

Practical Ministry Skills: Handling Conflict in Small Groups



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HANDLING CONFLICT IN SMALL GROUPS**Leader's Guide**

How to use "Handling Conflict in Small Groups" by BUILDING SMALL GROUPS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING SMALL GROUPS. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you train and direct the leaders of your small-groups ministry. The material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders, and has been selected by the editors of Leadership Resources at Christianity Today International.

Our "Practical Ministry Skills" training downloads are completely flexible and designed for easy use. Each download focuses on a practical theme that is relevant to small-groups ministry, and is comprised of brief handouts focusing on specific aspects of that theme. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for new small-group leaders or coaches.

The theme of this download is "Handling Conflict in Small Groups." It's designed to give group leaders basic tools for conflict resolution, as well as practical help for a variety of conflict situations. Each handout can be used as part of a training session for large groups of leaders and coaches, or as a way to encourage and educate people individually. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, to learn how to use conflict as an asset for your small group, see "Engaging Conflict in Small Groups," by Mark Bonham (p. 3–4). For practical tips and advice on managing conflict situations involving difficult personalities, see "Handling Conflict with EGRs" (p. 10–11). And "When Group Members Are Critical of You," by Danny R. Von Kanel (p. 14–15), can help group leaders process and deal with criticism in a productive way.

Our prayer is that this material will equip small-group leaders and churches to effectively and biblically manage conflict situations for the benefit of all involved.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.BuildingSmallGroups.com.

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HANDLING CONFLICT IN SMALL GROUPS**Engaging Conflict in Small Groups**

A look at the deeper issues underlying personality clashes

Philippians 2:3–4

Sooner or later, every small group will experience conflict. In some groups, conflict will become evident from the first meeting. In others, great pain is taken to avoid conflict. The members maneuver around it and make it clear that “we don’t do conflict here.” But the ways we behave in a small group reflect how we will behave outside of it, and handling conflict well in our group can lead to better ways of dealing with the uncomfortable issues people face every day.

A Case Study

Mary and Jim are group members. Mary sees herself as a “truth-speaker.” She is perceptive and reads people like a map. She is always aware of the “temperature” of her small group. She listens to what is said and has an ability to hear what isn’t being said—and she is more curious about the later. Her greatest desire is for authenticity and honesty. Everybody sees Jim as a “grace-giver.” He is trusting and takes people at face value. He values peace, and patience is one of his greatest virtues. He is affirming and very sensitive to the shame in others. His overriding desire for the group is that it feels safe, loving, and supportive.

Mary and Jim, to one degree or another, are in every group. Every group needs what they offer. But before Mary and Jim can offer what is best in them, they will have to face the inevitable conflict that their styles of relating will create.

Behind every conflict is a story that goes far deeper than the presenting clash. Jim grew up in a home with a dominating, angry mother. His father would work hard all day and come home to a wife who would dump her frustrations on him. Jim felt sorry for his father and felt contempt for his mother. She was not the virtuous “Proverbs 31” woman he heard about in church. But his father never complained. Jim sometimes wished his father would step up and confront his mother, but he felt pretty sure his father would lose that battle.

Mary grew up in a home that had lots of secrets. No one talked about dad’s alcoholism. No one dared ruffle dad’s feathers when he came home, even though the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. When Mary was sexually abused by her father, and later by her brother, her mother had a lock installed on Mary’s door but never talked about what happened. Mary sat behind her locked door angrier with her mother than with her abusers. Secrets and silence became the enemies that Mary vowed to fight.

Now, Mary and Jim find themselves in the same small group. It doesn’t take long for a perceptive Mary to pigeonhole Jim as a weak wimp who is more comfortable with the appearance of harmony than the guts to be honest. And, hard as it is for Jim to admit, Mary’s pursuit of people feels dangerous and makes him want to avoid her at all costs. In group, Mary is frustrated every time Jim seems to dismiss someone’s struggles with a verse from the Bible and an offer to pray. Conversely, Jim feels that Mary plows right into areas of shame with little sensitivity. Sometimes it seems that Mary’s outrage over injustice is stronger than anyone else’s. Jim feels that he must counter her impact by soothing the group.

Unless this conflict is addressed, it will further propagate the dysfunction that both Jim and Mary felt in their families growing up. The group will not be strong enough to bear “truth-speaking,” and it will feel that its “grace-giving” is patronizing. The safe, loving, honest, and authentic community will be lost.

A New Perspective

Conflict should not be viewed as a problem that threatens to destroy your group, but as an opportunity to grow the group. It is the unacknowledged and unaddressed conflict that is dangerous. Conflict that is entered into and resolved leads to deeper intimacy, whether in a group, in a marriage, between individuals, or with God.

As you think about addressing a conflict, ask yourself how to engage the issue while still valuing the opinions, observations, and feelings of each member. Remember also that, because the enemy of our souls delights in continued division, engaging in conflict resolution is warfare against him. So prayer is a crucial weapon. Ask for receptive hearts, listening ears, and a resolve to strengthen the unity of the group by honestly facing the

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issues at hand. Depending on the severity of the conflict and who is involved, you may need an outside person to facilitate a resolution. If so, you will want to make that person's role clear—to facilitate and mediate the resolution process, not to resolve the conflict themselves.

A Practical Method

So how does a group enter into conflict for the good of its members? Here are a few simple steps to work through:

1. The group leader should define the conflict as he/she recalls it. "Our conflict is about the differences between Jim's way and Mary's way of engaging the group and the tension that we and they are experiencing as a result."
2. Ask the group members if the conflict has been defined correctly as they recall it. Go around the circle and give each person an opportunity to respond. Some will have something to say; others may simply nod their head in agreement.
3. Ask, "How has this conflict felt to you?" Or, "What has been stirred up in you as the conflict has become evident?" The purpose here is to give each group member an opportunity to acknowledge and express their feelings. There is no right or wrong answer here. Silence or withholding does not support the conflict resolution process, so encourage everyone to speak.
4. Invite group members to ask questions of any other group member for clarity. Be careful to make sure that one person does not dominate this time, or the process will lose momentum for the others.
5. Ask each person: "What were you hoping would happen in this meeting?" "What did you want for yourself?" "What did you want for Jim, Mary, or the group?"
6. Ask each person what needs to happen for them to feel that this is a safe and healthy group again. What a member may express may not necessarily be something the group can guarantee (e.g. that the conflict will never happen again). The leader's role is to make sure all have been heard and to stay engaged in the process for the sake of the group. Allowing the process to stall or wander will make the group feel unsafe and lose trust.
7. Ask each person, "Can you recommit to this group?" If someone says "no," go back to points 3 and 4 and try again. Typically a group will want to get going again and not remain stalled.

This process relies on the integrity of the group to call one another out. At its best, it is a way for the body of Christ to minister to each other. Here are some questions for a leader to keep in mind during this process:

- Did the people in the conflict hear one another accurately? It is often helpful to ask Jim what he heard Mary say. Then ask Mary, "Did Jim hear you accurately?" Reverse the process, asking Mary what she heard Jim say. Many conflicts escalate due to faulty perceptions as communication passes through each participant's emotional filter.
- Did each person take ownership of what they perceived to be their part in the conflict? If your group is at a stage where you can go deeper, these discipleship questions can lead to real change: 1) Is this a pattern in my life? 2) How does this pattern in my life affect those in relationship with me? 3) How do I feel about the way I impact others? 4) Who or what does this situation remind me of?
- Has any group boundary been broken? If so, is this something (or is there something else) we need to need to talk about now or later?

When you notice a conflict is occurring, be ready to pull out this list and walk through it. Believe me, your group will be grateful for you and your courage. Many of your group members live daily with chaos and conflict that never gets resolved, so your willingness to enter into conflict is a real gift to them!

—MARK BONHAM; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss

1. In what ways has our group experienced conflict in recent months?
2. What will be the hardest thing about addressing conflict within our group? How can we overcome that?
3. What steps should we take to begin engaging and resolving our conflicts in the near future?

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Six Steps for Conflict Resolution

After two failed attempts, I asked a pro to lead the meeting. Here's what he did.

James 3:17–18

Six months into our church plant, the two most influential families had a fight. Nasty words were exchanged, battle lines drawn. Both sides began recruiting people to their cause. Something had to be done, but what? I held separate meetings with the two parties, but that just made things worse. “Lord, help me,” I prayed desperately as I set up another meeting with both families. As I fretted over the coming confrontation, Ron knocked on my office door. “Would you like some help holding a peace conference?” he asked. Ron is a school principal, well versed in conflict resolution. I gratefully accepted his offer.

Ron led the meeting gracefully, compassionately, and thoughtfully. It was a great success. Not only did he help resolve the biggest conflict we’d ever had, he taught me skills for dealing with conflict. Here’s how he did it:

- **Icebreaker.** Ron started with a conversational tone, not a confrontational one. “We all know why we are here today,” he said. “There is hurt in our hearts and misunderstanding in our minds. For the good of the church and the kingdom of God, we must reconcile. Before we dive into the issues, I would like each of you to form pairs and discuss this question: What is your favorite hobby and why?” I know it sounds silly, but it worked. After the first pairings discussed the question, he broke us up again and again until everybody got a chance to converse over a non-jugular issue.
- **Information.** Ron shared three ground rules: permission, potency, and protection. People are given permission to disagree. Each person is allowed to share their views strongly as long as they do it with respect. No one will be allowed to inflict intentional pain on others.
- **Illumination.** Next, Ron prayed. His prayer was full of grace and love. He prayed that the Lord would bring reconciliation, understanding, and restoration.
- **Issues.** “What are your concerns?” he asked. After each person spoke, Ron would clarify what they said. “If I am hearing you correctly, you are saying that she was disrespectful in what she said?” “I am trying to see it from your point of view, and if I do, you feel that you were intentionally hurt?”

When one side spoke, the other filtered their claims through anger and hurt. But when Ron paraphrased what was said, the opposing sides listened. Why? He was a “neutral” party. You could see the tension subside. Behind him was a giant Post-It note on the wall with a line drawn down the middle and the sides marked “A” and “B.” After he clarified an issue, he would write it down. He then asked the other side to comment on that issue. This step took about two hours. Its objective was to help the parties “unload their files” from memory.

- **Implications.** Ron asked two questions: 1) What is the worst thing that could happen if we don’t resolve this conflict? 2) What is the best thing that could happen if we resolve this conflict? Again, he wrote their answers down. It became clear that the outcome of this conflict was vital to our small church. Then he asked, “Which scenario do we want to shoot for?” Ron moved the group from defending adversarial positions to unanimously voting to seek a mutual position.
- **Ideas.** “What are some ideas for reaching that goal?” Ron asked. As a team, they brainstormed and agreed on an answer. Finally Ron returned to the first large notes and, one by one, reviewed their original concerns. “What are we going to do about this concern?” he asked, making sure every concern was dealt with. Later I typed up my notes and sent a copy to everybody involved.

—STEVE LARSON; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2004 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss:

1. What are the characteristics of a peacemaker?
2. Who in our group fits that mold, and how can they help?
3. What are some ways our group can practice these six steps and be ready if/when a major conflict arises?

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Preparing for the Dreaded Conversation

Thinking things through will lead you to a more constructive confrontation.

Ephesians 4:15–16

When we know we need to confront someone, one of the most dangerous inclinations we can succumb to is to do it immediately—when we’re still agitated. Sometimes we’re so angry that we can’t stop from venting. A better idea is to plan for the difficult conversation. Like painting a room, use the following steps to prepare the walls of your heart before you make that first stroke.

1. Clarify Your Intentions

Is your goal to set the person straight? Get your way? Make sure they know you’re in charge? For a confrontation to be effective, the purpose must be to find truth. When we approach a confrontation as a way for everyone to grow—instead of an opportunity to “fix” someone—we pave the way for success.

2. Begin with Empathy

Have you ever gotten a traffic ticket and had to tell your spouse? What happens if they respond with anger and accusation: “A hundred bucks? Nice going! How are we going to afford that?” Now examine your emotions. Who are you mad at? Your spouse! Your mind immediately begins retrieving all sorts of data to prove they are just as guilty as you. Now imagine a different response from your spouse: “Oh, how awful! There’s nothing worse than seeing those lights in the rearview mirror.” How are you feeling now? Like hugging your spouse, probably. Who are you mad at? Yourself!

Empathy opens a pathway for learning to occur. When preparing for a difficult conversation, I ask myself: *Is there any way to show empathy here? Can I put myself in their shoes in some way?* That allows me to confront without the heat of anger.

3. Is This a Matter of Taste or Truth?

Paul tells us to speak the *truth* in love—not to force our preferences on someone else. Am I upset because something is wrong, or because I don’t like it? I was once all set to confront a small-group leader when I asked myself this question. I finally had to admit that I was dealing with a matter of taste, not truth. The leader wasn’t violating Scripture, just not doing something the way I would.

4. Clarify the Issue

Try to narrow down the central issue to one word. Is it trust? Confidence? Competence? It’s tempting to list all the things we’re upset about, but more productive to narrow things down and keep them clear. “You’ve been late to the last four training meetings. That behavior is communicating disrespect to the rest of the team.” That keeps the conversation from dangerous rabbit trails.

5. Hold Up the Mirror

Get real with yourself as you prepare. How have you contributed to this issue? Are you bringing any of your own issues into it? Is the person you are confronting exhibiting a behavior that you struggle with yourself? Own up before you show up.

6. Project the Consequences

Look ahead a few weeks, months, or years. What will happen if the situation goes uncorrected? Who will be affected and how? What would a good result look like? How will the future be shaped by a positive outcome? It’s important to identify what is at stake, and to be able to communicate it truthfully and as objectively as possible.

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7. Trust the Holy Spirit to Do His Job

It's tempting to feel that it's all up to us to get the issues solved. The truth is, we can't control what another person thinks, feels, or believes. We can bring truth and love, but it is the Spirit of God who brings change to a person's heart.

After going through these steps, it's time to initiate the conversation. It's helpful to construct an opening "statement" that reflects your preparation. Write it down and read it through until it's clear in your mind.

—DENISE VAN ECK; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2004 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss:

1. When was the last time someone empathized with me? How did that make me feel?
2. Which of the above steps comes naturally to me? Which will I have to work at?
3. How can I practice these steps now so that I'll be prepared when I really need them?

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Handling Theological Conflicts in a Small Group

Five approaches that will help you and your group deal with doctrinal strife

1 Timothy 1:3–7

John was ready for the upcoming small-group meeting. Prayed-up and prepared, he was especially looking forward to seeing Tom and Nancy, a couple who had been attending the group for four months, but were not yet connected to the church. When the meeting started, the icebreaker was great, as was the worship time. Then the kids went to a separate room for their lesson, and John told everyone to turn to Matthew 28:18–20: Christ’s famous commission to make disciples of all nations. John shared his conviction that without Christ people are eternally lost, and that Christ expects all believers to evangelize and make disciples.

That’s when Tom blurted out, “I believe that Jesus only died for the elect, and that he predestines only elected people to be saved. God will bring to me those he wants me to talk with. So I don’t believe in witnessing.” The rest of the group froze in silence. The question on everyone’s mind was, *How is John going to respond?*

Get Ready

Let’s face it, doctrinal conflict can and does occur in small-group ministry. Ideally, churches have structures in place that will answer most theological questions. But if such documents do exist, group leaders usually don’t have immediate access to them. Similarly, a lot of churches don’t have a workable coaching structure in place to help group leaders deal with doctrinal questions. All of this means that too many small-group leaders are left to address theological issues on their own.

Dealing with doctrinal conflict is a diverse problem, and there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Yet as the leader is armed with various options and responses, the Holy Spirit can more readily remind him or her which option best fits the situation. With that in mind, here are some possibilities:

The “Can We Talk at Another Time?” Approach

This is often the best approach. Most small-group lessons last around 45 minutes—a time period in which the group can cover only a limited amount of ground. Consequently, one of the chief jobs of the small-group leader is to keep the discussion on track. When a doctrinal issue comes up, the leader can say, “Tom, your point about Christ dying only for the elect is a good one. Thanks for sharing it. But this is not the time to debate eternal security and predestination. Let’s have that conversation another time—perhaps we could meet afterwards. Right now, let’s look at what Christ clearly says here in the Word about making disciples. Now, let me repeat this question....”

At these words, the group will likely heave a collective sigh of relief. Remember that group members often feel uncomfortable and un-edified when wandering down the path of a tangled doctrinal discussion. Granted, there’s a time and place for such discussions, but it’s usually not in the middle of a small-group gathering. The “Can we talk at another time?” approach allows you to positively respond to the person with the doctrinal issue, yet firmly remind him or her that it’s best to discuss the matter outside of the group.

The “I Don’t Know” Approach

Here is a blessed phrase: “I don’t know, but I will check on it and get back to you.” That is a phrase of honor, not disgrace. Small-group leaders are not supposed to be theological experts. They are trained in other professions. Pastors, on the other hand, go to Bible school and seminary in order to study theology. So when the small-group leader says, “I don’t know the answer to that theological question, but I’ll find out and get back to you,” he or she is manifesting the humble attitude of a learner.

Pride tempts many group leaders to act like they know the answer to any question. But the results of giving in to such pride can be disastrous. How often have you seen group leaders think they remember a Scripture verse that addresses a theological question, only to spend five or ten fruitless minutes hunting for it? And answers given under pressure usually ring hollow.

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The “Brief Answer and Continue” Approach

When a potentially conflictive doctrinal issue can be easily explained, and the leader feels the group might also be helped by the answer, he or she can give a brief answer and move on. This is a good approach when the question comes from a sincere member who is known and respected in the group. Note that the leader should be sufficiently confident in the subject matter to give a brief answer—it’s often harder to give a concise answer than a long, rambling one.

The “Go with the Flow” Approach

I remember one meeting in my living room in which first-timer Mary, a nominal Roman Catholic newcomer, blurted out her frustration with the Catholic Church. She wanted to discuss what was boiling inside her heart—the doctrinal differences between the Catholic Church and evangelical Christianity. In this case, Mary sincerely wanted help. I allowed her to share her doubts, and we as a group answered her questions.

I chose this option because, first, she was the guest of a faithful member of the group. Second, she asked sincere questions that demonstrated a desire to know Christ—not just debate doctrine. Third, the maturity level of the rest of the group was high enough to warrant a free-flowing exchange with Mary.

We spent most of the lesson discussing her issues, and she came back week after week with more and more of her questions answered. Eventually she received Christ, was baptized, and even became a small-group multiplication leader. Sometimes the leader should see a doctrinal discussion as an opportunity to minister to doubting or seeking people.

The “Talk to the Person Afterwards” Approach

My wife Celyce invited Lily to her women’s small group with the hope that she’d become a believer. Unfortunately, Lily’s doubt and unbelief disrupted the love and community in the group. She liked to bring up arguments for the sake of debate. Her constant doubt and questioning around doctrinal issues caused disruption and consternation. She attacked other group members if they disagreed with her. Celyce reminded Lily about the need to stick with the topic. She even tried giving a brief answer and moving on. Nothing worked.

Celyce decided to have a serious talk with Lily after the group. The direct approach helped for a while, but the contentious narratives continued during lesson times. Celyce was eventually forced to ask Lily not to come back. “I think it would be best if I talked with you one-on-one, rather than in the group,” Celyce graciously told her. “Next week, why don’t we meet together for breakfast?” We later found out that Lily had a history of mental problems. Celyce made the right decision.

Conclusion

Experience is often the best teacher when determining which approach to take with doctrinal conflicts. Small-group leaders should not be afraid of failure—it will occur. But there’s no one who can help make sense of the diverse experiences better than the Holy Spirit.

I encourage small-group leaders to take time before each meeting to pray, meditate, and get in touch with God. Small-group leadership is an exciting adventure in trusting the living God for answers. He’s the One who will give wisdom to make the right decisions in dealing with theological conflicts in your small group.

—JOEL COMISKEY; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. Was the last doctrinal discussion in our small group a positive or negative experience? Why? Could the leader have benefited from any of the approaches above?
2. Have I tried any of the above approaches in my own small group? What was the result?
3. What steps can our church take in training our group leaders to address doctrinal conflicts and questions using these five approaches?

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Handling Conflict with EGRs

How to keep things running smoothly when members' personalities are the problem

Ecclesiastes 5:7

Rick Warren refers to troublesome or needy individuals within Christian communities as Extra Grace Required people (EGRs). EGRs are those who require extra patience, grace, and attention. Some EGRs are dysfunctional and hard to love. Others have irritating idiosyncrasies for which we must make allowances. On a good day, the quirks of EGRs can make small groups run over their allotted time because they dominate and/or monopolize the discussion. On a bad day, EGR members can be so needy and demanding that the remaining group members never want to return.

Practical Suggestions

The technique for managing EGRs depends on the individual person, group, and problem, but here are a few general suggestions to keep in mind:

- **Address the issue.** Do not ignore EGRs. Unattended EGR problems can suck the life out of groups. Bite the bullet and work through the problem right away so that it does not grow into a larger one.
- **Remind the group about the rules.** Over time, group members may forget the guidelines and purpose originally set for the group, so periodically remind them. Doing so probably won't resolve big problems, but it may assist with smaller logistical issues, such as not starting or finishing on time or not respecting the needs of other members. (If you don't have any group rules or guidelines, this is a good time to write some).
- **Pull the troublesome group member aside.** Talk to the EGR member privately about the disruptive behavior. Be kind, but specific. Explain why it is a problem, and suggest changes in behavior the member could make.
- **Talk with the remaining group members.** Proverbs 15:22 says, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." If an EGR continues being disruptive after you have spoken privately with the person, take the next step. Often, by this stage, group members have already brought the concern to your attention because they find the behavior troubling, as well. I am not suggesting you hold a private meeting without the EGR present—if the EGR learns of it, they may feel that people are scheming against them. However, you can individually encourage group members to help steer future meetings, wresting the attention away from the EGR and minimizing the chances for any one member to monopolize.
- **Set boundaries.** After you talk with the EGR and group members separately, talk to all members at the next scheduled group meeting with the EGR present. Explain about having consideration for other members, and urge them to limit their requests and length of sharing time during prayer.

The Last Resort

People who visit online chat rooms are expected to behave. If they act inappropriately, a moderator bans them from future postings—at least for a time. If they have too many infringements, they may be permanently banned. Similar rules should apply to small-group participation. If, after talking with EGR group members and giving them several chances, they fail to change their troublesome behavior, you may have no other choice than to ask them not to attend your group anymore. But use this solution only as a last resort.

A group shepherd's first concern is for the welfare of all the sheep. If the need of the one outweighs the needs of the many, something is out of balance. Remember that another group may suit this person's needs better. Or, if the EGR needs assistance on a deeper level than a small group can provide, you can make recommendations for professional help.

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Galatians 6:2 encourages us to carry each other's burdens, but not to step into a codependent relationship where we perpetuate a problem. By continually giving needy members more attention, we feed their need and shortchange others in the group; we send a message that the needy person comes first. As the group leader, you must weigh the needs of all members along with the needs of EGRs and do what is best for the majority.

—TEENA M. STEWART; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss:

1. Where does the line exist between a “quirky” person and an EGR?
2. Where does the line exist between bearing each other's burdens and perpetuating a problem?
3. How can our church support small groups and leaders when it comes to handling EGRs?

HANDLING CONFLICT IN SMALL GROUPS**Avoiding E-Conflict**

Regularly managing conflicts online is a bad idea.

1 Peter 3:8–9

Our church is tech-savvy. Our staff and small groups use e-mail regularly for announcements, prayer updates, and personal notes. But one thing we no longer do with e-mail or the internet is handle conflict. We've learned the hard way that doing so is almost always a bad idea. Here's why:

E-mail Doesn't Convey Emotions Well

When you're face-to-face with another person, you can gauge their emotions fairly accurately by watching their body language. But with e-mail or instant messaging, readings of emotional tone are often wrong. People read into things what they *think* you feel.

During one heart-to-heart online conversation, being a fast typist, I responded quickly to each of my friend's posts. I noticed she became defensive after a few exchanges, and then the conversation ended rather quickly. It was weeks before I realized she had been offended by the speed of my replies. She interpreted my rapid posts to mean I was angry. After making peace, we agreed to talk in person next time.

E-mail Is a Read-and-Reply Tool

If you are angry or thrust into the middle of a conflict, it's all too easy to "vent and send" before investigating the facts.

Last year, one of our volunteers heard about a budget issue that made him angry. He immediately fired off a harshly critical missive regarding the church's leadership. While every member has a right to raise questions, his e-mail was inflammatory and based on misinformation. Checking the facts beforehand would have kept his message out of the "outgoing" folder.

Online Conflicts Spread Like Wildfire

In a conflict situation, it's simply too easy to forward an e-mail to lots of different people—many of whom may not need to get involved. Add to this the varying frequency that people check e-mail, and soon no one knows who has seen what, which only adds more fuel to the fire.

I was surprised one Sunday morning to learn of a heated, critical e-mail generated by a key leader. I was even more shocked to learn who had received it. Current leadership, past leadership, and others who were completely uninvolved in the issues—all were carbon-copied.

Fortunately, the situation was contained and the author issued a personal apology to the entire distribution list, but only after a face-to-face visit from the pastor. Some things are best handled in person.

Now, when an incendiary e-mail comes across my desk, I fire off an automatic reply. But it's not to engage in any kind of e-conflict; it's to send an invitation. "I'd be happy to get together with you to talk about this issue. Give me a call, and let's set up a time."

—CHAD HALL; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2004 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit LeadershipJournal.net.

Discuss:

1. When have I been misunderstood over e-mail or instant messaging? What was the cause?
2. Does the above advice also apply to social networks or connection sites like MySpace or Facebook? Why or why not?
3. How can I prevent my small group from handling conflict in this way?

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When Politics Invades Your Small Group

These guidelines can help you keep the heat out of hot-button issues.

Romans 13:1–7

Here are some comments overheard in a recent small-group meeting: “I wish there was a decent candidate running this year.” “I assume no one here will vote for someone who wants to take away women’s choices.” “I just love Rush Limbaugh, don’t you?” When it comes to the dynamics of a group meeting, comments like these are usually high on the “cringe factor” scale. If the subject turns to politics (which happens often, especially in an election year), every small-group leader knows they are about to walk down a thorny path!

Unfortunately, it’s probably useless to try and fight such discussions by prohibiting them. So what should we do? What should our response be as a group leader? How should we expect the members of our group to react to strong political statements during a meeting? Here are some suggestions:

- **Make it biblical.** God has ordained government officials (Romans 13:1–7), so it is entirely appropriate and spiritual to discuss politics during a Bible study. The question is how to handle such discussions within a biblical framework.
- **Speak truth in love.** As Christians, we are interested in the penetration of God’s truth into every part of our world—including the political arena. But we need to temper our political opinions and actions with the love of Christ. When we discuss politics with others, we should encourage and bear with each other. We should also avoid talking down at others who differ with us. We should desire honest discussion with the goal of aligning ourselves with God’s will for our government.
- **God is a not a donkey or an elephant.** No group leader or member should assume that his or her own political view is entirely correct. Very few political issues are black and white matters of faith.
- **Don’t let politics become the focus of the group.** A small group might designate one night to study the subject of politics or government in Scripture. Or an occasional, brief, unplanned discussion can be appropriate. But if politics take over the group and the interaction of its members, either inside or outside the meeting, things are out of balance.
- **Confront overly zealous group members privately.** Any time one person dominates the discussion in a small group, a wise group leader will find a way to speak with them privately and ask them to be more aware of the group dynamics. A person with strong political views is no exception.
- **Align with church leadership.** Small-group leaders should always guide their group in accordance with the views of the overall leadership of their church. Any political view that rests outside the church’s understanding of Scripture should be avoided, and questions should be directed to the leadership of the church. Group meetings should never be a platform for division in the church.
- **Seize the moment.** People tend to bring up the “hot” political points of the hour, many of which are trivial when viewed from a larger picture. When this kind of talk arises in a group meeting, a prudent leader will discern the opportunity for a discussion of deeper issues. For example, a piece of gossip about the personal life of a politician might be guided into a healthy discussion of the question, “Does character count these days, and how does that relate to our vote?”
- **Supervised study.** If the leader feels that his or her group genuinely needs a more in-depth discussion about a Christian’s relationship to politics, perhaps a balanced book on the subject could be studied for a period of time.

—RICK LOWRY; copyright 2008 by the author and Christianity Today International.

Discuss:

1. What was my last experience with a political discussion? Was it positive or negative, and why?
2. Does our small group have an obligation to discuss political issues or candidates? Why or why not?
3. Which of the above guidelines can I use in my group right now?

HANDLING CONFLICT IN SMALL GROUPS**When Group Members Are Critical of You***Four time-tested ways to foster peace while under attack*

1 Peter 3:8–9

Many leaders struggle with appropriate ways to handle fault-finding. Some are able to turn a simple snide remark into a skirmish, a battle, and then all out war. Peace eludes them, and the body of Christ wrenches in pain over the resulting turmoil.

Leadership and criticism go hand in hand. Harsh words come with the territory. And what we do with criticism, our reaction, will magnify or minimize hurtful words. Our challenge is to find creative ways to take out the sting and maintain peace. After 23 years of observation, prior mistakes, and well-given advice, I have found four time-tested means to peace while under attack: silence, settlement, sorrow, and strength.

Silence

Augustine said, “Lord, deliver me from the lust of vindicating myself.” Some criticisms are best left alone. To respond is to aggravate our detractor. Ecclesiastes 3: 6 says, “There is a time to keep and a time to throw away.” We should keep our reactions to ourselves and throw away valueless judgments of others. Verse 7 goes on to say, “A time to be silent and a time to speak.” Silence can speak volumes.

Knowing when to respond and keep silent is best decided by asking, “Can I respond to this criticism in a holy manner?” Here are some other things to consider:

- Will your use of silence cause a problem to fester? If so, move quickly to address the issue.
- Will remaining silent give a cooling off period for all parties involved? Silence is golden at such times.
- Will silence keep peace by refusing to make something larger than what it may appear to be?

Settlement

Sometimes our critics have valuable insight, and a little humble pie of recognizing our critic’s views goes a long way in settling oppositions’ voices. Proverbs 15:33 says, “The fear of the Lord is the instruction of wisdom; and before honor is humility.” “By humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, and honor, and life.”(Proverbs 22:4)

Humbling ourselves while admitting we don’t have all the answers quiets the rumblings when we are wrong. Sometimes we need to settle the matter in this way—adopt our critic’s suggestions; agree with their analysis; acknowledge we were wrong. It will be hard to do at times, but great at bringing peace.

When using settlement to handle criticism, please consider these questions:

- Are you considering using settlement over a life and death matter? If so, don’t. Some things are worth dying over. Most criticisms, though, aren’t over death-defying issues. Settle and move on.
- Are you settling over just the criticism and not the extraneous issues? Don’t lose focus. Do what you have to do to settle the criticism but nothing else.
- Are the actions you take going to truly settle the matter, or will they only put off a renewal of criticism later? Settlement is still worth trying initially. But if the criticism surfaces again, settlement may not be the answer.

Sorrow

Our attitude after criticism solidifies people’s reactions, for good or bad. By approaching the fault-finding with a sorrowful spirit—sorry for the offense, mistake, or perceived wrong without admitting an offense, mistake, or wrong was committed—we save ourselves the grief that a haughty or proud spirit brings.

HANDLING CONFLICT IN SMALL GROUPS

Simply put, we should be sad when we do something that offends people. And all of us would love to evade reproof, but that's not always possible. "To avoid criticism," says Elbert Hubbard, "do nothing, say nothing, be nothing." Yet, we know effective ministry requires doing, saying, and being.

A sorrowful spirit breaks down defenses that critical people put up. It says our doing, saying, and being was not intentionally meant to offend. Since it did, we are deeply apologetic that our actions or inactions didn't meet their approval. Sometimes our sorrowful spirit can open the doors to making request. It may be to ask them to listen with an open mind as we share why we did or did not do as their criticism suggests. It may include a request to give it time to work—saving their faultfinding for later if so desired. Such a request, from such a spirit, may indeed please the critic.

If it pleases or not, we must avoid the danger in thinking every criticism is meant to bring about our downfall. Such thinking is less than Christian. "The wicked man flees when no one pursues" (Proverbs 28:1). Most critics only want what is best. When we are non-defensive, we become aware that constructive criticism is a real compliment to us. The person offering it is usually uncomfortable in doing so, but if he is willing to endure the discomfort in order to help us, we should listen and appreciate his suggestions. He runs the risk of arousing our enmity, but he cares enough for our welfare to take this chance.

When utilizing sorrow, reflect on the following:

- Is your sorrow genuine? Your face, emotions, and mannerisms should convey your deep anguish. Don't try to fake it.
- Is the timing right? Right after a heated exchange may not be the best time. Allow heads to cool.
- Is pride keeping you from expressing any sorrow and remorse? If so, confess it. Let God humble your spirit. Without it you may be victor over your critic but lose standing with the ultimate Judge.

Strength

Winston Churchill was a pillar of respect and strength. During his last year in office, he attended an official ceremony. Several rows behind him two gentlemen began whispering, "That's Winston Churchill. They say he is getting senile. They say he should step aside and leave the running of the nation to more dynamic and capable men." When the ceremony was over, Churchill turned to the men and said, "Gentlemen, they also say he is deaf!" Such frankness is sometimes necessary.

Scripture says, "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John...they marveled" (Acts 4:13). "And now, Lord, behold their threats: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak the word" (Acts 4:29). We, too, can leave our critics marveling when we speak the truth with boldness. Some criticisms are just blatant lies and require correction. To allow them to go unanswered is to reap harm to the body of Christ.

Before responding with boldness to our critics, consider asking yourself:

- Does their criticism affect the cause of Christ? If not, tone down your answer.
- Is the faultfinding personal or does it have a wider influence? If personal, respond accordingly.
- Is the criticism completely false or only partly? If only to some extent, you must retort less boldly.
- Does the criticism contradict basic church doctrine? If so, address it quickly before it spreads.

Peace at any cost should never be our goal in dealing with criticism. The foundations of our faith must never be compromised in order to please a critical faction. Critics flee when truth prevails. Speak boldly the truth and God will see us through any repercussions—and bring his peace.

—DANNY R. VON KANEL; excerpted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP Journal, © 2002 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [LeadershipJournal.net](http://www.LeadershipJournal.net).

Discuss:

1. Which of the above principles do I practice best? Which needs improvement?
2. Is it harder for me to respond to criticism with silence or strength? How can I work to gain a more balanced attitude to criticism?
3. When was I criticized last, whether fairly or unfairly? How could that situation have been improved using the principles above?

HANDLING CONFLICT IN SMALL GROUPS**Further Exploration**

Websites and books to help your group handle conflict

BuildingChurchLeaders.com. Practical resources from Christianity Today International.

- “Handling Conflict” Assessment Pack
- “Mastering Conflict” Survival Guide
- “Healthy Problem Solving” Case Study

BuildingSmallGroups.com. Small-groups resources from Christianity Today International.

- “Ministering to Difficult Group Members” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Getting Along with People” Bible Study
- “Successful Relationships” Bible Study

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Smallgroups.com. This website specializes in equipping small-group leadership to make disciples and strengthen community.

The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict by *Ken Sande*. The experts agree: this is the best guide to conflict resolution and reconciliation you'll find (Baker, 2003; ISBN 978-0801064852).

Why Didn't You Warn Me? How to Deal with Challenging Group Members by *Pat J. Sikora*. A help guide for dealing with difficult situations in your small group (Standard Publishing, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).