



CHAPTER 4

Where We Are: Levels of Conflict

Big problems generally start off as small problems. In his *Poor Richard's Almanac*, Benjamin Franklin relates, “for want of a nail the shoe was lost;/for want of a shoe the horse was lost;/for want of a horse the rider was lost;/for want of a rider the battle was lost;/for want of a battle the kingdom was lost;/and all for the want of a horse-shoe nail.” The rider could not foresee the price that would be paid for not fixing that horseshoe nail.

And not only do the small problems grow to become big problems, but the skills needed to solve them become more demanding as well. When you resolve problems early, you don't need additional tools to manage or resolve them. If you don't solve them early on, they fester. The challenge for the manager is to see the conflict early, and recognize that it needs to be addressed while it is still a minor disagreement.

In Chapter 2, I described the scene in a deputy director's office, after the senior management team had called human resources with a long list of complaints about the CFO, Tre. One of the seniors had ended the conversation with an ultimatum: “Either he goes or I go. And,

by the way, the rest of the team members feel the same way.” The response in the deputy director’s office was stunned silence: “What???” Where had this come from?” This team had seemed to work well together for over three years. Clearly, small problems had become bigger problems over time, and the skills that could have addressed the smaller ones would not be adequate now.

In his work with conflict within churches, Speed Leas developed a model for understanding the development of conflict through a series of levels.¹ These levels of conflict are not confined to the church, however; they play out in all kinds of situations—in communities, in the workplace, in families, and in international relations.

Understanding these levels will help you identify appropriate skills to resolve differences. If a conflict has ripened to a fight, or is at the point of being intractable and dangerous, the communication tools that you use to resolve lower level conflicts will not be adequate or acceptable now. On the other hand, recognizing the potential for problems to escalate over time into intractable situations will encourage you to slow up, to take the time to resolve those differences while they are manageable.

The Five Levels of Conflict

LEVELS OF CONFLICT

1. Problems to solve
2. Disagreement
3. Contest
4. Fight
5. Intractable situation

The five levels of conflict identified by Leas are: problem to solve, disagreement, contest, fight, and intractable situation. But they are best understood through example. The following demonstrates the escalation of a conflict through these five levels and is based on a situation that played out recently between two of my neighbors.

1. *Problem to solve.* These seem easy—so easy that we probably don’t consider them conflicts. We talk it over. We listen. We consider. We decide. We move on. Most, in fact, are resolved at this level.



Mark and Miranda, and Rachel had together bought an older building, now a duplex. Mark and Miranda would live on one side of the duplex, Rachel on the other. Actually, the legal term for their purchase was “joint tenancy,” which tied the neighbors together through a carefully crafted contract, except for one detail. Despite the consideration given to many shared matters, such as utilities and a common basement, the one thing the contract did not clarify was the exact property line between the two units.

Soon enough, they had a “problem to solve”—how to define the property fairly, either by hiring a surveyor or simply by walking around the property together with stakes and a measuring tape. As easy as this would have been to do early in their relationship, they just didn’t get around to it. There were too many other pressing needs—hanging curtains, painting the kitchen, or planting the garden—that were easier and more fun to do than having this difficult conversation.



2. *Disagreement.* This gets a bit more challenging. The parties begin to see that they have different views and each moves into the territory of declaring who is right, who is wrong. People take actions based on assumptions and perceptions.



Rachel decided to build a patio, and she took down a trellis beside the existing patio when she did it. When Miranda looked out her kitchen window, she was surprised that the trellis was gone. This felt aggressive to Miranda: “But, Rachel, we never talked about this.” To Miranda, the trellis and the area around it looked like a natural dividing point between the properties. Clearly, to her, that trellis was on her property. Meanwhile, on their side of the property line, Mark and Miranda did not want to get into an argument with Rachel, and they tried to take steps to

avoid that. They did not have a further discussion with her about the trellis. What they didn't do was propose a sit-down conversation with Rachel so that each could hear the other's views and they could reach some mutually acceptable understanding.

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When we can solve problems and resolve disagreements at these lower levels, they dissolve easily. There is not that rear-end collision we described in the first chapter—the quarrel that gets everyone's attention. But hindsight is 20/20. As we watch this dispute unfold, it is easy to see what the three of them *could* have done.

Honest disagreement is often a good sign of progress.
—MOHANDAS GANDHI

3. **Contest.** Ratchet it up a bit, and people swing into the next level of this model. Now it is about who is right, who is wrong, and the importance to each party of being *right*. Because—if we are wrong, then what? Are we less for it?

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After some time had passed, the question of the trellis and of Rachel's unilateral action gnawed at Miranda. These are her words describing the next step: "I drew plats, I made lots of drawings that offered what I thought were reasonable options to initiate discussion. I told her, 'Now that the trellis is removed, let's solve the rest of the property-line issue and compromise on the other divisions needed.' I'd drop these proposals off. Rachel intimidated the hell out of me. She shut me out of any conversation—she would get snippy and snotty."

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At this level, fear continues to rise, trust further erodes. Blame increases, along with negative assumptions and attributions. Because there is little communication, people create stories about what the other person is doing and why. The filters we use to make these interpretations are clouded by our own view

A long dispute means that both parties are wrong.
—VOLTAIRE

of the situation—and about how right we are and how wrong “they” are. From this story we generate hostile attributions and characterizations.

4. **Fight.** The stakes are higher yet. A fight moves the parties to the possibility of pain. Someone will get hurt, maybe both parties—emotionally or physically. People move into defensive mode. How can they inflict pain on the other to the point that the other gives up? Fights are for winning. Fights are for *not* losing. (Sometime people define winning as losing less than the other guy.) In any event, compromise counts as a loss.



By now the neighbors had stopped talking to each other—not for days or months, but for years. To avoid talking to each other, they would leave the utility bills in a common area, and write notes of complaint when a math error is caught. Rachel would watch Miranda water her garden, and seethe at the impact this would have on their joint water bill. Mark and Miranda left messages on Rachel’s voice mail when they knew she wasn’t home to answer the phone. They sent e-mails. E-mails were particularly satisfying because then they had *proof* of the message they had sent.

When Rachel came home with a German shepherd and when she put up shutters, Mark and Miranda took it personally: “Now, she even has a guard dog!” Then Rachel confronted Miranda: “Did you walk through my yard yesterday? You set off my dog.” What Miranda heard was hostile and combative. Miranda’s view was, “I felt like it was purposeful—she was putting together a plan to get me.”



At this point in a conflict there is no communication. Trust is nil. Blame and wild assumptions have taken over. Any action or statement made by one party is seen by the other as hostile.

5. **Intractable conflict.** This is the kind of conflict we all dread—conflict with a capital C. There is no going forward. Everyone is well beyond winning and losing. The parties are in a dangerous territory,

where the only answer anyone can see is annihilation, or at least complete separation.

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Rachel had had enough. She was selling her half of the house. She demanded that Miranda and Mark do the same, at the same time. As far as she was concerned, their joint tenancy contract required that solution. Selling their home was the furthest thing from Mark and Miranda's minds—they had a small child, they loved the neighborhood (except for their relationship with Rachel), and they wanted to stay put. Rachel finally said, "Sell your half when I do, or I'll take you to court."

The case ended up in front of a judge. Years after the event, the memory is still painful. Miranda continues to talk about the money that she and Mark lost and have yet to recover—in lawyers and court fees, in time away from work. Mark and Miranda cannot count the emotional toll all of this took on both of them, and the stress it created within their own relationship as well. Looking back, Miranda observed, "Avoiding conflict can cost more than just tackling it." They had gone from possibly uncomfortable conversations to the reality of the difficulties (time, money, emotional costs) of litigation.

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You can appreciate how this escalation may play out in a workplace situation. For example, the boss and the staff have had differences from the very beginning. The first week in her new position, Paula announced major changes in the work schedule. From her view, it was important to establish her authority early on. When a staff member questioned a decision, Paula was unable or unwilling to sit down and talk through the matter. Rather, when she heard the beginnings of a disagreement, Paula would make a declaration about what would happen, and then begin peppering the staff with e-mails to see if they were following through on her demands. The staff's efforts to talk to Paula about this ended in more directives. When three of her top performers gave notice, within days of each other, Paula was stunned. She couldn't understand what

had happened or why they were leaving. The staff had reached level five—intractable conflict—and Paula had no idea how this had happened. Had she heard and responded to their concerns earlier, repairs might have been possible.

Whenever and wherever possible, find ways to resolve differences and disputes before conflicts get to level five. That will save you time, money, and an emotional cost that cannot be calculated. People often turn to the courts for the final settlement of their disputes, though courts often don't correct the problems that people have brought with them. The courts are littered with broken relationships—business as well as personal. I have mediated countless situations like these.

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Two brothers opened a restaurant together. They had not clarified in the early days of startup who would be responsible for what. When the restaurant hit hard times, the two became entangled in a nasty legal battle that shattered their relationship, as well as destroying the business.
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Five young men were eager to start a company together. They had been fraternity brothers; they stood in at each other's weddings. In those early days, when the problems were small and manageable, they were too busy to be concerned about minor disagreements. Over time, as their lives changed and the business and the disagreements grew, the conflicts became insurmountable, the distrust and fear became more than they could manage, and the business was destroyed as one filed lawsuits against another.
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Yes, resolving differences earlier is better. Complete separation is often not that simple—and maybe not even possible. In the world of work, even after a termination, the boss and the employee can still find ways to inflict pain on one another, likely through lawsuits or assaults on one or another's reputation.

There are intractable conflicts, but still we press to find a way

around and through them. At some point, the cost of keeping the conflict alive is no longer worthwhile. When each party realizes there is no winning, together they may begin looking for another way. Based on his experience in resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland, George Mitchell was sent as special envoy to the Middle East. As he took this assignment, he said, “There is no such thing as a conflict that can’t be ended. Conflicts are created by human beings, and can be ended by human beings.”

Strategies for Each Conflict Level

So, the earlier you resolve a conflict, the better. What can you do if the situation has moved up the scale? Is it hopeless? Not if you are willing to put considerable effort into repair. Depending on how far the conflict has gone, how long it has been deteriorating, and how important the relationship is to both parties, transforming a deep-seated conflict is possible, although it can take considerable effort over time. I often tell clients, “You didn’t get into this quickly. You can’t get out of it quickly, either.”

When you are thinking about strategies for responding to problems at each of these levels, consider this: the level of conflict increases as the emotional involvement goes up and as the trust goes down. The following strategies are built on managing those changes.

If we are all in agreement on the decision, then I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain some understanding of what the decision is all about.

—ALFRED P. SLOAN,

AS QUOTED BY PETER DRUCKER IN *THE EFFECTIVE EXECUTIVE* (OXFORD: ELSEVIER, 2007)

Resolving *Level 1*, “Problems to solve,” calls for clear communication skills and a collaborative solution-seeking approach. I delve more into that approach and how to use it effectively in Chapter 13, “Reaching Agreement.” However, at this point, know this approach begins with clearly stated issues or problems to solve, and it relies on

good listening skills and the ability to identify interests. Agreeing on shared goals, even though individuals may have differing priorities, can help set a positive tone. Keeping conflict resolution at this level is possible when there is an atmosphere of trust within the office, there is a culture that views conflict and differences as healthy, and people are encouraged to raise questions and to disagree constructively, even in the face of difficulty.

At *Level 2*, “Disagreement,” the tension and anxiety have begun to rise, and the fear of conflict is mounting. “What if the conflict becomes bigger?” “What if we can’t settle it?” “What if I get upset, or she does?” What if? What if? What if? There is the potential for the difficult discussions to go badly—it is that potential that creates the fear. If you have had difficult, nonproductive conversations before, your fear of that happening again is even higher.

At this stage, you need more structure to create a safe place for dialogue. You need to specify some ground rules (guidelines, if you prefer) for how you are going to talk to each other. This can be as simple as, “Can we agree that one of us will talk at a time?” Or, “I’ll listen to you, will you listen to me?” You will need to clarify a common goal or objective around which you are all looking for a solution. For instance, within the workplace, the productivity or the mission may be a common goal. Another may be maintaining an atmosphere where people can come to work looking forward to the day, rather than dreading possible interactions. These steps decrease the anxiety and difficulty of the conversation.

At *Level 3*, “Contest,” the intensity and, hence, the fears are higher. Distrust is rising between the parties. As the drive to be right takes over, people in the workplace start reaching out for allies—people who support them in their position, who agree with how right they are, fanning the flames of conflict. A few people cluster at the coffee pot, or in one another’s offices, talking about what has gone wrong: what he said, or what she did, or how badly “they” acted. As the distrust mounts, communication about the issue becomes more difficult, often disappearing completely.

At this level, you need a more structured process. To manage the distrust and anxiety, you need to ensure process clarity: what is going to be

decided and how? What will the ground rules be? What data do we need and who will gather it? When will we meet and who will lead the meeting?

When you are at *Level 4*, “Fight,” the fears are high and the emotions are running strong. Trust between the parties has reached such a low that neither party wants to participate in constructive discussion. Often the conflict at this point has grown larger and more diffuse. At an earlier stage, there may have been two or three issues to resolve; now even identifying specific issues becomes challenging, as fears and assumptions have been built on top of one another. The parties have gone beyond having a problem or issue to resolve. Distrust and suspicion have overwhelmed all aspects of the relationship.

At this point, you need external help. This help may be someone both of you trust within the organization, or someone hired from outside to serve as a mediator or facilitator. In addition to resolving the problems that were the origin of the conflict, the mediator may need agreement on new ground rules for how people will work together or interact within the workplace in the future. To be of any value, such commitments require a system for monitoring and accountability. These commitments may be written into performance plans or monitored through regularly scheduled follow-up meetings.

If the conflict reaches *Level 5*, “Intractable conflict,” the people who are immediately involved are not able to make a joint decision. It is time to turn to an external authority to make that decision. At Levels 1–3, the conflict is at a level where the parties themselves can still negotiate with one another, if they have communication tools and skills to manage their differences. When conflict reaches *Level 4*, trust has deteriorated to a point that an external person whom both of the parties trust is necessary to provide a process for communication. Whereas at *Level 4* an outside source can facilitate communication, *Level 5* requires someone else to decide the outcome. The power difference between the parties may be too great, or there may be serious threats of harm to either or both.

Workplace bullying falls into this category and deserves special attention here. Over the past several years, my conversations with miserable employees have increasingly included claims of being bullied or subjected to hostile work environments. By workplace bullying, I mean

behavior that is aggressive, unreasonable, and persistent. It can be verbal or nonverbal, and can be subtle and insidious. This behavior generally involves emotional or psychological abuse or humiliation. Bullying behavior occurs regularly over a long period of time, and includes verbal abuse, intimidation, regular threats of dismissal, character assassination, smear campaigns, and social ostracism. Most often, it's a boss who carries this out; occasionally a co-worker engages in this behavior.

In this or in other forms of Level 5 conflict, someone with clear authority needs to take appropriate action—as a decision maker and as a monitor to hold people accountable for their actions. This may be someone higher up within the organization, or it may be an external authority, such as a judge or an arbitrator.

Consider This

- How do you resolve problems when they arise?
- Do you promote an atmosphere where disagreements are encouraged?
- Consider the conflicts within your organization. At what level is each one? What can you do now to begin to resolve one of them?

Note

1. Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church through Conflict* (Herndon, VA : Alban Institute, 2002).