

REDUCING SCHOOL VIOLENCE THROUGH CONFLICT RESOLUTION

As the plane was taxiing to the terminal, my pager beeped. Who could want me already? I'd barely left. My concern subsided when I saw it was my son's phone number at school. Probably he just wanted to know where I'd put something. But this was no ordinary call.

"Dad, I wanted you to hear it from me first. I'm all right—or rather, I'm going to be all right. I went with some students and faculty to the Taco Bell near the school. A couple of guys who were just looking for trouble jumped me outside the store and beat me up. They chipped a couple of my teeth, bruised my eye pretty badly, and I'm pretty swollen around the head, but I'm going to be OK. Dad. . ."

At that very moment, I was on my way to Pacific Union College to conduct a seminar for teachers and principals on successful conflict resolution. My mind began to spin. I had spent some time on the plane aching for my friend whose 25-year-old daughter had just been murdered. *What is going on in this world of ours?* I wondered. I confess that my thoughts did not contain many of the nice ideals on how to reduce violence that I would be sharing in less than 24 hours. At that moment, I wanted to *create* some violence.

As I drove from the airport to PUC, I prayed that Jesus would give

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BY RICK WILLIAMS

me understanding and compassion for all the players in the recent events. I prayed for forgiveness for my thoughts of violence. And several things became clear. This is a world of sin. Until Jesus finally brings peace, we will have conflict and violence. But God gives principles that we can use for dealing with this. As teachers and administrators, we must provide an environment in which conflict can be resolved according to Christian principles. This article will offer a process of conflict resolution which, while not ensuring a violence-free environment, will contribute to that goal.

During my years as a dean of men, dean of students, and professor of counseling, I observed that most people do better

at learning a few simple rules or principles rather than trying to assimilate large bodies of information. Thus, I will offer some broad biblically supported principles and steps for conflict resolution. At the end, I will list some materials you can use to delve deeper into the subject.

Communication Skills Needed

People see life differently! Our perceptions are developed over many years through the lenses of the cultures and subcultures that shape our lives. This is so basic that we often forget how powerful these influences really are. Many confrontations fester and finally erupt because of poor com-

or friend could say something like, “You are mad because math is hard for you.”

As the conversation deepens, the listener must try to imagine what it feels like to be in that situation. He or she can then summarize it in words like these: “You are pretty angry because it is hard for you to have to stay in during recess to work on math,” or “You’re upset because it is hard for you to see yourself at the bottom of the class.” The listener should share only at the level that the person is able to hear and accept. It is very important during this phase not to attach blame—such as “You should have studied harder.”

The stage also requires thoughtfulness. When you are required to be a confronter, it is often difficult to put yourself in another’s shoes because you may be so involved with your own emotions. It requires significant self-discipline to keep the focus on the other person’s perspective.

For example, when confronting a student whose behavior has been very annoying to you, remember that the student may be unaware that there is a problem—and thus you should say something like, “It may come as a surprise to you. . . .” If the student is well aware of the problem, however, an empathic response might be, “I’m sure you must be pretty disappointed to be talking to me about this.”

Step 2: “I” Statement

It is only fair that both sides should share their feelings in conflict situations. Often the simple sharing of those feelings can lessen or solve the problem. This occurs most easily with “I” statements.

In one of my first jobs, I had a boss who enjoyed being called “Captain.” Every morning, I greeted him with a “Good morning, Captain.” Later, I had a co-worker whom I regularly greeted with this same expression, out of habit. After we worked together for several months,

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munication in the early stages of a misunderstanding, often caused by different perceptions.

The single most important component of successful conflict resolution is good communication skills. The various goals of student negotiation, mediation, and arbitration are achieved by the use of core communication skills. Listening is perhaps the most important of these.

The following steps are organized from the perspective of the person who plans to do the confronting to bring about conflict resolution. Once these steps and skills are learned, they can be adapted to a wide variety of situations.

Step 1: Empathy

In order to be able to confront well, one must be able to listen well! The first step in conflict resolution is to listen actively—not only to the facts, but also, and more importantly—to the feelings and reasons behind them. It has been estimated that about 90 percent of the world’s problems could be resolved if in-

dividuals thought that their feelings were understood. One must listen well in order to communicate understanding.

People want to have their hurt and fear understood and will behave in desperate ways to achieve this. Anger always results from fear and hurt, even if the person is not aware of this. Thus, an active listener in a conflict situation must pay attention to the subtle ways the person shows that he or she is hurt or fearful.

Since every human being wants to be understood, it makes sense that a confronter will work hard to understand the other person’s perspective. In Matthew 22:39 (NIV), Jesus commanded us to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Listening to the emotions and needs of another person is a deeply loving act.

After hearing the emotions and needs, the confronter will communicate his or her understanding to the person being confronted. If a student comes into the classroom, slams a book down on the desk, and says, “I hate math!” the teacher

he called me to his office and said, "If you call me 'Captain' one more time, I am going to hit the roof." I was shocked. I had no idea that in his culture this phrase had negative connotations. So every morning, unintentionally, I had insulted him. If he had only shared his feelings earlier, I would have worked diligently to omit this phrase from my morning rituals. He could have said to me: (Step 1) "You know, this may come as a surprise to you," thereby letting me know that he understood I was not doing this maliciously. And then followed with (Step 2): "But it is somewhat irritating to me to hear the term 'Captain' because this phrase has negative connotations in my culture."

Step 3: Contract

After both parties' feelings have been acknowledged, they should try to reach an agreement about future behavior. This step is sometimes called the contract step because the parties try to come up with an agreement that meets everyone's needs and is measurable. For example, if a student borrowed a textbook that you needed, and didn't return it on time, you would not say, "In the future, I hope you will do better about returning my textbooks." He might then return them in 15 weeks instead of 16 weeks! Although this would be technically correct, you would still be very upset.

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Instead, the agreement should describe a specific and measurable behavior—something on the order of "I don't mind your borrowing my book for the weekend, but can we agree that you will return it to me before 9 a.m. on Tuesday morning?"

Step 4: Confrontation

Now what can be done if the person does not return the book by 9 a.m. on Tuesday? Then one must be prepared for confrontation. But this confrontation will be gentle—as Christ would do.

Confrontation consists of three com-

ponents: (a) The agreed-upon contract from Step 3, (b) the perceived behavior, and (c) a request for clarification. This can be illustrated by the following exchange: "I thought we had an agreement that the book would be returned by 9 a.m. on Tuesday. However, I clearly did not have it by that time. Can you help me understand why?"

Note several important points. First, the fact that we thought there was a specific agreement. Sometimes, the two parties perceive the agreement differently. Perhaps they both agreed on the day, but one thought it was next Tuesday, not this Tuesday.

Second, and perhaps most important, we did not say that the other person failed to return the book. So many times, confrontation goes awry because we think we have to prove people wrong. It is much more appropriate to point out the discrepancy, and ask them to show that they are correct. It often happens!

And third, the manner in which we say, "Can you help me understand that?" is critically important. A large portion of communication is non-verbal. Therefore, asking for clarification in a gentle, soft, and inviting manner is crucial to the success of the technique. It is what Christ does with us.

Many individuals have noted, with appreciation, that this method of confrontation puts all the pressure on the

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person to be confronted, rather than on the person doing the confronting.

Step 5: New Contract/Potential Consequences

Finally, it may be necessary to draw up a new or more specific contract with appropriate consequences. This stage has to be individualized to the situation at hand, so it is difficult to be too specific here. But if we were following through on our earlier problem, the conversation might go something like this, “It must be embarrassing to be talking about this book issue with me again [Step 1]. Quite frankly, it is embarrassing for me too, because it is hard for me to keep laboring these points [Step 2].” It is not necessary to go through steps one and two again, but this often sets the stage for showing why a better and more specified contract is needed.

Step 5 might sound like this: “I am still willing to loan you the book, but I need for it to be returned to me personally on Sunday night, October 29. Can we agree to that? If this doesn’t work out, I just may not be able to loan my books anymore.” Or, “If this doesn’t

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work out, I will refer the matter to the dean.”

Here is a summary of the steps in a simplified form:

Step 1: Empathy—Think what it feels like from the other person’s point of view.

Step 2: “I” Statement—State my emotions and describe the causes of the problem (no blame).

Step 3: Contract—State what I would like specifically, obtain agreement.

Step 4: Confrontation—(a) agreed-upon contract;

(b) perceived behavior;

(c) request for clarification.

Step 5: New Contract—with consequences, if appropriate.

These methodologies or communication skills are the core requirements for teaching students how to negotiate, mediate, and arbitrate.

There has always been too much conflict for teachers to handle it all. In recent years, with the reduction in societal constraints, the conflict and violence in schools has been increasing. Conflict resolution methodologies work, but they must be taught on a much wider scale. They need to be integrated into the curriculum, as well as everyday school life. Is this impossible? Not at all.

Excellent books are now available to teach students how to go beyond the core skills that have been presented here.

These books teach them to actually be negotiators and mediators in the school setting. They explain how to set up the environment, how to rotate the mediation assignments, what forms to use when mediating, and address ethical issues. Role-playing, role reversal, story-telling, and puppet players can be used by students and teachers alike as integral components of mediating. These are worthwhile life skills. Imagine what would happen if your school had every student serve as a mediator on a regular basis!

Two books that I would highly recommend are *Reducing School Violence Through Conflict Resolution* by David and Roger Johnson and *Conflict Resolution in the Schools: A Manual for Educators* by Kathryn Girard and Susan J. Koch.

It has oft been said that there is a lot of Christianity in a good loaf of bread. It can also be said that our Christianity shows clearest in how we disagree. Jesus loves us deeply even though He often disagrees with what we do. May we teach our students to also love deeply even when they disagree. ✍

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