians and the early Hebrews understood that it was OK to share feeling with strong emotion and passion. A break in relationship should not be necessary if we follow some important guidelines in handling conflict. In the early church we know there was conflict, and often great emotion behind the conflict, such as Paul and Barnabas being at odds over Mark.

*Sometime later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord (Acts 15:36-41).*

The idea of supporting another person while at the same time confronting them seems like an oxymoron. However, we will see that they don't have to conflict if we approach differences with the intent of maintaining the relationship.

## Confront the Issue, Not the Person

The first thing we must learn to do is confront the issue, not the person. Confronting the issue means we view the problem as an issue WE must address, versus an issue that YOU have caused. We must avoid blaming others for the issue if we want to have constructive dialogue and resolve of the issue. We must view the relationship as more important than the issue if we are to be successful in this process.

The apostle Paul found himself in what could have been considered a no-win situation. He was the new kid on the block. He strongly disagreed with Peter on an issue but did not back away from confronting Peter, the leader of the movement.

*When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.*

*The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" (Gal 2:11-14).*

It took a great deal of courage for Paul to confront Peter, the leader of the church at the time. However, there is no indication his confrontation led to a split between them. Peter later came to see Paul's point of view.

## **The Importance of Confronting**

Matthew 18:15 encourages us to go to one another if we feel we have been sinned against. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over." There are many reasons people are unwilling to confront another person on an issue.

You may fear rejection by the individual that you are confronting. You may fear they will not receive what you have to say and don't want to take the risk. So, you become co-dependent with that individual. This leads to greater problems down the road. The individual who needs to know about the issue lives in a vacuum and may continue in their hurtful ways creating an even greater problem down the road. You may also be construing a motive behind an individual's actions that may not really exist.

## **Avoid Construing Motive Behind Actions**

Let me give you a very hypothetical example. Let's say that you are speaking to a group of people. In your audience is a man on the second row. Every time you speak this man coughs. Soon, the frequency of his coughs seems to coincide with your comments. It begins to unnerve you. You begin thinking that this man is doing this on purpose to distract you (you imply motive behind his actions). Finally, you have had enough. During the break you confront the man. The man responds in this way; "I am so sorry. I have a horrible cough right now and it is often uncontrollable. I will sit at the back of the room from for the remainder of your talk." His reaction shows that he did not have a wrong motive behind his actions. However, you implied his motive by judging him before you got the facts.

This happens every day in a work situation. A boss makes a decision. The employee implies the motive behind the action, often resulting in a judgment being made. Whenever someone takes an action that impacts you negatively, our first step must be to go to the person and ask for clarification of the action as to why the action might have been necessary.

## **Some Practical Tips**

When we hear statements that differ from what we want to hear, our tendency is to do a few things. We might respond by 1) interrupting the person; 2) start my response with a "No, you're wrong" or "I totally disagree with you"; 3) or you may stop listening and start preparing a response to their position.

This is a wrong way to approach conflict. The first thing we must do is listen to their viewpoint and even affirm our understanding of their perception of the situation. Notice I use the word "perception." In advertising we have learned that a person's perception is their reality. It does not mean their perception is truth, it only means it is their reality for them until someone or something changes that perception to line up with the truth. Sometimes people choose to remain in a lie and there is nothing you can do to change it. You must allow them to hold that viewpoint without alienating the relationship. In other words, you agree to disagree and yet remain committed to the relationship. Granted, there are times when a break in the relationship will result and there is nothing you can do to prevent it. However, if we keep some of these ground rules in place, the likelihood of maintaining the relationship is good.

### **Reasons Behind Conflict**

Over the last several years I have learned that conflict is often a symptom of something else going on inside of us or others in whom we are having the conflict. Let me explain through example

A few years ago I was in a contract negotiation with a man on a joint business deal. We agreed on the terms of the deal and needed my attorney to finalize our agreement in a contract. My attorney called my friend John to work out the details. However, each time my attorney would seek to review the details of the contract, John would begin to take issue with him. It wasn't that what he said was not true, it was the manner in which the attorney spoke to him that John began to react to him. After a few days of this my attorney called and said he was at a roadblock with John, but he could not honestly say why since there were no particular issues that had not already been agreed to. I knew John's history and discerned what was taking place.

I called John and set up an appointment for the next day for us to meet. I drove an hour and a half to his office. Upon arrival I said, "John, you and I have agreed on these terms. Is that correct?" He agreed. Then John began to describe his conversation with my attorney. The more he described it, the more emotional he began to get. In just a few minutes John's blood pressure had arisen to the point he was almost cursing the attorney. At that point I interrupted John with these words, "In the name of Jesus I rebuke that spirit of fear and insecurity! If you continue to allow that to rule you, I am walking out of here." John was startled, as I was too, since I have never done such a thing. However, I saw so clearly what was taking place in John. You see, John had lost a multi-million dollar company that resulted from a corporate takeover which left him bankrupt, losing literally millions of dollars in the process. Lawyers were the catalyst for his downfall and he has seen lawyers as evil and the source of pain and hurt in his life. So, whenever he is talking with a lawyer, he allows the old hurts and pains and insecurities that he experienced during that time in his life to return. He had allowed a stronghold of insecurity and fear to rule him whenever he was speaking to a lawyer.

After I explained this to John he sat back in his chair and said, "You are absolutely right. There is no reason we cannot do this deal. I have allowed this spirit to rule my life in this area." We agreed on the terms of our deal and finalized the agreement - with the attorney.

Many times the people we are working with have underlying issues that are going on in their lives. You may be in a conflict with someone and their reaction to you seems

almost irrational. I remember working with a client's advertising director who was a woman. My first meeting with this woman revealed to me that this situation was going to be a difficult one. I realized it was not because I was not serving the company's needs appropriately; it was because this woman hated men. The signs were very clear. However, instead of being able to overcome the situation, I was forced to resign working with her because it was not a situation that neither the company, nor I was able to address in the context of an agency/client relationship.

Here are a few helpful guidelines when it comes to achieving a balance between confronting while supporting the individual at the same time recommended by Mike and Sue Dowgiwicz from their publication *Growing Relationships through Confrontation*\*

## **Support**

Support is done for the other person.

### **What to Support**

- The other person's anxiety, fear and doubt.
- The right for them to feel differently about the issue.
- The reality of their perceptions.

### **How to Support**

- Accept what the other person tells you.
- Listen to them.
- Mirror back what the other person says so they know you are listening.
- Verbalize the other person's feelings.

## **Confront**

Confronting is done for yourself and the good of the relationship.

### **What to Confront**

- Problems that are not being solved.
- Differences that hamper the relationship.
- Actions that are inappropriate/damaging.

### **How to Confront**

- Acknowledge the other person's position.
- State the differences clearly and succinctly.
- Check to see if you are understood.
- Be responsible for your feelings.
- Ask for their position on the issue.

God calls each of us to be peacemakers. However, there are times in which conflict will arise. Using these principles will help you avoid unnecessary conflict.

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\*Mike and Sue Dowgiewicz, *Growing Relationships through Confrontation*, Restoration Ministries, Colorado Springs, CO. Used by permission.