



Lewis Center
for Church Leadership

Leading Ideas

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The Promise and Peril of Conflict by David R. Brubaker

A compelling example of leaders turning conflict into opportunity for structural and cultural change is found in the first seven verses of Acts 6. The idyllic description of the first Christian community (Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37) is soon marred by incidents of deception (Acts 5:1-11) and internal conflicts (Acts 6:1-7). While the sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira — who attempted to deceive the apostles about the extent of their generosity — are shocking, the conflict recorded in Acts 6 sounds more familiar to our ears. One group murmured (or complained) against another group, and leaders intervened to resolve the conflict.

The complaints came from the Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews and were directed against the Aramaic-speaking Jews. Most scholars agree that the Aramaic-speaking Jews were in the majority of the early Christian movement and included the original twelve disciples — now called apostles. The identified issue for the minority group was that their “widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food” (Acts 6:1) — a compelling allegation in a society where care for widows and orphans was part of the Mosaic Law.

The twelve apostles could have ignored these allegations, ordered the minority group to stop griping, or issued a decree that all widows would henceforth be fed equal portions. Instead, they convened a meeting of all the disciples and self-defined by clarifying their primary role in the community. “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.” (Acts 6:2) They then gave the problem back to the group that originally complained, suggesting that they choose seven individuals “full of the Spirit and wisdom” to care for the feeding of the widows (v.3). Fortunately, the proposal “pleased the whole group” (v.5), and they chose seven men, all of whom had Greek names — and thus were likely from the group that originally brought the complaint.

It is instructive to note that this passage begins and ends with church growth. The first verse of chapter 6 records that “in those days...the number of disciples was increasing,” while the last verse of this section concludes that “the word of God spread” and “a large number of [Jewish] priests became obedient to the faith” (v.7). This is thus a story about conflict, nested in a story about growth and change. This fascinating, if brief, account of the first recorded church conflict offers at least three significant learnings.

First, *leaders need to move towards conflict, not away from it.* This is consistent with the “inviting disagreement” counsel in chapter 4 [of this book]. Leaders who learn to move towards conflict discover that they have opportunities to resolve issues when those issues are small, rather than attempting to fight fires when they are nearly out of control.

Second, *the identified issue is almost never the real issue*. The allegation from the Greek-speaking minority that their “widows were being overlooked” in the daily food distribution was indeed a compelling one, but it likely was a proxy for a deeper feeling of powerlessness and alienation among the Hellenist members of the early church. All the significant leadership positions (apostles) were held by the Aramaic-speaking majority, and the minority did not know how to exercise their voice other than through “murmuring.”

Third, *involve the “complainers” in solving their identified problems*. Note that the apostles did not agree to take care of the problem that had been identified. Rather, they recruited members of the murmuring minority to address the problem. This outcome . . . actually created a new role in the church — that of deacon.

Conflict is often a crisis, but it is also an opportunity. Much depends on our attitude towards conflict. If we expect it will be destructive and awful, it probably will be. But if we anticipate that the conflict may instead be an opportunity for genuine change, we may experience transformation. As Ron Kraybill, the founding director of Mennonite Conciliation Service, has said, conflict may be “an arena of revelation,” a time when we hear God’s voice as we never have before.

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