

## Spark Notes – Conflict: It’s Complex & Words Matter

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Today’s times reflect a culture of duality. Duality refers to having two parts that are often opposed to each other. This can be a challenge to blend and manage this mindset in the workplace, especially with our own beliefs/values and personality. Yet, as spiritual beings, we are encouraged to step beyond our comfortable behavior and be in relationship with one another.

Stepping forward to a resolution may encompass reaching out to have a conversation that involves misunderstandings, drama, and differences of opinion all bundled up in negative emotion. It may be tempting to look the other way or have someone else deal with it. However, having another person address the situation other than those affected by the conflict gives someone else the power and the relationship between the employee and the employer is still “there.” To not have a conversation because of the excessive emotion can cause a more negative and toxic environment because the emotion goes underground.

As church, we are called to be in a wholesome relationship with ourselves and with one another and this means working through the situation and emotion to restore relationship so we can be about our mission together. It takes courage to say something is not working and we need to talk about it.

So how do we get there? Two key components are:

1. Proper mindset
2. Strategy

### Open Mind:

The challenging part of this first step is to have one foot in the person’s moccasin while remaining interiorly focused in your world to gather the facts and the circumstances. This means taking time before the conversation to be aware of an array of reactions as well as any side stepping that may occur, e.g., the outside world is the cause of the predicament – “He started it by....” As a leader, remember to stand on the shore observing without going into the turbulent water. In addition, manifest your prayer life by working with people face-to-face.

### Strategy of the 4-A’s:

1. **Aim** – Articulate the specific expected behavior and/or the result needed.
2. **Assess** the current situation by having a conversation.
  - a. Gather the facts so as to name the problem/opportunity.
  - b. Determine causes of the gap of where the goal is to current situation (poor communication, different perception, personality, poor performance, etc.).
3. Seek **agreement** on a solution(s) and this may take the form of collaboration, compromise, and/or accommodation (be aware that this option may create a win-lose situation). May be helpful to create ground rules for this discussion and/or define boundaries.
4. **Affect/Accountability** - Follow-up and name consequences if the conflict is not resolved.

A variable in each of the above steps and in movement from one-step to another is “time.” Time may be at the doorstep AND it requires time and space for consciousness of the individual(s) to awaken and for Spirit to be involved.

The space between the “Aim” and the “Assess” step is best achieved with a pastoral approach. Barbara Mitchell & Cornelia Gamlen have created a book called “The Conflict Resolution Phrase Book” that may be helpful with the twists and turns of a conversation. Let’s face it, conflict is unpredictable and it has the tendency to send employers and leaders and most people into unhealthy fear. Having some words and granting yourself permission to address a difficult situation is empowering.

Some of the phrases Mitchell & Gamlen share include:

- I overheard a comment you made about XXX, you sounded angry/frustrated and I’d like to talk about it.
- I am aware of the tension, can we all commit to addressing and resolving this?
- Tell me what happened and how we got here.
- Help me understand...(…when this started …why this is important to you, …what leads you to say that, …what facts are underlying your assumption/perception, …what are all your options in responding.
- Please stick to the topic at hand.
- I don’t think we’re getting anywhere. Can we try a different approach?
- Please talk in a quieter voice. [When emotions right high, compassion may help.]
- I understand what you said, but I’m not sure I agree with your interpretation of the facts.
- We see this situation differently. Let’s talk about our different perspectives so we can bridge the gap.
- Instead of always finding fault with everyone, I need you to take responsibility for the role you play in these situations.
- I want to make sure I understood what you said. I took the comment to be a negative remark about XXX. Is that what you meant?
- Let’s focus on the facts and not the different opinions so we can take a step forward.
- Can I think about it and get back to you later?
- This seems like a good place to stop and consider where this is headed.
- If something interferes with the deadline we just set, please let me know within 24 hours.

The human condition is present even with sharing a common faith. As a leader, do not expect employees to handle every situation on their own. A culture of supporting employees while addressing concerns helps create a positive culture and work climate to meet the needs of those we serve.

**Addendum - Definition of Terms:**

Incivility may encompass inconsiderate words and behaviors that upset the workplace, e.g., rudeness, badgering, berating, gossiping, excluding, interrupting, demeaning language, creating unnecessary controversy. The behavior may or may not have harmful intent.

Bullying and Hostile Work Environment are a step up from incivility because it is repeated health-harming mistreatment may consist of different behaviors. It may not be illegal, but it is toxic to the workplace. Per the Workplace Bullying Institute, some of the most common behaviors of bullying include accusing falsely, nonverbal intimidation, discounting a person in front of others, harshly and constantly criticizing, starting, or failing to stop, destructive rumors/gossip, yelling, screaming or throwing tantrums in front of others to humiliate someone, etc.

Unlawful Behavior/Harassment is unwelcomed conduct that is usually tied to a protected category, such as age (40 or over), race, color, sex (including pregnancy), disability, genetic information, religion or national origin. Harassment becomes unlawful where enduring the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment, or conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive.

**\*\*Please contact the Parish & School HR Office at the Archdiocese of Milwaukee asap if the situation may be one of illegal harassment and/or to talk through a specific conflict situation.**