

Becoming Familiar with Patterns of Conflict

Levels of Conflict

Level 0 Unacknowledged conflict

Level 0 describes a situation in which the conflict is not openly acknowledged or recognized. It may have been present for a long period of time and remained essentially underground—unacknowledged and not discussed. This does not mean the conflict has gone away.

Level 1 Problem to solve

Orientation: problem-oriented rather than person-oriented

Objective: solving the problem

Resolution: within the community

Conflict begins as a problem that needs to be solved (Level 1). Problems are issues or challenges that can be described and for which solutions can potentially be found. If the problem is not solved, conflict can escalate to level 2, a disagreement.

Level 2 Disagreement

Orientation: Mixing of personalities and issues, problem cannot be clearly defined. Beginning of distrust and personalizing problem.

Objective: face-saving, come out looking good. Not yet a win/lose conflict

Resolution: Possible within the community. Needs skills to have conversations to stay focused on the problem while allowing for disagreement

The disagreement is often about how to solve the problem and is a normal, expected part of solving problems. The key is to find ways to resolve disagreement or to encourage all parties to come to a shared point of view. If the conflict continues to be unresolved, a level 3 conflict can emerge, a contest

Level 3 Contest

Orientation: personal attacks, labelling of others and formation of factions. Distortion becomes a major problem.

Objective: shift from self-protection to winning

Resolution: third-party consultant is needed. The community is too affected by the conflict to respond well. A neutral person will be needed to provide a process for the community.

A contest is one in which there are winners and losers and no one wants to be a loser. Sides begin to form and clarity about the problem to be solved begins to diminish. It quickly becomes more important to win than to solve the problem.

Level 4 Fight/Flight

Orientation: factions are solidified, with clear lines of demarcation. Shifts from winning to getting rid of person(s). Talk now takes on the language of "principles," not "issues." People start to leave the situation.

Objective: eliminating others from the environment, hurting the other person/group
Resolution: The final opportunity for successful intervention with a third-party consultant

If the conflict continues to escalate to level 4, individuals and groups begin to act in more aggressive, instinctual ways and the situation can quickly deteriorate. In a

fight/flight situation, those who are conflict avoidant leave. Those who remain are typically more committed than ever to winning. Principles and dogma are often evoked as justification for various points of view. This level is characterized by strategizing how to win the fight and garnering the resources necessary to do so.

Level 5 Intractable Situations

Orientation: sees person(s) as harmful to society, not just to the offended group or person. No longer clear understanding of issue(s); personalities have become the focus. Conflict is now unmanageable.

Objective: to destroy the offending party/persons (e.g., see to it that a fired pastor does not get a job elsewhere)

Resolution: Third-party intervention extremely difficult but it is possible for those involved to be willing to start a process of rebuilding trust.

Level 5 describes a level of conflict in which hope for reconciliation is generally lost. Emotional responses overwhelm thinking and problem solving approaches. Combatants are focused not just on winning, but even on punishing or getting rid of their opponents.

A restorative process can no longer be used to address conflict without creating more harm unless everyone involved is willing to take responsibility for their part in the breakdown of the relationship and are committed to find a way to make the relationship better. A lot of work has to be done to regain trust on both sides.

Managing Conflict

The simplest way to manage conflict is to keep differences of opinion at Level One or to move them down to that level so everyone understands and agrees "we have a problem to solve." Write the problems out together as a "Workable Problem Statement" which should:

- be free of blame
- be specific and descriptive
- not focus on the distant past
- not be a "put down" of any involved parties
- be agreed to by all involved as a definition of this problem

In all cases except for level 0, the goal is to de-escalate the conflict to the lowest level possible—ideally to level 1. If the conflict has reached level 3 or higher, it is difficult to resolve the conflict without outside help since all the insiders are viewed as having a side in the conflict.

For level 0, the goal is to escalate the conflict to the level of awareness. As long as it remains unacknowledged, no work can be done to resolve it.

From Speed B. Leas, "Moving Your Church Through Conflict,"
and the work of David Brubaker, Eastern Mennonite University

Participating in a Restorative Conversation

Thank you for considering taking part in a restorative conversation. A restorative approach provides the structure to begin to re-establish a broken relationship(s). A restorative approach:

- supports people to find a respectful way forward
- assumes those involved in the conflict and those affected by it are the best equipped to find a way forward
- invites people to talk about what happened, the impact of the situation on them and others and what needs to happen to move forward
- uses open-ended questions. There's no correct answer
- assumes next steps are a result of and depend on the conversation participants have together. The conversation determines the outcome

Restorative Readiness Criteria to Participate in a Restorative Conversation

The success of a facilitated conversation depends on the participants. All participants must meet certain criteria so that more harm does not happen. Restorative facilitators will not set you and others up for failure.

To help you decide if participating is right for you, please consider the following questions. Answering YES to all of the questions indicates you are ready to participate.

If you have answered NO to any of the questions, you may not be ready for this conversation right now. Discuss with the facilitator if participating in the proposed restorative conversation makes sense.

Readiness to Participate in a Restorative Conversation

Criteria to Participate	YES	NO
1. Do you want the situation to get better?		
2. Are you participating freely without feeling pressured or coerced to do so? (Consider: Are you concerned if you don't participate you will be seen as uncooperative or letting someone down? Do you worry there may be negative consequences for you if you do not take part?)		
3. Can you identify and accept responsibility for ways in which you are responsible for the breakdown in the relationship, even if you have a very minor role to play?		
4. Do you understand and agree with the proposed focus for the conversation?		
5. Are willing to be part of the solution to make things better?		
6. Do you understand the process you've been invited to be part of?		