

# RESOLVING CONFLICT

KNOW WHAT TO DO AND WHAT NOT TO DO







## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I help non-profit and business leaders understand how to maximize their God-given potential to lead and serve others. I do this primarily through speaking at events and leading half-day/all-day workshops.

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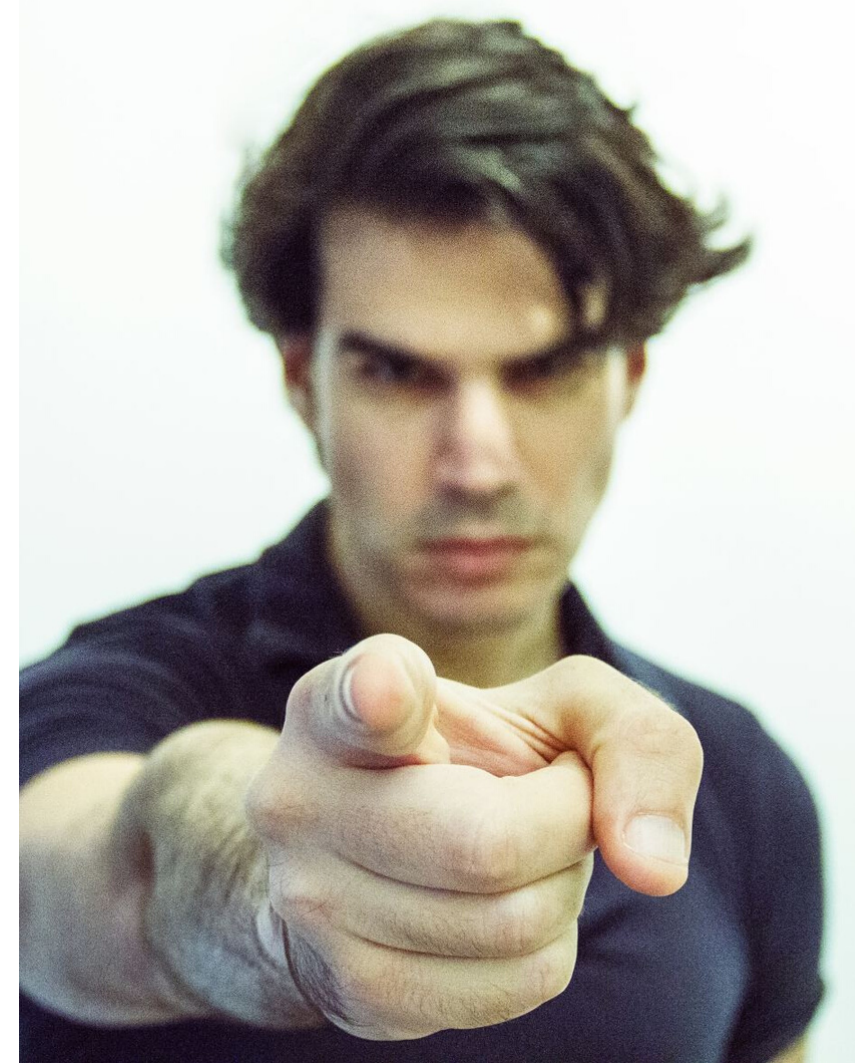


## INTRODUCTION

Think about the building of a new worship space. Conflict can arise between those reaching for excellence and those who are concerned with stewardship. Still, others will argue for no new building at all, wishing to rent instead in order to allocate resources more missionally. Not all conflicts are negative and should be resolved. Find out how to tell the difference and how to deal with it properly.

## IMPROPER CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Over the next few pages, we will look at four improper responses to conflict: freeze, fire, fight, and flight. In the first response, those at odds with each other attempt to withdraw in the relationship. We will look at this more closely, along with the other three in this section.



## PROPER CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In Ephesians 4:25, the Apostle Paul tells us to “put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” In essence, be honest. We’re family after all! We will examine the wisdom found in the Ephesians apply it to conflict resolution.

# INTRODUCTION



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Not all conflicts are negative and should be resolved. Think about the building of a new worship space. Conflict can arise between those reaching for excellence and those who are concerned with stewardship. Still, others will argue for no new building at all, wishing to rent instead in order to allocate resources more missionally. Is it even possible to address everyone's concerns in this situation? What would managing that tension look like?

Or how about the conflict between those always looking into the future versus those managing employees on the clock? Some think leadership is greater than management. But could leaders get anything done without managers ensuring there's a process to carry out the vision? Conflicts between leadership and management will always be present, as vision and systems collide, and flexibility integrates with excellence.

Progress depends not on the resolution of those tensions but on the successful management of them. Nancy Ortberg, a consulting partner of Patrick Lencioni with the Table Group, tells about one team she consulted.

A team member complained, “We never run into any tension; it’s just that we aren’t moving forward!”

“Exactly!” was Nancy’s response. “That’s your problem!”

In essence, they needed more conflict. Rather than embracing diversity of ideas and encouraging debate, they were more fixated on team harmony —“just keep everyone happy.”

Tension and conflicts, if managed correctly, propel us toward engagement and real solutions that have both buy-in and better results. Without friction between tires and pavement, a car cannot move forward. Without tension, motors can’t run, tools can’t fix, and rubber bands are useless. Likewise, without conflict, relationships don’t have the potential to grow or really go anywhere worthwhile.

High performing teams must engage in what Lencioni refers to as “passionate, unfiltered, debate” in his book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. You will only achieve mediocrity when members are not allowed to argue toward the best solution. Conflict is a necessary and important part of teamwork.

On the other hand, family, marital, and friend relationships have obvious differences in contrast to workgroups or teams. The former prioritizes the relationship whereas the latter has relationship born out of the pursuit of a shared vision and mission. In a family or marriage, relationship is the focal point of interest and ongoing tensions will prove unhealthy. On a team, however, your work is what drives the relationship and better work results in better relationships.

So first be aware that conflict is inevitable. It will happen. Therefore, anticipate it. All teams, churches, families, and marriages will experience conflict and tension to some extent. Paul and Barnabas had a conflict of opinion in Acts 15:36-41 (more detail on this [here](#)). Fortunately, the outcome was positive.

Second, keep in touch with everyone’s opinions and feelings. Staying in tune with those closest to

you ensures that the relational capital is there to deal with conflict when it arises. It's like changing the oil in your car. It's not urgent to take your vehicle in every 5,000 miles for an oil change but it certainly extends its mechanical health and longevity. Likewise, it's often wise to hold team meetings on a consistent basis if for no other reason, to check in on the status of your mission and maintain relational connection.

Finally, remember that feelings and emotions run much deeper than facts, and often the substance of arguments is of lesser importance. Deal with both the emotional and the rational; resolve conflict before it becomes disruptive.



# IMPROPER CONFLICT RESOLUTION



# IMPROPER CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Over the next few pages, I will be looking at four improper responses to conflict: 1) Freeze, 2) Fire, 3) Fight, and 4) Flight. Credit is due to Bill Hybels for gathering these responses to conflict in his book, *Fit To Be Tied*, which he wrote with his wife.

## **FREEZE**

In the first response, those at odds with each other attempt to “freeze each other out,” giving the “cold shoulder,” and ultimately withdrawing in the relationship. Everyone knows there is a dispute, but no one says anything about it. Instead, each person backs away and mutters under their breath.



No matter how large the problem looms, it is never dealt with openly. People negotiate around it, avoid it, or hope that time will thaw things out, but the chill never leaves the air. In fact, with each new unresolved conflict, they add another layer of “ice.” Eventually they “freeze” themselves into total withdrawal from one another.

A story appeared in the 1930’s edition of The Chicago Herald Examiner about a husband who embraced this “freeze ’em out” style of behavior in a rather extreme way. The article was entitled, “Man Spites His Wife By Staying Blindfolded in Bed Seven Years.” Here’s an excerpt from the article:

“The strange story of Harry Havens of Indiana—who went to bed—and stayed there—for seven years with a blindfold over his eyes because he was peeved at his wife, [this strange story] was revealed here today when he decided to get out of bed. Havens was the kind of husband who liked to help around the house—hang pictures, do the dishes, and such. His wife scolded him for the way he was performing one of these tasks, and he resented it. He is reported to have said, ‘All right. If that’s the way you feel, I’m going to bed. I’m going to stay there the rest of my life. And I don’t want to see you or anyone else again.’ His last remark explains the blindfold. He got up recently, he

explained, because the bed started to feel uncomfortable after seven years.”

Freezing people out of a relationship obviously does not resolve conflict, but only causes individuals to become cold, withdrawn, and emotionally hardened.

## **FIRE**

This is where people deal with conflict like cowboys. They shout in the saloon, throw things, break windows, and fire their guns. When disagreements break out, people “draw their six-shooters” and start firing off “verbal bullets” at one another. Bullets ricochet around drawing more people into the fray. Feelings are vented, anger is released. Action and drama abound, and a lot of damage is done along the way because by swapping shots at each other, people get wounded deeply. Innocent bystanders take sides and further inflame the problem.

The issues that drive people apart remain unsolved because instead of attacking the problem, people attack each other. They do not first consider the wide-ranging impact of their verbal barrage. Often the conflict—which may have been minor—becomes a full-blown relational disaster; deep emotional wounds are inflicted that may never fully heal.



Firing off at people obviously does not resolve conflict. Rather, it has the potential to wound people deeply and blow the conflict way out of proportion.

## **FLEE**

When an argument begins, some people literally run from it. Some people go out and get drunk or embark on a shopping spree or just storm out of the building. Others silently leave with a victim mentality.

On dysfunctional teams, people either choose a “yes-yes” posture toward their leader or leave when things don’t go their way. Highly effective teams see conflict and disagreement in a more positive light and encourage it as a way forward toward better solutions. Their only concern is that members agree to disagree agreeably, maintaining respect for each other. Ideas are attacked, not each other, and members never flee the scene.

Another way people flee from conflict is to absorb themselves in work. Their workaholism may be symptomatic of running away from conflict and drowning out the pressure through work. Like all the other improper responses we’ve discussed earlier, fleeing does not resolve the problem. The person simply carries the issue with them, becoming reactionary and bitter in the process.

## **FIGHT**

The fourth and final way of handling conflict occurs when verbal assaults escalate into actual physical violence inflicted on each other. Resorting to violence, people create more pain and distance than the original issue could possibly have caused.

People lose control and plates or glasses fly through the air like projectiles. Feet kick holes through sheetrock. People lash out at each other with fists and fingernails. It's never a pretty sight!

An example of this conflict style happened in Waukesha, Wisconsin to newlyweds, Mr. and Mrs. Snider. The problems started when their wedding was over and they were trying to decide where they should go to celebrate. They couldn't agree and, since they had been drinking since early afternoon, the bride got mad and swung at her husband—gashing his head open with her wedding ring. The police were eventually called because someone in the bar thought the groom had been stabbed.

When the bride met the police, she was belligerent and was arrested for disorderly conduct. They later found the groom wandering along a nearby street in search of a hospital. The police took him to see



his wife at the jail. But, shortly after being released, the lovebirds began arguing again and this time he hit her in the face. He was arrested for domestic battery and since she started kicking the police officers for interrupting their 'honeymoon,' she was arrested a second time for disorderly conduct. They spent their wedding night in separate cells and were released the next morning. It's not hard to imagine how long their marriage lasted!

# PROPER CONFLICT RESOLUTION





# PROPER CONFLICT RESOLUTION

In the last few pages, I discussed four improper responses to conflict, all leading to plots purchased in the relational cemetery. Which begs the question—can conflict resolved correctly actually lead to life and flourishing? I believe it can!

## BE HONEST

In these next few pages, I will be examining the wisdom found in the book of Ephesians of the Bible and applying it to conflict resolution. In Ephesians 4:25, the Apostle Paul tells us to “put off

falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” In essence, be honest...we’re family after all!

Relationships cannot be built on deception. The word falsehood in Greek is “pseudo.” A pseudo-Intellectual appears to be a complex thinker when, in truth, he or she may or may not be very bright at all. She may call herself “Dr.” He may smoke a pipe and grow a distinguished-looking beard, but he got his diploma in the mail. So basically, a pseudo-something is a false-something. It’s a front—a mask—a fake. It’s not real.

We need to be honest and real about who we are and what we’re feeling. We must speak the truth in love. Being honest means acknowledging problems and conflicts, not ignoring them.

Sometimes clarifying an issue can be the means of building a relationship, even though it may focus on something negative for the moment. Using the word “clarify” rather than “confront” softens the entire approach. It might also help to write the issue down before approaching someone.

John. R. W. Stott once stated that “Fellowship is built on trust and trust is built on truth. So falsehood undermines fellowship, while truth strengthens it.”



## BE ANGRY

Ephesians 4:26-27 instructs us to “Be angry and do not sin” (ESV). Another version—“In your anger do not sin” (NIV).

Anger is an emotion that must be felt—not suppressed or denied. The Greek word for anger is a command; we’re ordered to be angry. Consider that not all anger is bad; it’s often triggered by a sense of injustice—evidence of being made in God’s image (the Bible has plenty to say about God’s anger—I’ve often heard it referred to as righteous indignation). In fact, shrugging off serious offenses is a sure sign you’re disconnected in your relationships. Concealed anger eventually leaks out and poisons relationships, much like toxic waste hidden in a mountain cave seeps into the water table. Furthermore, buried anger will eventually lead a person into pits of depression and bitterness.

The Bible is clear that we should not sin in our anger. “Go ahead, be mad...but, when you’re ticked off, remember, sinning is off limits!” (Luke’s Revised Version) Our problem is not anger—it’s the sinful way we tend to respond to it. Not controlling our anger is a weakness (you’re actually letting someone you don’t want to have control over you

control you!); you're strong when you release it correctly.

So let's note several things. Expressing anger in immature, selfish, and hurtful ways is always sin. Allow yourself to "cool off" before expressing your negative emotions. Remind yourself that appropriate expressions of anger never cause fear, never belittle or intimidate, and never shut another person down.

This text in Ephesians also tells us to deal with our anger quickly—"Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." The longer you wait the harder it is to resolve an issue. Going to bed angry makes your anger behave like cement in that it hardens during the night!

The devil wants us to hold on to our anger, eroding trust and commitment, and building walls of resentment between relationships. He wants us to embrace our rage long enough to destroy relationships and introduce bitterness.

"Do not erect a shrine to your anger in your heart. If you do, the devil will appoint himself its priest."  
-Anonymous



## BE PRAYERFUL

Though not explicitly found in the Ephesians 4 passage (see Paul's injunction in Philippians 4:6 soon after pleading with two women to reconcile their differences) being prayerful is appropriate to the topic at hand. In fact, being prayerful should be the overall guiding principle with all these beatitudes on resolving conflict. Each situation is unique and requires prayer—wisdom from above.

First, consider David's prayer in Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (vs. 23-24). The Holy Spirit gives us a balanced perspective on problems. Our human tendency is to cast blame on others and to deny personal guilt. In prayer, we begin to ask probing questions: "God, am I being unreasonable or selfish or insensitive here? Am I aggravating the situation? Am I yielding to sin?"

Second, when people pray, God often does miracles. It may be the miracle of changed hearts

and the solution to a difficult problem, or it may simply be the miracle of giving me a new perspective on the issue.

Third, when people pray, lives are changed and hearts are softened. Consider that it may be my heart that needs to soften first.

Fourth, when people pray, pointing fingers change direction. Rather than blaming the other person for the offense, I begin to look inward toward my lack of forgiveness, perspective, or love for the offender.

Fifth, when people pray, problems shrink. It's amazing how prayer can dial down the angst in my spirit, the strong feelings of injustice, or the seemingly insurmountable problems. Prayer focuses my attention on the Great I AM!

Finally, when people pray, conflicts sometimes disappear.

## **BE KIND**

Returning to Ephesians 4, focus on verse 29 and the first part of 32: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but

only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen...Be kind and compassionate to one another.”

My wife Amy purchased a suction cup shelf for our bathtub at a garage sale soon after we moved back from Southeast Asia. (And of course it didn't work —“suction cup thingys” never do!)

She never should have bought it...she wasted a few precious quarters on that thing...what was she thinking?! Those and a few other choice thoughts rushed through my mind...I conjured up all types of responses I would say to her—all surrounding the logic that would have defied such a purchase (yes, yes, all over a suction cup device! And a few quarters—seriously? I'm still laughing thinking back about it).

But then a check in my spirit—“Luke, BE KIND.” Just a simple message—“Be kind.” See, I could have started a huge conflict over something so small, so inconsequential...just a silly little plastic shelf. But kindness was the right response, and thankfully, the Spirit prompted me to be kind...and not get on her case about buying a piece of junk.



A small thing, you say...well, maybe, but it's the "small foxes that spoil the vines" (Song of Solomon 2:15). Many large disputes start from very small things and small issues often get blown way out of proportion. Just consider that all it might take to prevent or defuse a conflict is one word of kindness, a compassionate response, a moment of empathy, and an attempt at thinking the best of another instead of the worst. So be kind.

Let's look at some practical pointers on being kind.

First, examine your heart to see if you are biased against the offending person. It's hard to think kindly about, much less act compassionately toward those you hold in a negative light. Often unconscious biases are formed from past experiences or social stereotypes based on over-generalized and unfair beliefs.

Second, do not cease to confront just because you like someone, or use confrontation as a means of punishing someone you dislike. Neither is an act of kindness. Kindness helps others overcome their deficiencies and self-destructive tendencies.

Third, do not attack people; concentrate on the

problem. Kindness avoids personal accusations, remembering that everyone is human, prone to make mistakes. A kind person empathizes with one who made the mistake and helps them find a way forward.

Practically speaking, avoid words like ‘always’ and ‘never.’ (“You never do your share of the work!” or “You’re always late!”) Statements like this are always false, never true. Generalizing like this encourages the conflict to continue and even fan it up to the next level. Plus these words are anything but kind.

It’s much better to express hurt rather than hostility. Use “I messages” instead of “you messages.” I feel “such and such a way,” is less inflammatory. You’re not judging or accusing. You’re owning your own feelings. This also opens the door for further discussion and practical problem-solving. Besides, it’s kind!

Stephen Covey introduced us to the concept of an emotional bank account. Every person has one... you either make deposits—kind, positive words that build someone up—or withdrawals—offenses that have the potential to break down a relationship—in

other people's emotional bank accounts.

We're all prone to making mistakes and will therefore make withdrawals in others' emotional bank accounts. The key is to make ample deposits to offset the withdrawals. Serious problems occur when too many withdrawals have been made and these accounts become overdrawn.

So here's some advice for maintaining positive relationships. For every negative, hurtful, discouraging thing you've said to someone, you should say several kind, loving, helpful, encouraging things. John Gottman's pioneering research shows that for marriages to last there needs to be a 5:1 ratio in terms of deposits and withdrawals. Kind, positive interactions like complimenting, smiling, and touching must outnumber negative comments like sarcasm or put-downs by a ratio of 5-to-1. In fact, marriages that are at a 1:1 ratio are teetering on the brink of divorce. You must be kind far more than you are unkind.

On a side note, does kindness and positivity have limits? Apparently, that ratio diminishes slightly for those in work environments. People on teams or work groups should maintain a ratio of 3:1. Barbara Frederickson's research at the University of



Michigan concluded that when this ratio approaches 12:1 the team may no longer be as effective—too much praise and not enough passionate, unfiltered, debate (to borrow from Patrick Lencioni) renders a team unproductive and unsuccessful.

Now, let's build on that with a look at some practical considerations. It's vitally important to affirm another person and demonstrate a caring attitude, even if you do not agree with their decisions, beliefs, or behaviors. Affirming them as a person is your first priority—it will also equip you with social capital to invest in their lives and perhaps bring about positive change. So here are some do's and don'ts:

- Do find things that you can speak positively about. “Catch people doing the right things” is some of the best parenting and management advice I've ever heard.
- Don't say mean things. The uglier our words, the less we will communicate. Unfair criticism chips away at a person's dignity and puts them on the defensive.
- Do speak the truth in love. “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11 ESV).

- Don't yell. The louder your words are, the less your team member will hear.
- Do small things to express appreciation. Keep your "I love you's!" up to date and take time to write specific words of appreciation and encouragement on notes for people at work. Consistency is key.
- Don't forget. Remember, sins of omission (actions not taken) are sometimes as great as those of commission (actions taken). Be intentional.
- Do keep your disputes at a local level as much as possible. Work things out privately.
- Do not dispute your issue in front of those who are not involved or it will make it bigger as it causes them to take sides.

## BE FORGIVING

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32)

Forgiveness is not easy; love is hard work. Forgiveness is not a feeling, rather, it is an act of the will. It’s saying, “I value our team, our team vision, and our team relationships. You are important to me and I want to glorify God, so I choose to forgive you!”

When Stephen Covey was doing research for his most famous book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, he came across the following compelling statements: ([credited to Viktor Frankl and Rollo May](#)):

- Between stimulus and response there is space.
- In that space is our power to choose our response.
- In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Forgiveness is choosing freedom for both ourselves and the offender. Bitterness prevents growth and makes us a slave of the wrongdoer. Better to enable both yourself and that person toward life and wholeness.



If you're currently embroiled in conflict remember that the goal is not to win but to be reconciled. We're not trying to win arguments; we're trying to win hearts! Dale Carnegie tells us to avoid all arguments. He says that you can't win an argument. If you lose it, you lose it, and if you win it, you still 'lose' it since you've lost any potential impact you may have had on that person. He who loses feels inferior; he will resent your triumph. Furthermore, as [someone](#) once said: "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

We must always be committed to resolving issues and restoring harmony. State the terms, "I'm sorry" and "I forgive you," over and over again. Develop the ability to forgive and 'forget.' In the apostle Paul's words: "[love] keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5b). While mentally forgetting an offense may be impossible, it is possible to resolve not to bring the issue up again.

# PRACTICAL STEPS

## SEVEN A'S OF CONFESSION

If we have been the cause of an offense or made a mistake that offended someone, we must confess honestly and thoroughly, accepting personal responsibility for our own errors. Below are the Seven A's of Confession:

- Address everyone involved. “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Proverbs 28:13).
- Avoid ‘if,’ ‘but,’ and ‘maybe.’ Don’t make excuses; “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son’” (Luke 15:21).
- Admit specifically. That goes for both attitudes and actions. The more specific you are the more acceptable the apology.
- Apologize. Expressing sorrow for the way you offended someone will add to the sincerity of the apology.
- Accept the consequences and make restitution if necessary. “But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount’” (Luke 19:8).

- Alter your behavior. Make a commitment to changing harmful behavior or habits (see Ephesians 4:22-32).
- Ask for forgiveness. Sometimes that means allowing the offended person time to forgive.

## **INVOLVING A MEDIATOR**

I'll never forget the time when my wife and I had some close friends involved in a dispute. We had to act as mediators, setting some ground rules, making space for each party to be heard, and helping them both move toward a solution.

Sometimes when resolving conflicts you may need to ask a third person to mediate. First, try to discover common ground from which to build a way forward. Finding just ten percent that you agree on can re-posture the entire conflict on a more positive footing.

Second, look for a solution that both can accept and which will advance a shared vision or mission. Stephen Covey called this a third alternative. Unfortunately, too many times we only think in either/or—my way or the highway.

This win-lose (“I win, you lose”) posture only sours the relationship further even if you get your way at the moment. Those who assume a victim mentality—lose-win (“You win and I lose...in fact I always



lose...I'll just give in yet again as I always have...")—are devalued by the victor, diminishing both parties' dignity. Choosing a third alternative—win-win ("You win and I win—we both win!")—denies selfish ambition and leads to creative solutions. If a win-win cannot be established it's best to agree on "no deal" which simply means that we will agree to disagree agreeably so that perhaps in the future we can work something out.

Here's a great exercise to try sometime with a group of friends. Draw an imaginary line down the floor, dividing everyone into two groups facing each other across the line. Instruct each team to convince the other team to cross over to their side without using force. North American players almost never convince one another but their Asian counterparts simply say, "If you'll cross the line, so will we." They exchange places and everyone wins. The key to resolving conflicts? Think win-win!

## **WHAT FOLLOWS FORGIVENESS**

The ultimate goal is for reconciliation and forgiveness to occur that can eventually lead to a thriving relationship. It may take time for wounds to heal, but they CAN heal. Here are some key issues to consider if you desire a relationship to heal and thrive.

After offering forgiveness promise to:

- Not think about the incident OR bring up the incident again or use it against the person you just forgave. This is especially hard right after forgiveness and reconciliation have occurred. Feelings are still raw and memories acute.
- Refuse to talk to others about the incident. There's nothing to be gained by rehashing something you've laid down, nor will it bode well for the relationship just mended.
- Not allow the incident to stand between you and the other person, or hinder your relationship in any way. In other words, you need to force yourself to act out forgiveness even if you don't feel like it.

Here's my final challenge to all of us—**what will it take to make it for the long haul in our relationships, especially with those nearest and dearest to us?** What price are we willing to pay? Will I fight for what is so important to me? Will I glorify my Father in heaven by choosing to forgive as he has forgiven me (see Ephesians 4:32 and Colossian 3:13)?

# REFLECTION QUESTIONS





## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Several years ago I was working for my friend John on a ranch in Colorado. Without using a jack, I lifted the front end of the tractor so he could change the tire. Most of you would probably deny my superhuman strength, refuting that claim, and perhaps beg to ask a few clarifying questions.

Similarly, when it comes to conflict, one must ask the following questions and assess the sources of disagreement:



- Is there inaccurate information? Has everyone's point of view been given equal time and attention?
- Is the issue simply a matter of preference? Are people using different methods to accomplish the same thing?
- Is everyone clear on the same goals? Do people have different competing agendas?
- Have other previous problems contributed to bad feelings? Do some other issues need to be resolved first before working on the current conflict?

Getting everyone to see everyone else's viewpoint is difficult but nonetheless vital in order to retain dignity and move the discussion forward in a positive direction. Get each person to restate in their own words what they heard and understood the other person said. Help people understand the difference between preferences and convictions. Clarify vision, mission, and goals. Clear up any attitudes of ill will through private side meetings before working a group through the resolution process.

*[In the spirit of full disclosure, click [here](#) for a more accurate perspective of the photo on the previous page.]*





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