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# CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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## *for Principals in Catholic Schools*

**C**onflict is not comfortable. There is any number of reasons for this. Not least among them is a prevalent belief that conflict represents some kind of failure. It is often believed we are in conflict because we have done something we should not, or because we have not done something we should. I wish to argue that conflict is not necessarily, or even usually, a sign that something is wrong. However, many of us struggle with this. Because we have such a negative perception of conflict and interpret it on the level of a personal failing, we neglect to develop explicit conflict resolution strategies. Instead, many people deploy implicit or hidden strategies to deal with conflict, such as conflict avoidance or passive-aggression. Some years ago I was staying in a monastery in the Dublin mountains, where I was told about a monk who, when he disapproved of the homily, would lean forward and turn off the light on his lectern; textbook passive-aggression. Yet, given how his community organised themselves, where anger was not permitted or seen as in any way appropriate, this may have been his last resort.

For people working in institutions with an explicitly religious ethos, conflict can take on added dimensions of stress. After all, if everyone were properly applying the principles of not judging or forgiveness, there would be no problem, right? Consequently, in institutions such as Catholic schools, conflict can be viewed with even more fear and anxiety. This is because it can be seen not only as a failure of management but in some vague way, as a failure to properly live out one's faith. I suggest that conflict is a natural, healthy phenomenon that occurs in all institutions. It does not represent any kind of personal or moral failing any more than catching a cold is an automatic sign of a weak immune system. Sometimes, we just catch a cold. In Section 1, I identify themes and strands in the Christian story that express the importance and healthiness of conflict. In Section 2, I offer some examples of particular conflicts that are likely to present themselves to the principal of a Catholic school and suggest some practical strategies for better understanding and resolving them.

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### SECTION 1

#### **Conflict as healthy, universal and the pre-requisite to real growth**

It is difficult to think of conflict as healthy, especially given its destructive potential. With this belief system, it is almost impossible to envision its creative possibilities or to see it as necessary. I am reminded of the Irish writer and philosopher John Moriarty (Canada should claim him too as he was formerly a professor at the

University of Manitoba) who said that conflict can be constructive and could even be "sacramental." I think we should take this seriously. Conflict has the capacity to place people in touch with deeper aspects of themselves, of their understanding of reality and with their relationship to their faith. The story of Jesus clearing the temple (Jn. 2:13-16) is only one biblical example of the legitimacy of anger, the appropriateness of being in conflict and the obligation we sometimes feel to engage in actions that will inevitably make people uncomfortable. I was recently told, in all seriousness, by a



# Coping with *STRESS* in the Workplace

FOR MANY PEOPLE, A JOB IS A SOURCE OF INCOME and identity and a place where they spend almost half of their lives. Most people spend at least eight hours a day at work. When travel and overtime are included, it can mount to ten, perhaps even twelve hours a day.

Many people need to generate some tension and stress in order to do their best work. Too much stress is a different matter. It is ironic that the qualities most likely to make people successful in the workforce- aggression, ambition, drive and energy - are those, which are most likely to hurt them if they are not channelled in the right ways.

## THE SYMPTOMS

Stress is difficult for many people to understand. Excessive stress can take a toll on health, family life and productivity. The habits, attitudes and signs that may alert us that we are experiencing stress may be hard to recognize because they have become so familiar to us. The most common symptoms of excessive job stress are:

- fatigue;
- insomnia;
- high-blood pressure;
- headaches;
- ulcers;
- heartburn;
- inability to concentrate or relax;
- changes in appetite; and/or
- waning sexual interest.

Stress becomes a definite problem when a person feels hopelessly overloaded at work, is unable to leave job problems behind at night or on weekends, and experiences a trapped, immobilized feeling.

# HAVING HARD CONVERSATIONS

By **Jennifer Abrams**, Author



*Having Hard Conversations* provides an interactive, personal approach to mastering the art of challenging conversations. The step-by-step strategy addresses a wide range of situations, including communication with supervisees, peers and supervisors. Emphasizing that initiative and preparation are the keys to a successful conversation, this resource includes:

- thought-provoking questions and first-person accounts that help educators become more self-aware, effective communicators;
- advice on overcoming personal hesitation about expressing concerns;
- guidance on identifying goals for the conversation and choosing the best “what-where-and-when” for a productive discussion; and
- sample scripts and practical tools to help educators prepare for the conversation.

By addressing important issues directly and professionally, educators can find self-empowerment and promote an open, healthy school environment.

Hard conversations come in all forms and sizes. At school, they might involve teachers, administrators, parents or students. They take place behind desks and in the hallway. They can range from a formal evaluation, in which you tell someone he will not be returning next fall, to the briefest comment to a colleague about being on time to a meeting. They are difficult to have whether you are giving feedback or receiving it. But having hard conversations in school is essential.

When faced with having hard conversations, for many of us our first impulse is to avoid speaking up. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that this response does not help us improve teaching and learning, and it does not make our schools thrive. As teachers, we know both support and challenge contribute to growth for students. So why do we not use a healthy balance of both support and challenge when working through difficult issues with our colleagues?

Whether you are faced with a gossipy colleague or a belittling supervisor, there is a better way to have the hard conversation, whatever the conversation needs to be.

A good starting point is to **understand clearly** your feelings about the problem. Ask yourself:

- If I am hesitating, why?
- How can I get to a place where I feel ready and comfortable sharing what needs to be said? What information do I need? What emotions do I need to deal with?
- What am I trying to accomplish? If I speak up, will it move me toward or away from my goal?
- Am I willing to experience the discomfort that might come as a result of bringing up this topic?

Then think about **what to communicate**:

- What explicit professional teaching or work behaviours am I focusing on?
- Is there specific and reliable evidence that I can share?
- Once I share my thoughts, what are my suggestions for next steps in order to fix the problem?
- How will I continue to be of support as the problem is corrected?

Finally, think about **how to communicate**:

- How might I write up our first few talking points and/or sentences?
- What language will work for this conversation and what words might just trigger the individual and thus stop her/him from listening?
- Where should I have this conversation so it has the best chance of being effective?

These questions are just the beginning, but provide an initial framework for the internal discussion you need to be having before you speak up. Of course, each conversation should be handled on a case-by-case basis.

The next question is who should be responsible for these hard conversations? I have been giving the workshop on which the book is based for several years and I often hear murmurs of resistance during