

CONFLICT WILL COME

How to prepare for and deal with inevitable conflict among camp staff



By 10 a.m. tomorrow, most of the campers will have boarded their buses for home. By noon, the summer staff will say their final goodbyes and head back to their universities to begin another year of study. Ahhh, but tonight was the perfect ending to the summer camping season. Each of the counselors, with their junior campers in tow, circled around what would arguably be the biggest and best bonfire of the entire summer.



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The only thing brighter than those glowing embers was the glistening starry canopy above. Even the mosquitoes, normally big enough to saddle and ride, had gone on hiatus. ▶



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After a few songs, some silly and some purposefully chosen to be reflective, the testimonies from the campers began. The testimonies followed their predictable path — some funny, some serious, but nearly all included thanking their counselor and occasionally the kitchen staff or activities director. It was at that moment, in this blissful monotony, that fire fell from heaven.

Sarah and Jason moved quickly toward each other from opposite sides of the fire circle as if an invisible force was driving them. Although not their intention, all eyes shifted to them. Through many tears and loud sobbing, you could hear them apologizing to each other and seeking forgiveness. After 12 weeks, a festering (though primarily silent) conflict that started during the staff training week had finally found a peaceful and humble resolution.

Now, these many years later, as a former summer-staffer who witnessed this firsthand, I have reflected on the composition of that conflict — why it started, how it ended and what leading lessons are valuable enough to pass on to you.

Conflict is Essential and Inevitable

Maturation, let alone spiritual formation, cannot happen without being conflicted. Throughout our entire lives, we are faced with choices. To choose one thing is to choose against another. Choices mean changes, changes mean friction, friction causes heat. Our convictions and values are forged on the anvil of choice. Add enough heat and pressure, and what once was immovable will begin to look very different. This is as true in relationships as it is in earth science.

We often resist and resent those who turn up the heat on us. Be it man or God, we usually prefer to stay in our current state. “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but can’t have it ... so you quarrel and fight” (James 4:1–2). It may be counterintuitive to our understanding, but those who have our best interest in mind will frequently be the source of conflict. Make no mistake, those who are against us will also inflict wounds. Even though they mean it for evil, God will use it for good. ▶

Practicing the Art of Conflict Resolution

The common phrase “practice makes perfect” captures the truth that what we practice, we can eventually perform with greater ease and effectiveness. Too often, we teach, but we do not train. Conflict management skills are best integrated when illustrated through role-playing. Skilled facilitators build a bridge from the academic concept to the act of intervention.

Camps intersect people across the conflict spectrum. Whether they are campers, counselors or cooks, everybody brings with them a history of conflict. Some have been abused, and some are abusers. Some are seething with anger on the inside and smiling on the outside. One of the most powerful gifts a camp can offer is to be a safe place for making peace. The greater the number of camp staff who have personally experienced peace after conflict and have honed skills as peacemakers, the more powerfully people will be spared the pain of a toxic life.

John Ortberg said, “Confrontation is a precious gift. When it is withheld, teams deteriorate, performances fail, families break apart and companies go bankrupt. The lack of appropriate, effective confrontation is fatal to communities, and it can be lethal to individual men and women.”

Watching the Clock and the Thermostat

After 23 years as the camp’s executive director, “Big Mike” had come to understand the anatomy of conflict. In his early years, if he saw conflict emerging between staff members, he would jump on it like a 500-pound gorilla. He had very little tolerance for anything that might interfere with the ministry to campers. “Camp is for the campers, not the counselors. Knock it off and get your focus off yourselves and back where it belongs, on the campers!”

His technique reminded me of this type of intervention beautifully managed by a flight attendant on a flight from Nashville to Philadelphia. Sitting five rows in front of me were two people exchanging heated words. It was a man and a woman, but they were not married. I could feel the tension rising quickly, and I was pretty sure she could take him. I was waiting for the first swing when down the aisle comes a tiny flight attendant who might have weighed 90 pounds. Without hesitation, she stood between them, and with a deep, loud bass voice said, “This ends here, and it ends now! Do I make myself clear?” In typical Nashville style, they both sheepishly said, “*Yes ma’am,*” and sat down. Our whole section cheered, and those two combatants sat in their seats without a peep for the rest of the flight. Problem solved!

Having been seasoned himself over the years, Big Mike now takes a very different approach. He counts on a certain amount of conflict to be present. He regards conflict as one of his best opportunities to teach Christ-likeness to those who have been entrusted to his care. He and the other leaders have dedicated an entire day within their staff training week to deal with internal, external, relational and organizational conflict. He believes he is giving his staff a life-changing experience by being part of the staff and a life skill that will bless them and help them personally and anyone their life touches in the future. ▶

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Big Mike sees his involvement with conflict resolution among his staff and four phases:

- 1. Intercession.** God providentially brings people and circumstances into our lives for good and not evil. Believing that to be true, Big Mike spends more time in prayer and less time trying to change people or circumstances. Prayer has a way of clearing the fog from our thinking. Perhaps you've noticed that prayer and discernment seemingly have a cause-and-effect relationship. God does not withhold wisdom from those who ask. By the way, praying was not his normal default; it became a discipline over time. Bottom line: Big Mike now starts by asking before acting.
- 2. Investment.** There is an investment axiom that says, "The stock market rewards patient investors and humbles quick speculators." Stewarding those whom we lead is similar. Big Mike made his investments by listening first, then learning and then leading. Those who try to lead before listening will often learn the hard way (a typical rookie mistake). Instead of jumping to conclusions when the odor of conflict was in the air, Big Mike would watch patiently, ask questions gently and test assumptions along the way. Investing in the process this way prevented his previous tendency to overreact and yet would not allow the underreaction of a passive, uninformed path of least resistance.
- 3. Intervention.** There are times that leadership must act quickly and boldly, but with conflict, that is the exception, not the rule. There are many methods of intervention, but not all methods are equally effective. By choosing the right technique, leaders can avoid doing more harm than good. People are individuals with unique personalities, temperaments, IQs and EQs. Big Mike found that most of his staff responded well to his quiet,

come-alongside style of encouraging them to practice blameless resolution. Simply put, this technique encourages you to focus on what you can own about your actions and attitudes and then initiate with a "soft answer" (Proverbs 15:1) as an invitation to reconciliation. Seldom, very seldom, did it become necessary for Big Mike to turn up the heat by using his positional power.

Keep in mind what pastor and writer Warren Wiersbe said, "When God permits His children to go through the furnace, He keeps His eye on the clock and His hand on the thermostat. His loving heart knows how much and how long."

Although very grateful, Big Mike was not surprised when Sarah and Jason could no longer resist the compelling call to reconciliation. For Big Mike, his patience, grace, skills, timing and reliance on God had prepared an environment ripe for reconciliation.

- 4. Celebration.** There is something powerful about anticipating a good outcome. It is the idea of "starting with the end in mind." The end is not just peace between conflicted parties, but it is also the truth that reconciliation brings joy to the heart of God. At the very core of the Gospel is reconciliation. If we fail to praise Him and celebrate His goodness, even the rivers will clap their hands in protest.

Oh, by the way, Big Mike's wife, Stephanie, just returned from the baby shower for Sarah. Jason and Sarah both told Stephanie to thank Big Mike for his care in helping them go from haters to married lovers. You've got to believe that God smiled.

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I'm happy to discuss these training concepts with you if you're interested. You can reach me at dmarks@centerconsulting.org. ■



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