

The Dispatch

The May 2022: How to Approach Conflict

We have written about conflict in other issues of the Dispatch but, as we all know, conflict doesn't just magically disappear because we write about it. It stays with us, morphs, sometimes abates and, at times, becomes worse. Yet, the insights from others who have thought a lot about conflict can give us wisdom and perhaps specific guidance about how to deal with ours. In this issue, Lance interviews a retired judge, who has spent the last decade providing mediation services. Davon then writes on healthy levels of disagreement, while Bill gives his take on conflict in the Joseph story of Genesis. As usual, let us know how you receive our ideas!

Lessons from the Land of Conflict

[Lance Woodbury](#) (interviewing Judge Robert Schmisser)

Judge Robert "Bob" Schmisser is a 1974 graduate of the University of Illinois and received his law degree from the University of Kansas in 1977. He practiced law in Pratt, Kansas, from 1977 until 1986, when he was appointed district judge. He retired in 2012 and now offers mediation services, along with managing his family's agricultural land holdings in northwest Missouri, western Kansas and eastern Colorado. He visited with me about the lessons he's learned from resolving conflict over decades as an attorney, judge, and for the last decade, as a mediator.

Bob, what gets in the way of people successfully resolving conflict?

First, both sides often see each other as "unreasonable." Whether it's a breakup of a marriage or a dispute over an estate, each side views the other as totally out of line. Second, both parties have the same feeling, namely, that they have been hurt by the other and should recover something for that pain. A third obstacle is each side thinking that they will come in and "win" whatever issue is between them. But the other side rarely surrenders. No one really wins. No one winds up with a piece of paper that says "I was right."

What, then, helps people in conflict reach agreement?

The legal *process* is designed to be fair so that people will see the *result* as fair. I say it is designed to "grind slow and grind fine." To ensure a fair legal process takes time and money, which can wear people out, and thus mediation is often seen as a good alternative. People also realize that although they may not be totally happy with the outcome, the other side is also unhappy with the result. If both sides are equally unhappy, then we are somewhere near where we need to be!

Any advice for people currently in business or personal conflict?

The goal of resolving a dispute should be less about getting everything you want, and more about achieving a level of certainty in your personal life or business. Variations on Ecclesiastes 6:9 remind us that "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." If you find a way to resolve conflict collaboratively, you may not get your best outcome, but you won't get your worst result, and you will know how to plan for the future of your life and business.

The Bias of Avoiding Conflict

[Davon Cook](#)

There is much academic literature about biases that impact our reasoning and thinking. We have blind spots based on past experience, assumptions we make, or our innate desire to avoid information that makes us uncomfortable. Nick Horub of Harvest Profit wrote a helpful [series](#) explaining 13 biases defined in academia and applying them to the farm world. A farm leader mentioned it while reflecting on the risk of his partnership group not challenging each other's thinking enough.

That started me thinking about not only the biases themselves (and I encourage you to read them) but also what ideal situation *allows* a group to be *able* to challenge each other's thinking without starting a fight. The leader I mentioned worried that wanting to avoid conflict would lead partners to avoid bringing up anything uncomfortable, or being devil's advocate, or simply having a different opinion. I've written [previously](#) about "healthy conflict"—being able to discuss differences of opinion in productive, idea-based terms, not in destructive interpersonal terms. The purpose is to produce the best possible solution, even if that involves heated debate. How to accomplish that is the work of many more articles here and elsewhere!

Yet I think it's empowering to admit to ourselves that having little to no conflict is both not *realistic* and perhaps not *desired*. We hope to avoid the destructive, personal attacks that harm relationships. But even when that happens, we need the skills to mend from that harm and recognize disagreement will return another day. We also need the habits and processes in place to solicit differing opinions, evaluate them wisely, make a decision that is accepted, and then move on.

Thus, I would add to the academic list of 13 biases the typical human desire to avoid discord and the fear of creating it. How are you creating an environment that welcomes productive discord and deals with unproductive discord proactively?

Resolving Conflict - Looking Again at the Joseph Story

[Bill Long](#)

"I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" (Genesis 45:3)

One of the most moving scenes in Scripture is the reconciliation story between Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 45. The purpose of this post is to suggest a reason why the brothers were able to bury their long-held animosity at this point. My thought is that only when both sides in the conflict (Joseph on one side; the brothers on the other) faced equal vulnerability did they have an incentive to reconcile.

In a word, Joseph was the gifted one of the family, and he let everyone know about his giftedness. The brothers therefore designed an elaborate ruse to dispose of Joseph and convince their father Jacob that they had no idea what happened to him. They tossed Joseph into a pit and left him to die. His sense of vulnerability is clear in the story.

As we know, he was eventually rescued by one of his brothers who wanted to get in good with Jacob. Joseph was then sold into slavery in Egypt. He could never forget the dangers he faced.

Later when his brothers came down to Egypt to buy grain and met with the "new" Joseph, who was in charge of Pharaoh's grain distribution, Joseph saw a way to retaliate. So he, unrecognized by his brothers, laid on them increasingly onerous stipulations in order to get grain. Finally, he required them to leave the youngest son, Benjamin, in his care. This was too much for the brothers, who saw this as potentially sacrificing little Benjamin. Their vulnerability is palpable.

Thus, when Genesis 45 opens and Joseph reveals himself, each party knows how it has been hurt and has hurt the other side. Little recognized, but convincing to me, is that this reality of hurt given and hurt sustained might just have been the crucial factor in bringing the brothers back to harmony.