

# Leading Through Conflict

## 4 Steps to Navigating Difficult Situations

*"The quality of our lives depends not on whether or not we have conflicts, but on how we respond to them."*

-Thomas Crum

Good school leaders know that there will be conflict when leading others. What should you, as a school leader, do when conflict comes your way? There is no way of escaping conflict. You should never run and hide when it arises. By intentionally avoiding conflict, you run the risk of compromising the integrity of your leadership and potentially making matters worse than they actually are. Conflict is not always extreme. Actually, more often than not, conflict is a good thing since, at a minimum, it demonstrates that people are thinking, people care about what they are doing and for better or worse, they are putting forth an effort to do something and make things better as they see fit.

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### You May Not Cause Conflict

As an administrator, you may not cause the conflict or at least you may not cause it directly. This does not mean that you won't have to deal with it to some extent. By deciding to be a leader, you have chosen to face conflict whether you like it or not and whether you caused it or not. It's simply the nature of leadership and it is one of the prices you must pay. Often times, my teachers have come to me with challenges they are experiencing. The ranges of these challenges vary, even extending outside of work. The challenges from work where I am leading might consist of a lack of communication, misunderstandings or disagreements about resolutions to an issue. If you think of a conflict, I probably have dealt with it to some degree. In my experiences, issues and challenges between teachers and leaders can be resolved with little assistance and by having a conversation in which sides are willing to listen to each other. But there have also been occasions in which

more effort has been required. When dealing with conflict between people you may want to follow these steps:

1. Listen carefully without any immediate judgment, quick response and be sure that you have heard all sides to the situation. It is common for people to only tell the side that speaks to their advantage or correctness. Have the initial intent of hearing what is the root cause of the conflict.
2. Find out the expectations that people have for you. Sometimes people just want to vent, other times they may just want you to be aware of the conflict and have the intentions of solving it themselves while other times, they may want you to intervene and assist with solving the problem. You should always ask them, "How would you like for me to help you in resolving this issue or did you want me to just listen?"
3. Get all the information that you need, although this may not mean getting all of the information that there is, because you may not have the time to do so depending on the urgency of the conflict. After you feel that you have the information that you need and have talked to the parties involved, get those individuals who the conflict involves in the same room. I warn you to be selective because some people may not have healthy intentions in resolving the issue. Under no circumstance do you want to create a sideshow. People gravitate towards negative drama and it can also be a distraction to solving the real issue.
4. Lastly, start working on a resolution and consider all options. When considering the options, think about who the conflict is impacting, the urgency of the matter, the time that is needed to implement a resolution and doing what is fair. This does not mean that everyone will be happy because in conflict, all sides are rarely pleased with the outcome. The intent is not to make everyone happy. The intent is to resolve the issue with fairness and ensure that the success of the school continues to occur.



## Do Not Run

Your reputation and effectiveness as a leader can be predicated on how you deal with conflict. Teachers and staff members watch what administrators do, but more importantly, they observe what school leaders don't do. If you don't confront conflict - or worse run from it - you will lose the respect of your teachers and staff, possibly even hurt your reputation as a school leader. Great senior leaders serve teachers and students, which you cannot do if you are running away. You may even be running toward a much bigger problem or creating another one.


Conflict is rarely easy, but many cases, it will make you stronger if you don't run. Running makes you tired and weak, so don't do it! I have seen senior leaders try to avoid conflict by not addressing it, ignoring the problem and leaving their teachers to their own vices. Allowing teachers to solve the conflict on their own, when they need help from the school leader because they were not in a position to resolve the conflict creates a larger problem, things get worse and respect is lost for the senior leader. Never forget that great leaders deal with conflict head on.

## Conflicts Come and Go Like Storms

Conflicts are a lot like storms. They come and they go, but they never last forever. Also, like storms, conflicts weren't created for us to "get over." They are meant for us to get through. No one can physically get over a storm — they are too big. But, we can prepare to get through it.

When putting storms in a literal context, we know that some storms are unexpected. Real storms typically have signs that they are coming our way. These signs include a drop in

temperature, dark, billowy clouds, dimming of the sky and sometimes lightning. A great leader who is in tuned with their school environment will often see the signs of conflict in their school environment that is coming. When these signs are happening, be sure to pay close attention and do not take these signs lightly so that you can be as prepared as possible. Know what issues may cause potential conflict in your school by using your intuition about the teachers, students, parents, community and school environment. Be prepared and stay prepared in all that you do.

Keep the mindset that conflict can and will arise at some point, without being paranoid. Just hold to the fact that conflict will arise invited or uninvited, directly related to you and indirectly related to you. When storms come, work with others to arrive at the best resolution. 



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