

LESSON 29: Business Performance

Conflict Resolution

INTRODUCTION

If you have led people in the past, you no doubt have had to resolve conflict. Relationships are fragile and conflict can surface quickly. Unresolved conflict or disputes that have gone awry can destroy a culture and even a business.

Developing a process for resolving your own personal conflicts and how to lead others in your organization through conflicts can be time well spent. The ultimate goal is to bring “shalom” to your workplace. The ancient Hebrew concept of peace, rooted in the word “shalom,” meant wholeness, completeness, soundness, health, safety and prosperity, carrying with it the implication of permanence.

But Shalom can be hard to come by when people are involved. In this lesson, we want to discuss internal and external conflicts that are common in business and some thoughts on how to navigate those conflicts in a way that steers the organization to a place of shalom.

WHY DO WE HAVE CONFLICTS?

One of the definitions Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides for conflict is, “to be different, opposed, or contradictory: to fail to be in agreement or accord.” Conflict in relationships is common. We all have different personalities, past experiences and worldviews that shape our approach to life.

When two people have two different perspectives on issues, it’s natural to have conflict. But, without conflict, our businesses would be operating in a vacuum. We would not benefit from the different insights and perspectives that others on our team bring to the table.

Unfortunately, conflict often surfaces due to the pride, ego, or stubbornness of ourselves or our team members. When we become close minded and believe our idea or approach is the only correct possibility, we defy the wisdom God desires to provide us and allow our selfishness to rule and reign.

TYPES OF CONFLICT

In a business setting, there are typically two types of conflicts to resolve: internal and external.

Internal Conflicts

Whether it's a conflict you personally are having with someone on your team, or your team members are in conflict with each other, internal conflicts can be the most taxing.

Unfortunately, many times, the emotional explosion is the first realization of a conflict. It is important to realize, however, that the spark that created the explosion was likely not the beginning or even the core issue that needs resolved.

People will put up with a great deal of pain before confronting an issue, especially if they are confrontation avoiders. As the little things begin to build, eventually there is a "straw that broke the camel's back" event. It's at that point that we usually begin to work on resolving the conflict.

Unfortunately, prior to the explosion, it is not uncommon that the offended party has already started gossiping to others about their concerns. This undermines the credibility of the parties involved and creates a toxic work environment.

External Conflicts

Customers

The adage, "the customer is always right," doesn't always play out very well. There are customers who may disrespect your employees, abuse your policies and practices, or are just plain mean. Life's too short to serve everyone that can cost you time, money and lots of energy.

When you have a customer who constantly causes grief to your organization, there are times when you need to address the problem. Unfortunately, this can lead to conflict, and sometimes you will need to cut the customer loose.

There's a story of a Southwest Airlines passenger that had a habit of writing a complaint letter after every flight she took. She would complain about the lack of assigned seating, or how they only served peanuts, etc. When these constant complaints found their way to Herb Kelleher, the CEO, he wrote a brief letter back to the customer. "Dear Mrs. Crabapple, we will miss you. Love Herb."

Vendors

Sometimes suppliers don't measure up. They make promises that you build your business model around and then when those promises are unfulfilled or delayed, it can cost your

company money. This can surface conflicts that need to be addressed. Other times, we don't honor our commitments to the vendors which can also cause conflicts that the vendor wants to address.

There can be a stark contrast between the way we might handle a customer conflict versus a vendor conflict. We usually want a customer's business, so we may show a great deal of deference unless they have abused the privilege. Vendors, on the other hand, usually want our business if we pay them on time. This can give us some leverage that many may abuse. If we choose to treat both with dignity and respect, our treatment of customers and vendors should be more closely aligned. This is in contrast to how many *conventional* business leaders will approach these two relationships.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Which kind of conflicts are more frequent in your business; internal or external? Why do you think that is the case?

- 2. What benefits do you think there are in being more adept at resolving conflicts?

- 3. How do you feel about conflict? Do you avoid it at all cost or dig in and embrace it?

- 4. How can you better bring "shalom" to your workplace?

RESOLVING CONFLICT BIBLICALLY

When conflict surfaces, the response usually boils down to either “fight” or “flight.” Some are warriors who are ready to do battle when conflict comes their way. Others want to avoid confrontation quickly and quietly. They can slip out of the room before things get heated.

The downside of being a “fighter” is that you may be thinking about battle before taking the time to listen to the other party and gain understanding. The one who engages in flight, on the other hand, avoids confrontation and never voices their concerns, allowing the conflict to fester.

In Matthew 18, Jesus taught the disciples a way to resolve conflict that has something uncomfortable for everyone. He said, *“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*

According to Jesus, step one is to go to the source. Don’t start gossiping or complaining about the one with which you’re upset. Instead, go to the person with whom you have an issue and address it privately. If more people would adhere to this first step, many issues would be resolved just from the understanding that is gained from a private conversation. Many conflicts are simply misunderstandings.

Step two is for those situations that aren’t resolved from step one. Some people are stubborn, or they have a blind spot. They don’t agree with your position and therefore ignore or refute your concerns. That’s when it’s time to grab a person or two to go with you. These are people who have had a similar experience with the individual. They can provide additional facts to the conversation, adding heft to the complaint.

Next, Jesus wanted the church to be the final authority. He intended for the pastor who had authority over the defiant person to be able to speak into the situation and to give them one more opportunity to repent. Unfortunately, many churches are poor on accountability. I’ve seen pastors who dodge being brought into these kinds of conflicts. They sometimes shrug off the authority God has given them over their congregation and refuse to participate in the reconciliation process.

Finally, there are times when nothing works. Even the church can't get through to them. This is when you have permission to treat them as an unbeliever, which typically means avoiding contact with them.

Lawsuits

We live in a litigious society. When things don't go our way, many are inclined to sue. Although there are certainly times when justice will not be served any other way, we need to remember that, as Christians, God has set us apart. Christians suing Christians is a poor reflection on our faith.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:7, "Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" Before taking matters to the courts, first try resolving the issue by using the model in Matthew 18. If that doesn't work, sometimes arbitrators like a Christian organization called Peacemakers may be helpful.

Author and entrepreneur, Pete Ochs, tells the story of being sued by a man with whom he had done business. At first, Pete thought it was a nuisance...until he spoke with his attorney. After the attorney heard all the facts, he convicted Pete by telling him that he had definitely wronged this other person and that the lawsuit not only had merit, it could very well destroy Pete's business.

Pete began praying and repenting. He then called this other party and begged him to meet with him one on one. Pete walked into his office and dropped to his knees and said, "I am so sorry. I have wronged you and I want to make this right. The Bible told me I needed to drop everything to come and reconcile. Will you forgive me."

Pete was stunned when this man informed him that just the week before he had accepted Christ, and he began wondering if he had handled this situation in the best manner by filing a lawsuit. The two of them quickly came to terms and resolved the problem.

When we are deep into the process of resolving conflict, it's easy to get to a place where we are striving to be proven right rather than striving to reconcile with our brother and sister and be an agent of reconciliation between them and God. God cares for them as much as he does for you. He wants them to turn from any wickedness and to instead turn to Him. It's your job to help them move closer to God, not farther away.

Leading Others Through Conflict

As a leader, others in your midst will drag you into their conflicts. It's not uncommon that your employees or independent contractors will call to gossip or complain about someone else

within your organization. It's easy to get sucked into their story and want to side with them without hearing the other side of the story.

If you desire to have a workplace free of gossip and conflict, it's best to stop a complainer and encourage them to take their issue one on one to the person who has upset them. You may be brought back into the situation if they have trouble resolving their issue, but at least it sets them on a proper path of reconciliation rather than one of gossip and destruction.

SUMMARY

Conflict in the workplace is inevitable and is sometimes necessary for each of us to see beyond our own narrow view. Unresolved conflict, however, can fester and create a toxic work environment.

Conflict can get worse when handled incorrectly. Fortunately, Jesus gave us a reconciliation model that provides a path that shows the greatest honor and respect for others possible. Although it was designed for believers within the church, it is a wise model that works in the workplace as well. If you remember along the reconciliation journey that God's desire is for His children to reconcile with Him first and then with each other, it will help guide you to a resolution that will bring shalom to your workplace.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How well do you see Jesus' conflict model working in a business setting? What challenges might you have in implementation?

2. How do you feel when someone confronts you, one on one, about any wrong you've committed against them?

3. What systems or habits can you put in your place in light of this lesson to better resolve conflicts in your workplace?
