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## **The Dance of Conflict Resolution**

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*Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals.* (from Interpersonal Conflict by Wilmot & Hocker, 1998)

Conflict is a fact of life. From family members having disagreements to nations waging war, we are faced with the necessity of learning how to resolve our differences. As Wilmot and Hocker's definition suggests, the *perception* of conflict often determines how we approach it. Is it a fight to be won, a struggle to wrestle with, or a dance that takes collaboration?

I personally like the last analogy when discussing interpersonal conflict for two reasons: (1) I like dancing with my husband and (2) it offers a vivid picture of how something relationally wonderful can result from two parties being committed to working together for the benefit of the whole. In marriage, disagreements are a natural part of the process of becoming one. Conflicts can be good in that successfully going through conflicts can promote personal growth and greater intimacy with one another.

As I continue to learn healthier ways to resolve relational conflicts, the following principles have proven helpful:

1. Conflict resolution involves acknowledging the validity of another's point of view.

Each of us operates out of our own perceptions, values, and needs, which differ because of our unique, God-given designs and experiences. It is easy to fall prey to the thought that all people think or *should* think like we do; however, if we don't acknowledge what another person thinks, feels, or values, the problem between us will not be resolved.

A few years ago, I confronted a close family member about a key issue that was affecting our relationship. I entered that exchange having a high need to be understood. I had little regard for what the other person thought. I just wanted to be heard. When I received an angry, defensive retort, I knew I had done the wrong thing. From that mistake, I learned "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." How much more readily will we listen to those who have first listened to us.

2. Effective communication is the basis for successful conflict resolution.

- a. *Listening: As we can look without seeing, we can hear without listening.* Effective or active listening is hard work. Because it is not automatic, we have to make a conscious, deliberate commitment to listening by eliminating internal and external distractions. Learning how to utilize both verbal and nonverbal cues is essential to listening well.

- b. *Expressing your needs while respecting others.* In the situation with my relative, I had to learn how to express my needs without harming the dignity of the other person or my own. I have learned first to acknowledge the good I see in both the person and our relationship before broaching an uncomfortable or difficult subject that needs addressing. I also give the other person a chance to view how they see the situation, and attempt to be truthful and kind in the tone I use to express my perceptions as well. This comes from an understanding that there are at least four goals present as we exchange with one another: (1) Content, (2) Relational, (3) Identity/Face-Saving, and (4) Process.

Often times, it is most helpful to address the relational and identity issues prior to the content. In so doing, a couple or group can create a safe and receptive environment that will solicit cooperation among the participants. Again, people respond best when they are first acknowledged and heard.

3. Self-awareness: What do I bring to this conflict?

Proverb 14:15b states that "...a prudent man gives thought to his steps." What do I contribute to this conflict? What might I need to adjust to help us work together? Sometimes we have to give up the "right to be right." If it's a choice between being right or being loving; may it be our prayer to be loving.

4. Culture frames conflict interaction.

Consider the following story:

A Japanese-American teenage youth is invited to a weekend snow trip in Big Bear by his school friends. Excitedly, the youth goes home to seek permission to go. He approaches his father who is reading the newspaper in the living room: "Dad, my friends are going to Big Bear for a snow trip this weekend. Can I go?" Without saying a word, the father lowers the newspaper just enough to see his son's face, briefly locks gazes with the boy, raises the newspaper and continues to read. The son says to himself as he walks away, "Well, I guess that means 'no'." He relays what occurred to his American friends. They exclaim, "But he didn't say 'no'!"

Cultural context will determine how conflicts are addressed. In cultures such as American, German, or Australian, context is less important and thus, the approach to interaction is more individualistic, direct, confrontational, action and solution-oriented. In cultures such as Japanese, Chinese, or Korean, the context of interaction is very important. These cultures are characterized by indirect communication, avoiding and accommodating when in conflicts, and a group orientation. The exchange between the youth and his father illustrates how cultural differences play a key role in how we may naturally resolve conflict and interpret our world.

There are many helpful things to glean from our cultural and family heritage regarding appropriate exchange and resolution of disagreements; however, in my experience, the Bible has many clear examples and instruction on how we are to address differences with one another.

I like the story of Mary and Martha found in Luke 10:38-42. Martha feels taken advantage of as she dutifully takes care of the details of hosting her guests. Meanwhile, her sister Mary sits placidly at Jesus' feet, listening to the Master. The story beautifully captures the feeling of unfairness that we along with Martha often feel. Resentment, accusations, blaming and triangulation result as Martha storms out of the kitchen and confronts Jesus with the injustice to which she is being subjected. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself. Tell her to help me!"

Jesus responds, “Martha, Martha, you are worried about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Although Jesus is accused and pulled into this sibling dispute, he is not offended. With kindness and understanding, he addresses Martha. He identifies with her concerns first. Jesus then proceeds to instruct her, addressing her harried heart’s need for simplicity by telling her what is most important—come learn from Me. Little does she know that taking time to listen to the Master will address her every need (maybe even give her tips on how to get Mary in the kitchen to help more often, oiy-vay!).

5. Developing certain relational skills can be helpful.

The following relational skills are often useful in conflict resolution. Consider developing these skills:

- a. *Dealing with angry/difficult people.* The need to resolve conflicts solicits an emotional response at some level. Thus, it is important to know how to handle the strong feelings of hurt, disappointment and anger in us as well as in others.
- b. *Problem Solving.* Do this equitably and respectfully.
- c. *Forgiveness.* Reverence for God first enables us to act righteously in our relationships with one another. Forgiveness is essential to maintaining and growing in relationships.

6. There is more than one way to resolve conflicts.

Styles of conflict management include (1) avoidance, (2) competition, (3) compromise, (4) accommodation, and (5) collaboration. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. The situation and relationship will determine what form of conflict management to use. Success in having constructive conflict interaction will be determined by our willingness, skills and courage to adopt a flexible style toward the various relationships and situations we face.

It “takes two to tango.” Dancing and conflict resolution both take practice, patience and a willingness to do what is necessary to be “in step” with one another, so get out those dancing shoes!

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