



**ATFE**

Association for  
Theological Field Education

2005 ATFE Biennium

**MANAGING CONFLICT IN FIELD  
EDUCATION CONTEXTS, PART 1:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO  
CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

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# Managing Conflict in Field Education Contexts, Part 1: *An Introduction to Conflict Resolution*

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Donna Duensing's case entitled *The Troubled Internship* describes a conflict between Janet Morgan (Director of Field Education at Western Seminary), Pastor John Garland (Pastor of St. Michael's Church and supervisor of the internship), and Margaret Flanders (the field student from Western Seminary). Janet Morgan must decide how to manage the meeting that she will soon facilitate between John Garland and Margaret Flanders.

A wide spectrum of contributing factors may shed light on the dynamics of this case. One is Karl Slaikeu's and Ralph Hasson's list of the common causes of conflict in their book entitled *Controlling the Costs of Conflict* (p. 79). The list includes ten causes: (1) Denial—unawareness until the explosion happens; (2) Skill deficits—poor communications and negotiations; (3) Lack of information—not obtaining information or poor organizational skills; (4) Conflicting interests or values—not being open to other values and needs; (5) Psychopathology—clinically depressed, stressed, or character disorders; (6) Personality style—differences in personality types; (7) Scarcity of resources—cause stress in other areas; (8) Organizational deficiencies—lack of a plan dealing with overload; (9) Selfishness—greed causes differences; (10) Evil intent—just wanting to cause harm. Obviously, multiple items from this list, namely, denial, skills deficits, conflicting interests, personality differences, and selfishness, are contributing factors to this case.

A second contributing factor can be explained through the lens of Transactional Analysis as explained by Dr. Grover Loughmiller, a retired psychologist. Transactional Analysis is built on the idea that people have three different ego states in their personalities—the Child, the Adult, and the Parent. Transactions among these three states occur constantly and can be analyzed concerning their dynamics. In addition, in relationships involving two or more parties, the transactions between them can also be analyzed in terms of the interaction between the ego states of one person and those of the other. When the Critical Parent role over-functions, a person may be experienced as a Persecutor; when the Child role over-functions, a person may be perceived as a Victim; when the Nurturing Parent over-functions, a person may be experienced as a Rescuer. When a Persecutor-Victim-Rescuer relationship is formed and reinforced, a perpetual Triangle relationship can be habitually repeated.

In the case, John Garland could be viewed as a Persecutor, Margaret Flanders could be viewed as a Victim, and Jane Morgan could be viewed as a Rescuer. If that triangle were to be perpetuated, then, tragically, John Garland would be allowed to inflict unnecessary stress on Margaret, Margaret could be discounted and deprived of learning how to deal with a Critical Parent person in ministry and of learning how to function as an Adult in ministry, and Jane could be stuck in a pattern of rescuing Margaret instead of empowering and supporting her.

In most conflict situations, power, power imbalance, or powerlessness is a key component.

Power is a consistent and predictable ingredient in most conflicts, and this case is no exception. Since power is rooted in the dynamics of the relationship between two or more people. Power is central to communications. Power is not a finite resource; it can be expanded or limited. Over time, chronic power imbalances harm and destroy relationships, and people will, by constructive or destructive means, seek to balance power imbalances. Constructive conflict management or mediation will seek to balance power and, thereby, enhance the relationship.

Different levels of power exist according to the different levels of maturity of the persons involved in the relationship. The two main types of power are positional power and personal power. Positional power is the lower form of power, while personal power is higher and is the product of personal emotional and social intelligence.

Janet Morgan's response to the conflict between John Garland and Margaret Flanders can address the power imbalance while still empowering both John and Margaret, rather than seeking to empower only Margaret. Since Janet's highest form of power is based on her own emotional and interpersonal intelligence, she will be more effective in her intervention with John and Margaret if she manages herself as maturely as possible instead of relying on any positional levels of power. She can use a caucus to coach Margaret about how to manage herself most effectively in the mediation with John, and she can even coach John about how to manage himself most appropriately in the mediation. She can listen to both Margaret and John and then respond to them instead of reacting to them.

Anxiety is emotional discomfort or pain. It is also an often overlooked yet a powerful ingredient in most conflicts. The anxious brain is the least mature, least rational, and most reactive level of brain functioning. As anxiety increases, rational, mature behavior decreases. In fact, the anxious brain is often called the "Reptilian Brain." This highly anxious and immature brain is highly reactive, defensive, and defensive. Persons acting from their anxious brain assume that they are acting from their mature, rational brain while their actions are clearly reactive. Especially in ministry settings, anxiety often accompanies strong beliefs and high expectations.

Another by-product of anxiety in a ministry context is the phenomenon of emotional triangles. Anytime two parties—like Margaret and John—are anxious about the other, they inevitably prefer to avoid dealing directly with each other and to avoid each other by processing their anxiety with a third party with whom they are more comfortable. Unfortunately, such triangling perpetuates the tension between the two primary parties and retards the resolution of their conflict. Janet will need to avoid becoming "triangled" between Margaret and John if she hopes to facilitate a healthy resolution of the conflict between them.

The role of leadership is pivotal in such conflict situations. If leaders become as anxious as the other parties involved, then they may be as reactive as the reactive participants in the conflict. Leaders are more apt to be reactive to the extent that they are "undifferentiated" (unseparated) from the anxiety of the participants. If leaders can be more "differentiated" (separated) from the anxiety of the participants, then they can be more rational, mature, and responsive to the situation and the participants. The most effective leaders are the most differentiated leaders. Differentiated leaders can bring calm to anxious situations and offer constructive behavioral options to those embroiled in conflict. Janet will be more helpful as a leader if she can be responsive instead of reactive to John and Margaret.

## **Managing Conflict in Field Education Contexts, Part 2: *Advanced Skills in Conflict Resolution***

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Conflict evolves in an escalating progression of levels. That progression includes the following levels: (1) Problem-Solving (parties may disagree but still share the problem); (2) Personal Antagonism (persons are seen as the problem); (3) Issue Proliferation (problem issues move from specific to general); (4) Triangle (parties talk about, not with each other); (5) Eye for an Eye (parties become more reactive and escalate); (6) Antagonism-Hostility (parties are fixed in their hostility toward each other); (7) Polarization (the organization is divided into polarities).

This progression can be translated into a scale of five levels of conflict in organizations. Those levels are as follows: (1) Problem to Solve (parties collaborate to solve the problem); (2) Disagreement (parties see each other as problem); (3) Contest (parties are in tug-of-war power struggle); (4) Fight-Flight (angry people fight, fearful people take flight); (5) Intractable (parties are stuck and, no constructive moves are made). Parties engaged in a conflict may be at different levels. John Garland may be at least at level 4; Margaret Flanders may be at level 4 also; Janet Morgan may be at level 3 or 4. Different levels of conflict suggest different strategies for intervention.

In addition to different levels of conflict, five different styles of managing conflict are typical among conflict participants. The five styles are as follows: (1) Avoiding (avoiding people you find troublesome); (2) Accommodating (doing a favor to help someone); (3) Compromising (soft bargaining, exchanging concessions); (4) Competing (imposing or dictating a decision); (5) Collaborating (reconciling interests through a win-win solution). While each of the five can be the most appropriate style for managing any specific conflict, any style that is used excessively or inappropriately can become ineffective for the conflict situation. In the case under examination, John appears to use the “competing” style; Margaret appears to use the “avoiding,” “accommodating,” and perhaps “compromising” styles; Janet appears to use the “collaborating,” “compromising,” and perhaps the “competing” styles, depending on whether she is dealing with John or Margaret. Janet will need to use the “collaborating” and “compromising” styles strategically to mediate effectively between Margaret and John.

In his book entitled *Managing Church Conflict* Hugh Halverstadt suggests five strategies for intervening in conflict situations in ministry contexts. Two of the five strategies are “resolution strategies”—strategies designed to result in a resolution of the conflict. Those two strategies are Negotiation—collaborative problem-solving between two parties and Mediation—negotiation between two parties with the assistance of a third party as facilitator. The other three strategies are called “constraining strategies”—strategies designed to manage the conflict that is not likely to be resolved. The three constraining strategies are “Preventing Exchange”—working with parties separately while not allowing them to repeat negative interactions; “Changing the Context”—making appropriate constructive changes in the dynamics of the context; “Coaching Principals”—coaching key players about how to manage themselves more effectively in the conflict. Obviously, the resolution strategies are preferred, but the constraining strategies are necessary when the resolution strategies do not succeed. Janet could try to implement the resolution strategy of mediation first and resort to coaching the principals or changing the context as needed. Merely preventing exchange would not likely change anything or resolve anything. The strategies that offer the participants the most control of the process and the

outcome are the negotiation and mediation strategies. Janet would do well to try these two strategies first in an effort to facilitate a negotiated agreement between Margaret and John.

An essential dimension of the negotiation process is that of “going below the line”—identifying the emotional hot buttons beneath the positions advocated by John and Margaret. In order for a mediator to be effective in facilitating a negotiated agreement between two parties, the interests underlying their positions must first be heard, identified, and articulated. According to Karl Slaikeu in his book entitled *When Push Comes to Shove*, the most common interests underneath conflicting positions are these: to be “made whole,” to put the matter to rest, to avoid costs in time, effort, or money, to avoid stress and protect health, to protect and preserve reputation, to establish precedent, to punish, to be vindicated (proven right), to save face, to save time, to honor values of fairness and justice. Clearly, several of these interests are involved in this case. Janet will need to identify which of these or additional interests may be involved in this conflict.

Janet will also need to identify her own interests, especially in her conversations with John. She will also need to recognize that she will not likely function as a “facilitative” mediator (totally neutral, value-free, interested only in process) but will most likely function as an “evaluative” mediator (bringing her own interests and values to the process and holding each party accountable to shared values). As a Director of Field Education, Janet can bring mature leadership and constructive mediation to this conflict situation that will empower all parties involved, actualize Christian reconciliation, and enhance the field education experience for both Margaret and John.