



THE COMPASS

A TOOL FOR DISCIPLERS

Conflict Resolution

Conversation On the Journey

If I could snap my fingers and impart one skill to the students in our movement it would probably be the ability to address and resolve conflict. By and large when someone is upset with someone else, their first move is to go and talk trash about them to someone else. There is a tendency to gossip, complain, and run them down real good. That, of course, is an ungodly response and though it might be gratifying, it does just about nothing to restore the relationship.

One of the reasons we tend not to go to the person we're upset with, is that we don't know what to say. Here I'd like to show you a five-step guide that you and your disciple can follow when you need to have a hard conversation with someone. Who knows, if you and they follow these rules, you could start an epidemic of healthy conflict resolution.

Typically, when someone's mad at someone else, they just let it build until they reach their personal boiling point, and then unload on them: "You always do that; I can't believe you're such a jerk; it's no wonder no body likes you; how could you be so stupid?"

Well, that was nice. The good news is you finally decided to address what's bothering you, sort of. But all they caught was this garbled mass of accusations and emotion. Unfortunately, they have no idea what you're talking about, and are totally on the defensive. Good work. Here's a better idea.

Facts

Start by letting them know what the heck you are talking about. But do so dispassionately. Pop quiz: Is the following a statement of fact? "When I called you last night, you were so incredibly rude. I had stayed up late waiting for you to call, but did you care? No! I swear you are the most inconsiderate person who ever lived."

Uh, no. That's a bit of fact loaded with interpretation, opinion, and accusation. Try this instead:

"Hey Oscar, do you have a few minutes? There's something I need to talk to you about. Last night I was expecting to hear from you. By 11 o'clock I hadn't received a

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This Week's Excursion

Everybody hates conflict. Unfortunately, a lot of people also hate resolving conflict, or at least confuse resolving conflict for the conflict itself. In this lesson, you can teach your disciple some simple principles, and a process to follow that will help them address troubling issues and restore relationships.

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call from you, so I decided to try your cell. When you answered, the conversation was brief, and you hung up before I got to ask you my question.”

Catch all that? No interpretation, just the cold hard facts, with no attempt to spin them or read into them. We’re off to a much better start.

Thoughts

Having established the facts that all should be able to agree on, you are free to move to step two, in which you state clearly your interpretation of the facts. Avoid saying things like, “And on the basis of the aforementioned facts, I think you rot.” Instead, try something like this:

“Oscar, I thought we agreed to connect at 9:00 since I had to finish the paper and you were the only one in the group who had that citation that you agreed to look up. Since the paper is 40% of our grade I thought it was irresponsible for you to not give me the information I needed when I finally called you.”

See, you’re being honest, the facts are out there, and now so is your basic interpretation and complaint. Keep going.

Feelings

This is where you should let them know how you feel. Be careful though. If you begin your sentence by saying, “I feel that. . .” you are almost never describing a feeling. I know that’s screwy, but it’s true. “I feel like you are a jerk.” “I feel like choking you with my own hands.” “I feel that the world would be a better place if you were eaten by a pack of wild dogs.” None of those describe feelings. They may reveal feelings indirectly, but they are really statements of thought. Try again.

“I need to tell you I was really angry when we hung up. I had been growing more frustrated as the night went on because I knew it meant I’d be up late finishing this paper. And I was disappointed that you didn’t own up to your obligation when I called.”

Desire

In step four have a chance to make clear what you wish were true (and in the language of the Middle-East peace process, “Lay a roadmap for the future.”) Since we are trying to be civil and win hearts, not inflame rage, try not to say, “I swear if we get stuck in the same group again I’m going to tie you to the desk in the library and superglue your eyes open.”

Instead, try, “It’s really important to me to get a good grade in this class so I can get into my major. I’d also like our group to stay together for the next project. You’ve got some good ideas and I think we really benefit having you part of it.

Actions

Final hit is when you offer specific actions for the future. What are you asking them to do? What are you pledging to do?

Avoid things like:

Next Steps

Role play resolving conflict using this model. Give feedback about how well your disciple communicates during each step.

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“So in the future, why don’t you grow up and do your stinkin’ homework? I’m sick and tired of you sucking the life out of me and not holding up to your end of the bargain.”

Instead:

“I’d really appreciate it if you could get the bibliography done by Friday like we decided. If you can’t, let me know so the group can reassign that job and give you a different assignment.

Facts. Thoughts. Feelings. Desires. Actions.

If you can train your disciple to go walk through that process you can really help them resolve conflict instead of inflaming it. Explain the five steps, and then (as dorky as it seems) role play it. I’m serious. Pick an issue and then pretend to be the irritant in their life.

Have them explain the facts. After they do, evaluate how they did. Did they stick to the facts? Or were they giving opinions and interpretations?

Then have them share their thoughts. Are they clear? Do the thoughts form a reasonable interpretation of the facts?

Feelings come next. Are they actually expressing emotion, or are you just hearing thoughts, dressed up in feeling language?

Then desires. Are they reasonable, free of antagonism, and likely to elicit agreement from the other party?

Finally, action. Are they giving specific steps that they will take and are requesting the other person to take?

Role playing this is key. So is separating one step from the next. There is a lot more to say about resolving conflict, but this simple process ought to go a long way in improving the inevitable hard conversations that you and your disciple will need to have.

†End

Side Trails

Couple Communication. Phyllis and Sherod Miller. Interpersonal Communication Programs.

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