

Fighting the Wrong Fight

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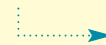
LUNCH USED TO BE NICOLE'S FAVORITE PART OF the work day. The banter with her coworkers, and the friendships with a few of the long-time workers gave the noon break a feel of easy familiarity, and it was a welcome respite from the labor-intensive care of the elderly in the nursing home where she worked. Salaried and hourly workers mingled easily, too.

That all came to a sudden halt two weeks earlier when the owners of the facility announced an upcoming layoff, though up to that point, all the workers had ever heard was upbeat reports on the fiscal health of the home. Then, right on the heels of the announcement, a story in the local paper revealed managers in Nicole's facility had been given "retention bonuses" just weeks before the layoff announcement.

Now the camaraderie of the workplace was shattered. Hourly workers brooded over the impending layoffs, and their resentment around the managers' bonuses was poorly concealed. Some of the hourly workers had invited a union to meet with them, and there was tension between pro-union and anti-union workers.

A registered nurse with no management responsibilities, Nicole wished she could turn back the clock. She also wished she could fix the people problems, but the lone attempt she'd made to referee a fight between her two best friends over the union had only netted her hard feelings from both of them.

Who was to blame? What could be done to fix it? Who should fix it?



Scripture Passages

James 3:13 – 4:2

Matthew 7:3-5

Proverbs 19:11

Ephesians 4:26-27

Matthew 18:15

Proverbs 19:9

Matthew 6:14-15

Colossians 3:13

Romans 12:19-21

In Depth

This set of five studies is intended to help us move from a place where we tolerate moral relativity in our lives to a place where we reflect steadfast character. Doing this requires concentrated action on our part. In other words, we must be intentional. In the first of the five studies we examined ways to avoid letting ridicule, threats and criticism distract us from our call to Christ-like character. This study helps us identify when and how to handle conflict that arises in our careers.

Describe the kinds of conflict that can arise in the workplace.

Now list the kinds of conflict you presently find yourself enmeshed in at work.

[The most common first action required when conflict arises is sorting out who the actual principals in the conflict are, and separating them from the “crowd.” Generally, in workplace conflict there are five categories of people: (a) the principals, those directly involved either as arguers/combatants or as targets; (b) the witnesses, people with information useful in sorting through the details of the conflict; (c) the pilers-on, those people who weren’t originally part of the conflict, but injected themselves into it; (d) the cheerleaders, people not involved in it, but with a vested interest in fueling it; and (e) spectators and innocent bystanders.

When you’re responsible for resolving a conflict in the workplace, the faster you can sort out who fits which category, the quicker you can get to the heart of the struggle. Generally speaking, the principals should be put face-to-face eventually (though certainly not always); witnesses involved in the conflict must be interviewed, but not allowed to be a part of what we call the “settlement sessions” (notice we said sessions, not session); pilers-on and cheerleaders need to be reprimanded and, in some instances, disciplined for exacerbating the conflict; and spectators and innocent bystanders need to be congratulated for resisting the temptation to become one of the above.]

While every conflict requires a different strategy for resolving it, there are some general principles that are consistent with Scripture. In the workplace, principals may include some or all of the following:

1. The people actually in dispute or disagreement
2. The managers responsible for these people
3. Human resources representatives assigned to oversee the resolution

The first important message in this journey toward steadfast character is this: If we aren't a principal in the workplace conflict, in most cases it is not our duty to try to resolve it, even if the principals seek out our assistance. Why do you think this is true?

Most workplace conflicts are not serious, and an orchestrated attempt to resolve them merely heightens the emotion around them. Often conflict is best resolved by one party brushing aside the offense or choosing not to fight because the matter isn't significant. Or the conflict *is* significant, but it's clear to us we're in the wrong and we don't need prayer and prep time to resolve it ... we just need to apologize.

When you know you're wrong, apologize. Nothing resolves conflict more effectively than a rapid, heartfelt apology.

While many Christian writers use Matthew 18 as a model for conflict resolution, this is in fact a mis-application of the text. Matthew 18 is a model for discipline, not a model for conflict resolution. Conflict resolution may result as a part of the disciplinary process described in Matthew 18, but the principles of that text are not necessarily always useful or appropriate in a workplace setting, even one involving individuals who are both Christians. While some of the principles are the same, applying a Matthew 18 model to a workplace conflict is more likely to ratchet up the conflict than it is to resolve it.

Assume for the purposes of this study that you are one of the principles in the conflict, and it isn't one that's easy to resolve. Even when we're sure we're right in a dispute, it is important we prepare our hearts and attitudes before seeking to resolve a conflict. Like the lesson we learned in our study on how to handle criticism, the most important step in this preparation is to take the matter to God in prayer (James 3:13 to 4:2). During this prayer time, we should be:

1. Asking God to show us His truth in the matter, i.e., to show us how much of the conflict is our fault and how much is not.
2. Asking God to reduce the intensity of our emotion around the conflict, including a desire to win, be right, or get revenge.

Assess the importance of the conflict. Is the conflict over an important matter, or is it something which should have been overlooked, dismissed or forgiven? (Matthew 7:3-5; Proverbs 19:11)

Assess the nature of the conflict. Is the conflict over details/issues, or is it personal/clash of personalities? Why is this difference important?

What does Scripture say about conflict?

1. Resolve the matter quickly. Read Ephesians 4:26-27. Why is this important?
2. Resolve the matter quietly and confidentially. Matthew 18:15. Why is this helpful in resolving conflict?
3. Our defense or argument should be truthful in all its points. No half-truths or omissions. Proverbs 19:9.
4. Forgiveness should be sought when appropriate, and offered when appropriate. Matthew 6:14-15; Colossians 3:13.
5. Retribution, or the quest for it, is not permitted. Romans 12:19-21.

Only when one party refuses to engage actively and willingly in the problem-solving process should the matter proceed beyond a settlement session involving the people actually in dispute or disagreement, the managers responsible for these people, and the human resources representatives assigned to oversee the matter.

Conflict is a real part of the world and can't be avoided. While conflict sometimes produces positive outcomes, behavior in conflict must always be managed. How we as Christians manage ourselves during conflict and the way we attempt to resolve those conflicts can serve as a powerful testimony of our faith and be an important link in our progress toward a steadfast character.

For further reflection, see also II Timothy 2:24 and Hebrews 12:14.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Unless we are a principal player in a conflict (as defined in this study), there are very few times when we should involve ourselves, especially in the workplace.
- Prayer should always be the Christian's first step in preparation for dealing with conflict.
- Most workplace conflicts are small and insignificant, but get bigger because we let emotion rule us as we try to resolve them.
- When we're wrong we must apologize.
- The principles of Church discipline described in Matthew 18 are not generally useful in workplace conflict resolution.
- Scripture teaches us these truths about conflict resolution:
 - (a) We should resolve the conflict quickly.
 - (b) As often as possible, we should resolve it quietly and confidentially.
 - (c) We should always be truthful when discussing conflict.
 - (d) Forgiveness is a necessary component of conflict resolution.
 - (e) Retribution is never acceptable.