

Leadership Conflict

Love

Love between believers is the first and fundamental commandment of Jesus, yet many leaders seem to think that leadership takes priority over love. Certainly leadership often requires difficult decisions and should not bow to favouritism, but the exercise of leadership can never justify acts that are contrary to genuine godly love.

Galatians 6:1 Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

Openness

“But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.” (John 3:21)

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. (1 John 1:7)

Leaders must walk in the light together; they must be open with one another about their vision for the future they seek to lead people to and their own strengths and weaknesses. Leadership must be shared so that the variety of contributions that Christ has provided in the church can all contribute to a wholesome and healthy leadership team.

Integrity

Leaders must live what they preach as far as they are able. They must lead by example and not just by exhortation. And this example must include the way they handle leadership relationships and leadership difficulties.

Handling Leadership Conflict

A leader's response to accusations against them

Leaders must learn how to handle accusations against them and disagreements with other leaders. Leadership is a high calling and comes with great responsibilities. The standard of love for leaders is high. John says

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.” (1 John 3:16)

A leader's first response to accusations or disagreements should be to lay down his life rather than defend himself.

That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10)

This is the example Jesus left for us.

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you. (Matthew 5:44)

For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. (1 Peter 2:20-21)

If this is how Jesus wants us to behave towards the enemies of the truth, how much more should we show this forgiveness and love towards our fellow leaders. Sadly, leaders are so often very defensive, strongly defending and justifying their actions and respond to accusations with accusations.

Forgiveness

Jesus warned us that if we do not forgive those who sin against us, neither will our Father forgive us.

Responsibility for conflict resolution

Everyone in the body of Christ is responsible for conflict resolution. No one who sees conflict has the right to stand by and say nothing. We must all guard the unity of Christ's body.

But leaders clearly have the prime responsibility to resolve conflict. Again, no leader can stand aside saying "it's not my responsibility" but the lead leader is ultimately responsible before God for those in his care, and he must not shirk the responsibility for resolving conflicts that arise within his church or in his leadership team.

The causes of conflict

Effective teams will have a willingness to disagree, yet hold each other accountable to not move into destructive conflict.

Conflict arises out of a perceived inadequate response to a problem or disagreement. For instance, "I don't feel you have given sufficient consideration to my view."

The cause may be serious moral or doctrinal error which may require a matter to be confronted and may result in conflict. But it is more usually a disagreement about vision, strategy, roles, structure, implementation or personal preferences that ought to be resolved without conflict.

It is important to identify the actual problem that gave rise to the conflict. James suggests that we need to start by searching our own hearts:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? (James 4:1)

Conflict between people is often the result of conflict within an individual. This inner conflict may not be obvious to that person. When we feel the need to speak or act in way that could give rise to conflict, we should first ask God to help us examine our own heart to reveal what is causing this strong emotion.

The following questions should be prayerfully considered both individually and collectively to identify how the conflict has arisen:

- What is the problem that has given rise to this conflict? Try to dig down to the root issues.
- What part has each person contributed to this conflict arising?
- What part is pride playing in this conflict?
- What part are mistakes, inexperience or inadequate knowledge playing?

Resolving conflict

Conflict resolution is about winning hearts not arguments. It requires that each person listens carefully to the other, and then echoes back in as few words as possible what they think they have heard.

The following questions should be prayerfully considered both individually and collectively to try and find a godly way forward.

- Are we being open with each other about the real issues?
- Are there behavioural issues that need addressing?
- How can we imitate and glorify Jesus in handling this issue?
- Can we bring in a peace-maker to help us resolve this in a godly way?
- What positive thing would each person like to come out of resolving this issue?

Initiating conflict

Before initiating a potential conflict consider the following advice:

- Never react in the heat of the moment. Get at least one night's sleep between the decision to initiate the potential conflict and the implementation of that decision.
- Pray until you are sure that this is what Jesus wants you to do.
- Seek the advice of an experienced leader who is not involved in the situation.
- Discuss the wisdom of your intention with your spouse.
- Discuss the wisdom of your intention with your fellow leaders.
- If you are sure you should initiate a potential conflict, only raise the essential issue. Do not raise any non-essential side issues. They will become the focus instead of the core issue and make resolution much more difficult.
- When raising the issue do not make accusations against the other person. Stick to your own observations and feelings, and report only facts, not hearsay. Remember that you are trying to establish truth, not win an argument.

Healthy church audit

Many churches find it helpful to have a “healthy church audit”. You invite a leader from another church to interview a cross section of the leadership and the wider congregation in order to discover if they really have a common vision and to see if the teaching, pastoral and leadership functions within the church are healthy and effective. They then report back to the leadership team to help them improve the quality of their leadership.