

Conquering the Conflict Monster

By Kelly A. Bennett

CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE, a certainty for every organization's leaders and managers. The question is not "if" conflict will occur, but "when," and if you haven't had your fair share, know that it's coming. You can count on it!

However, conflict doesn't have to be the "Monster" it's made out to be. With some foresight and careful planning, you can address these difficult issues with Christian wisdom. So, what's your strategy for dealing with disputes and disagreements as they arise?

MANAGING THE MONSTER

First, the basics: The court system is society's conflict management system. But as the volume of litigation increased, the legal system had to come up with a "better way" to resolve disputes and, thus, "ADR" was born. ADR (alternative dispute resolution) provides parties alternate, non-court forums for resolving conflict. The most common forms of ADR are mediation and arbitration.

Mediation is the process where a neutral party (the mediator) facilitates settlement discussions and helps the parties develop solutions benefiting all involved. Mediation offers the most power and control to those embroiled in disputes, because mediators never make decisions for the parties—the participants decide the outcome, and it's done in a *private* arena.

Arbitration offers an informal "trial" of the dispute, with the arbitrator making a final decision on the outcome of the case. The benefit of arbitration is that the parties get a *private* determination, by an arbitrator of their choice, as to who's right or wrong, and what money or other damages should be awarded.

Arbitration is also generally faster and less expensive than a trial at the courthouse. For Christian organizations, the ability to choose a Christian arbitrator, rather than having a judge appointed to the case, can have the additional benefit of ensuring that the arbitrator shares the organization's Christian worldview and will respect the Christian principles of justice, mercy and reconciliation.

THE RIGHT MODEL

Interestingly, the concept of ADR isn't a new idea. Jesus introduced it early on when he said: "If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the fault. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If that person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church" (Matthew 18:15-20, NLT).

This sounds a little like mediation and/or arbitration, doesn't it? Notice, Jesus didn't say, "if another believer sins against you, talk to him about it and if you don't get satisfaction, zip down to the courthouse and file a complaint for fraud, breach of contract and whatever else applies."

Look at what Paul had to say: “When you have something against another Christian, why do you file a lawsuit and ask a secular court to decide the matter, instead of taking it to other Christians to decide who is right? Don’t you know that someday we Christians are going to judge the world? And since you are going to judge the world, can’t you decide these little things among yourselves? Don’t you realize that we Christians will judge angels? So you should surely be able to resolve ordinary disagreements here on earth.

“If you have legal disputes about such matters, why do you go to outside judges who are not respected by the church? I am saying this to shame you. Isn’t there anyone in all the church who is wise enough to decide these arguments?

“But instead, one Christian sues another—right in front of unbelievers. To have such lawsuits at all is a real defeat for you. Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be cheated? But instead, you yourselves are the ones who do wrong and cheat even your own Christian brothers and sisters” (1 Corinthians 6:1-8, NLT).

When it comes to managing conflict in your organization, what do you model for your employees and the watching world? Do you model Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 6 principles, or the world’s way of denial, avoidance or aggressive attack?

PLAN AND LISTEN

Does your organization have a thoughtful plan for handling conflict? Failing to plan for conflict can cause very serious problems for any church, ministry or business. Often the most serious problems could have been resolved faster, and frankly, cheaper, had management simply implemented and followed a biblical dispute resolution plan and invested a little more time talking with and listening to their employees.

For example, in mediating employer-employee lawsuits, a common complaint heard from employees is that legal action could have been avoided if only the employee had been given a chance to “be heard” in a meaningful way.

I’m reminded of the Dr. Seuss story, *Horton Hears a Who*, where the microscopic town folk (they lived on the head of a dandelion, you may recall), gathered en masse to shout into a megaphone-like contraption: “We are here...we are here...we are here!” Like the “Whos,” people desperately want to be heard.

A FEW EXAMPLES

The extremes people will go to, to be heard, are often ugly. Take the case I mediated last year with a long-time employee who felt so shut out at the time of termination that she developed an unflattering website (that suspiciously looked like the employer’s, and used the ministry’s name in the web address) to make her own voice heard on the matter.

Or how about the terminated employee who had made serious errors in judgment, but was shut out of discussions about the errors until the day she was terminated? She went on to take her case to vendors and constituents of the high-profile organization, and, in the process, revealed confidential information in a light most unflattering to the organization and its supporters.

Another memorable mediation involved an employee who was summarily dismissed on the grounds he had shared proprietary information with an outside party. The problem was, the

employee was abruptly dismissed without any explanation as to why—no explanation at all.

The employee raised an interesting point: During his employment, he was told by his employer that when a ministry member made a mistake, it was ministry policy to give every opportunity to turn from the inappropriate behavior and be restored. The employee contended that, in fact, a senior management member had been confronted over inappropriate conduct and was given the chance to keep the job and be reconciled.

The terminated employee couldn't understand why the Matthew 18 process and the ministry's "policy" were applied to others, but not to him. The result? A wrongful termination lawsuit, a tarnished reputation of the parties and a diversion of ministry resources.

Remember the Apostle James' teachings on "equality in the sight of God?" (James 2:1-9). We as Christian employers are to treat every employee with equal fairness and opportunity for repentance and reconciliation. Clearly, had the ministry followed the Matthew 18 process for this employee, a very adversarial and expensive lawsuit could have been avoided.

NUTS AND BOLTS

How do you incorporate a healthy model for conflict resolution into your ministry or organization? A great leader takes a look at how things have been done, and asks, "How can we do them better?" First, consider a written grievance policy that incorporates directives for handling disputes, from the most minor to the most substantial. Incorporate the policy into the employee handbook, explaining each step of a grievance process (e.g., first, talk one-on-one with the individual with whom you're having a problem, then the supervisor, etc.).

Next, look at your employment and vendor contracts. Is there a written provision for how a dispute under the contract will be handled (an ADR clause)? Many times the only way to keep a matter out of the secular courts is to agree to mediation and arbitration *in advance* of any conflict. Recommending ADR in the heat of the conflict is often too late!

Finally, look for signals that a professional intermediary may be helpful to prevent escalation of the conflict. For example, you terminate an employee who refuses to accept a severance package and sign a release; or when, after termination or a sudden resignation, management begins to wonder, "Is he going to sue us?" Under such circumstances, you should consider bringing in a mediator at the exit interview to do some "damage control" and assist in negotiating a smoother transition for both employee and employer.

When you develop a purposeful plan for handling conflict and follow the teachings of Scripture, you send the right message to both disputants and onlookers, while saving time, money and a world of hurt.

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