

# Managing Conflict in the Restored Church



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Some members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints contend that conflict has no place in the Church. They quote the scripture, “if ye are not one, ye are not mine.” They deny the existence of conflict because they feel that ideally the Church should be conflict free. But conflicts do exist in the Church. They should be managed, not ignored.

The management of conflict can be improved without impinging on the doctrine of the Church, and it can best be done on the local level. For a ward or stake to be an effective organization, there will be men in authority who can determine the source and nature of a conflict. These men will know whether a dispute deserves attention and, if so, how much time and energy should be devoted to resolving it. Because they will have a real understanding of the nature of the conflict, they will know what actions will bring the most effective resolution.

## The Nature of Conflicts in the Church: Some Vignettes

*Intrapersonal Conflict.* Conflicts within self, but often resulting from interaction with the organization, account for a source of stress. For example, unfulfilled expectations about a position, resulting from how it was described as compared with how it really is, breed much intrapersonal conflict. A call in the Church may be issued to a person whereby the position is made to sound more important or responsible than it really is. This may lead to unfulfilled expectations and dissatisfaction.

Another common source of inner stress takes place when there is identity conflict. A person’s self-concept might prevent him from accepting himself in a certain position. In our ward, we have the example of a person who has been called to numerous clerking and secretarial positions but who does not see himself as a clerk. While he continues to accept these callings, he is generally unhappy in his Church work. Such intrapersonal conflict affects the quality of his service.

Bishops and others who frequently counsel with Church members know the extent to which personal problems, including sin, can serve to prevent members from progressing and can affect the quality of their work and their interaction with others.

At the intrapersonal level of conflict, various forms of counseling seem to be the most effective intervention methods. The new *Bishop’s Training and Self-Help Guide* helps bishops to be better counselors and demonstrates

the Church's attempt to improve effectiveness in this area. In addition, to prevent identity conflict, Church leaders should also consider matching a person's self-concept with the job he is being asked to accomplish. When callings are made, it would also be helpful to seek to be as realistic as possible in explaining the nature of the work to be performed. This approach would go far to eliminate many unfulfilled expectations. Finally, Church leaders can get divine inspiration to help them manage intrapersonal conflicts and this is, of course, the key to resolving such sources of stress in the kingdom of God.

*Interpersonal Conflict.* Personality clashes and interpersonal disputes are the Genesis of much disagreement in the Church. Examples of these kinds of conflicts are legion. For instance, anyone who has ever served an LDS mission knows that one of the real challenges of the experience is to learn to live compatibly with another missionary. Some missionary teams are able to have both productive and interpersonally satisfying relationships, while other companionships are fraught with interaction problems that keep the missionaries from fully engaging in the work. In the Restored Church, many student apartments, marriages, working relationships (e.g., bishoprics, presidencies, and superintendencies), and ward members suffer from the interpersonal conflicts that have afflicted their relationships.

One effective procedure for resolving interpersonal disputes is to use skillful third parties. A third party, someone not directly involved in the conflict, can help individuals in the organization by creating common incentives for reaching accord, by providing the needed outsider support for openly exploring the problem and surfacing the differences that need to be worked out, by helping to sharpen the issues so that they can be managed, by synchronizing the right time and place for the meeting so that it can have every opportunity to succeed without being unduly interrupted, by focusing on skills that will improve communication, and by refereeing the confrontation itself so that it does not become destructive or harmful to either of the parties. A third party consultant is more neutral and can therefore act, as the occasion demands, as a judge, a mediator, or a change agent pushing for action. In general, the third party tries to transform the conflict from hostility and ill will to a focus on problem-solving activities.

In the Church, as has already been pointed out, we have the added advantage of legitimate authority. Consequently, we frequently use this third party technique when, for example, bishops, home teachers, fathers, and priesthood leaders intervene to help improve conditions that may be adversely affecting spiritual well-being or the Church organization. Building on our experience and our willingness to use this procedure, we could probably improve our use of third party intervention methods by using available applied behavioral science knowledge.

Third party skills can be learned by simulation (e.g., role plays, games, exercises, and case studies), and it would be possible to allow the trainees to practice their skills in “safe” environments before actually risking someone’s soul.

To be an effective third person interventionist, it is important to understand and skillfully use interpersonal communication. Four communication skills can be taught that help persons to be effective listeners, to clarify messages, to establish better rapport, and to help decrease personal defenses that often block one’s understanding. *Paraphrasing* is when the receiver checks his understanding of the meaning of the message by repeating to the sender what he heard. Using this skill helps to clarify communication and prevent distortion. *Describing behaviors* is a way to give feedback in a nonattributive way by specifically describing certain behaviors that lead to a certain conclusion. Giving evidence helps to reduce defenses that often block communication. *Describing feelings* permits the sender to communicate to the receiver his emotional (as well as cognitive) message. *Checking perceptions* is when the receiver is unsure about what the sender is feeling and tries to interpret the emotional message. This is quite common in daily practice but instead of keeping the uncertain inference to himself, the receiver then checks his perception with the sender to be sure he has interpreted the emotional message correctly.<sup>1</sup>

*Intragroup Role Conflict.* One of the most common causes of stress in complex organizations is categorized under the heading “role conflict.” This kind of conflict includes what a person should do in his position, the limits of his authority, the status and opportunity associated with a position, and how a person sees himself in relation to others occupying similar positions in like settings.

Within any leadership group, there is a constant effort to define roles. In the Church, various handbooks, rulings by persons in higher positions of authority, and correlation programs grapple with this problem. Still, there are ambiguous zones in the Church wherein it is possible to experience power struggles, task uncertainty, and overlapping responsibilities. When responsibilities are not clear-cut and when group leadership is required, there are many role conflicts.

Seven men serve as the presidents of the seventies in each stake. The general calling of the seventies is to do missionary work, but the specific tasks of the presidents are somewhat ambiguous. While a senior president gives leadership to the other six, the seven presidents as a body have a group form of leadership. In many cases, there is role conflict within this group. Sometimes factions can form within the group or the interpersonal rivalries become such that it is very difficult to accomplish work. This is one example where intragroup conflicts occur.

There are other group forms of leadership in the Church (e.g., stake committees and boards, high council, LDSSA council, persons appointed to work on specific projects) which may be sources of potential conflict. Within certain organizations themselves (e.g., Relief Society, Sunday School, APY) these same dynamics may occur and may have to be resolved.

To manage role conflicts, it is possible to engage in two kinds of activities. First, the task ambiguities can be clarified and roles can be more carefully described. Second, the group can establish procedures for managing the conflicts that result. One procedure would be to rotate the “conductor” role so that different people have a chance to organize the meeting agenda and to conduct the session. Another helpful technique is to appoint someone to act as a “process observer” with a legitimate mandate for stopping the meeting when he perceives a conflict that needs to be surfaced and worked. While the rest of the group concentrates on the agenda items, this person can focus on improving the interaction, communication, decision-making, and goal-setting processes so that the group will be more effective. Thirdly, Church members skilled in group dynamics but not otherwise a part of the group could occasionally be invited to come and help the group to become a more effective working team. This might be accomplished by using laboratory methods of education. Finally, it is often helpful to reserve ten minutes at the end of a meeting to critique or debrief the meeting (likes and dislikes) so that the group can learn from its experience and improve its procedures.

*Intergroup Conflict.* Competition among various organizations and programs often serves to push each subgroup to do its very best. However, the competition for personnel, for facilities, for status and recognition, and for time can sometimes breed rivalry and unforeseen ill will. Who has jurisdiction and responsibility for what is another source of intergroup disagreement. Differentiation and specialization often cause an ingroup cognitive and emotional orientation that sometimes clashes with the position of another organization or program (e.g., the seventies’ missionary orientation vs. the genealogy interests of the high priests). The lack of good communication and correlation between groups often leads to information distortion and conflict. All of these factors tend to cause intergroup conflict in complex organizations.

These kinds of conflicts are common in the Church. In one ward council, for example, the heads of the Primary, Relief Society, and Junior Sunday School and the janitor were in dispute over who should use the toys in the playroom and who had responsibility for repairing them and for putting them away. Rather than decide the matter for them or keep the disagreement from occurring, the counselor conducting the meeting permitted all of the parties to air their grievances. A number of the comments

were very affective, even hostile, and some might contend that such negative emotions should not be permitted in official Church meetings. However, at the right moment, the counselor was skillful enough to ask the \$64,000 question: What are we going to do about this? The extra energy generated by the conflict was then channeled in a constructive way not only to reach a catharsis but also to suggest some very creative solutions to the problem. All involved had good feelings about the meeting when they departed. The counselor remarked that it is too bad that this particular mode of managing conflict is not used more often.

The University First Ward, Boston Stake, is in many ways an ideal congregation. The membership is devoted, talented, energetic, and anxious to serve. It is a temporary ward in that there is a two-thirds turnover in the membership at the end of any given academic year. In terms of history, relationships, and organization, a new year beginning in September is really an opportunity to begin afresh.

We, the bishopric, had been pressured with staffing problems and with trying to meet new ward members during the first two months of this academic year. The problems seemed typical enough: loneliness, roommate adjustments, borderline activity, homesickness, and inadequate social activities. There were interpersonal and organizational conflicts in the ward, but no more than could normally be expected. One aspect of the ward organization was attracting our attention and did seem to require that we intervene to improve it.

The University First, like most student wards, is organized into family units (about eight to ten married and single students presided over by a family father who has been called, sustained, and set apart for that position) for implementing the home teaching and family home evening programs. The various family units, we noticed, had begun to form such strong group bonds that some dysfunctional competition between groups developed. Also, it became apparent that the ward members did not sense a feeling of being part of the greater ward community. We decided as a bishopric to hold a Ward Family Night to build a stronger sense of unity. Our theme was "How to create an ideal LDS community in our ward."

The event was held on a Monday evening. We first met in the chapel for an opening song, a prayer, and instructions. We then proceeded to divide into ten small groups and to meet in various classrooms. Half of one family was merged with half of another family, and the small groups changed composition three times during the evening. Thus, every half-family had an opportunity to meet and collaborate with three other half-families. Each small group was directed by a discussion leader who had received instructions prior to the session about logistics, the nature of the task, and the kinds of dynamics that should be encouraged.

The first task was to discuss, using a brainstorming technique, our perceptions of an ideal LDS community. The second task of the groups was to identify those restraining forces that currently existed in the ward which prevented us from becoming ideal (as we had just articulated that goal state). Some forces listed were: stereotyping people and categorizing them into certain subclassifications, thus not permitting them to be understood as they really are; interpersonal competition (e.g., between sisters); organizational competition between ward organizations and programs; gossip and information distortion; failure to appreciate diverse (different) orientations. All of these restraining forces could be viewed as sources of conflict. The third task was to decide what actions could be taken to overcome the forces and reach our goal.

The evening concluded with a mass meeting in the cultural hall. The format was that of an Indian powwow where persons spoke spontaneously what they felt in their hearts. The bishop began the meeting by reading a scripture and ward members then spoke briefly about their feelings resulting from the evening's activities, about their hopes, or about their visions of what we could become.

The major sources of conflict (the restraining forces) are now on mimeographed sheets and we are all working to overcome them. Our ward council has met to review the action plans and to act on some of the ideas. The family fathers have likewise convened, and individual apartments are deciding what they can do. We are seeking to build a ward climate of fraternal love where we can be blessed by the spirit, where we will study the scriptures and live according to their precepts, where we will help one another to live the "law of eternal progression," and where we will establish mechanisms for resolving conflicts that might keep us from reaching these goals.

Intergroup conflicts can be resolved in much the same way as interpersonal problems. Third parties can be used effectively for intervention. The communication skills are helpful to create norms and a climate for confronting differences. The difference in using these tools is that they must be employed at a more macrolevel of analysis. The interventionist will have to possess knowledge and skills to bring two or more groups together as was done for the Ward Family Night. The climate of the whole organization will have to be more open and trusting so that conflict can be surfaced and managed.

### **Whether and How Much to Act**

Once the source and nature of the conflict has been uncovered, a decision must be made about intervention. Is the conflict potentially destructive so as to require the expenditure of costly resources (time, energy, authority) to try to resolve it? The best rule of thumb to use to answer this



question is: when the parties (persons, groups, organizations) need to collaborate in order to accomplish a task, the conflict should be managed to the extent that it permits them to collaborate effectively.

This means that the persons considering intervention must first ask why do these parties need to resolve their differences. It may be that in a ward family the concept of brother and sister connotes interdependence and therefore relationships must always have a potential for collaboration. Good feelings need to exist at all levels so that it will be possible to continuously help one another.

The persons considering intervention must, then, determine the extent to which the conflicting parties need to work together. If they are highly interdependent (e.g., a bishopric or presidency, a pair of home teachers, the priesthood quorums, a family), then all of the resources necessary should be expended to resolve the conflict and promote collaboration. Thus, one intervenes in direct proportion to the degree of required interdependence or collaboration.

### **Managing Conflict: Mormon Doctrine and Practice**

It is anticipated that some readers will still question whether this topic is appropriate for discussion. Is there a doctrinal basis for arriving at these conclusions? How do these proposals differ from current practice? Should we try to prevent conflict from occurring at all in the Church, and, if so, why do we legitimize the topic by discussing it so openly?

*Mormon Doctrine.* The Lord, when He arrived in the New World, told the Nephites,

For verily, verily I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention, and he stirreth up the hearts of men to contend with anger, one with another.

Behold this is not my doctrine, to stir up the hearts of men with anger, one against another; but this is my doctrine that such things should be done away.<sup>2</sup>

Alma also admonished the people to abolish contention, to become unified, and to exercise love toward one another.<sup>3</sup> Many of the other prophets have looked on the existence of conflict as an indication of wickedness and have been moved to go forth and preach repentance to those who were contending one with another.

The General Authorities have also underscored the fact that harmony and love are goals for the Church. Brother Widtsoe pointed out that the "Law of Brotherly Love" is the guiding philosophy of the priesthood.<sup>4</sup> Harmony in the home is a goal stated in the current *Family Home Evening Manual*.<sup>5</sup>

However, while these ideal states may be commonly accepted goals, both the Church and the Lord have also recognized that men are fallible and that structures and procedures need to be devised to adequately deal with these conflicts when they arise. For example, we are all aware of the scripture in the Doctrine and Covenants that helps us to know how to righteously use the priesthood to deal with conflict:

*Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterward an increase of love toward him that thou hast reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy.*<sup>6</sup>

And the Prophet Joseph Smith said:

I frequently rebuke and admonish my brethren, and that because I love them, not because I want to incur their displeasure or mar their happiness.<sup>7</sup>

A doctrine that is frequently used to help each of us resolve our differences is the principle of repentance. If we feel anger, we should repent and get back in the spirit of peace and love.<sup>8</sup> We are charged not to stir up anger or bad feelings toward one another, but to forgive our fellows without judging them.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we must be willing to freely forgive others if we are to be forgiven ourselves.<sup>10</sup> This doctrine supports the article's thesis that we should try to manage conflict instead of ignore it. Repentance and forgiveness are two important principles that lead to effective resolution because we must be ready to forgive or resolve a conflict in order to repent.

The scriptures also instruct us on how to resolve our differences. It is written,

Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church: but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and publican.<sup>11</sup>

There is, then, a scriptural basis for the structures such as the Bishop's Court that are used for processing conflicts in the Church.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, it could be concluded that while it may be a goal to arrive at a condition of perfect harmony, the Lord recognizes that in our present fallible state we need to have structures and procedures for resolving conflicts that arise because of our imperfections.

Conflict can also be viewed as being normal, natural, eternal, and sometimes even functional. One can best attain a condition of perfect harmony, not by overcoming all conflict, but rather by learning to effectively resolve differences so that they do not block spiritual progress. A state of perfect harmony is synonymous with a state of perfect conflict resolution.

*Mormon Practice.* In practice, the Church has often found good ways to manage the conflicts that besiege it. There is a cooperative ethic in the Church which enables members to effectively organize in order to accomplish the work. Part of this cooperation comes from strong personal commitments to the Church. The ethic is also supported because the Church is laical and the work is voluntary. Moreover, because callings change frequently in the Church, members must learn how to cooperate quickly in order to perform duties.

Church authority, when used properly, is very “legitimate” (i.e., the persons subordinate to those in authority do not question the rights of superiors to act and behave as they do), and persons in positions of leadership can claim right to divine inspiration over their various jurisdictions. Authority is used very effectively in the Church to resolve conflict. For example, fathers intervene (sometimes with the help of the home teachers) to help family members resolve disputes; bishops feel free to confer with leaders of ward auxiliaries and priesthood organizations when they are conflicting; a ward mission leader might counsel a pair of stake missionaries in his ward if he feels that they are having interpersonal problems that prevent them from collaborating effectively; or a Relief Society president could sit down with a counselor or a teacher and try to confront a personal or interpersonal conflict that affects the organization.

Those in authority often use mechanisms for periodic assessment (e.g., the oral evaluation, issuing a call to serve, the temple or personal interview) as occasions to surface and deal with conflicts. Sometimes these discussions focus on intrapersonal problems that are preventing spiritual growth and successful Church service. Sometimes such conferences are about organizational issues (e.g., relationship with counselors, with other ward members, with family).

The Home Teaching Program could be viewed as a direct extension of the conflict management machinery. When functioning properly, home teachers should be helping the father of a family to improve the quality of his family life. In general, husband-wife, parent-child, or child-child disputes that cannot normally be regulated in the home are to be referred first to the home teachers and then to the bishop. Home teachers can also act to bring together antagonistic parties (members of families) in the ward to help them solve their differences.

In summary, both the doctrine and practice of the Church provide for many opportunities to engage, where necessary, in conflict-resolution activities. However, the fact that many disagreements are often left smoldering, that some persons leave the Church because they cannot reach accord, that we sometimes manage by crises rather than by being proactive, that persons in the Church are not always as skillful as they might be in

trying to resolve disputes, and that we do not always understand the exact nature of the conflict and whether we should intervene—all of these realities are indicative of our need as a Church to make an explicit effort to focus on this problem area and to try to learn ways to be more effective.

## Conclusion

The Church can more effectively manage some of its organizational conflicts. It can do this by (1) adopting a more workable orientation toward conflict; it is normal and should be surfaced and managed, (2) training Church leaders to better diagnose the conflicts, and (3) using applied behavioral science knowledge to help those in positions of authority acquire the knowledge and skills needed to be more effective conflict managers. This important practice could be ameliorated without violating our doctrines; indeed, we could become “one” by developing effective procedures for continuously resolving our differences.

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1. See the appendix for greater detail about the communication skills.
2. 3 Nephi 11:29–30.
3. Mosiah 18:21.
4. See John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1939).
5. See *Family Home Evening: Heaven in Our Home* (Salt Lake City: LDS Church, 1971), pp. 77, 138.
6. D&C 121:43.
7. As seen in Widtsoe, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
8. Proverbs 11:12, 29:22
9. D&C 64:7–14.
10. 3 Nephi 13:14–15; Matthew 6:12–15.
11. Matthew 18:15–17.
12. D&C 107:78–81; 42; 102; 107; 134.