

# LEVELS OF CONFLICT – Realistic and Effective Approaches to Conflict Management

Based on the work of Speed Leas

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## Overview

This article describes a model developed by Speed Leas for assessing and responding to the level of conflict present in a particular situation. The model assumes that unmanaged conflict will tend to get worse and that if it does get worse, it will progress through predictable levels—perhaps with surprising speed.

It also assumes that one’s ability to manage the conflict successfully (i.e., address the concerns and keep the issue from progressing to higher levels) requires accurately assessing the actual level of conflict and using strategies to address it that fit the level. Using the wrong strategy can seriously exacerbate the problem—both in using a higher-level strategy and in using a lower-level strategy than the situation calls for.

LEVEL	SYMPTOMS	STRATEGY
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>LEVEL I PROBLEM TO SOLVE</b></p>	<p><b>Objective of those involved:</b> fix the problem, not the person.  <b>Tone/behaviors:</b> optimistic, collaborative, problem not person focus, rational; language is clear, specific, here and now, adult; real differences over goals, values, needs, plans, information; people understand each other and disagree.</p>	<p>1. Facilitate decision making by <u>collaborative problem solving</u>, or if not possible, by <u>negotiation</u>, or if not possible, by <u>formal authority action</u> (by voting or leader decision.)                  2. <u>Methods</u> -- establish meeting norms, use a facilitator and a disciplined process, brainstorm and prioritize, use communication skills, etc.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>LEVEL II DISAGREEMENT</b></p>	<p><b>Objectives:</b> self protection, not getting hurt; solve the problem  <b>Tone/behaviors:</b> cautious, not hostile; general language to protect people and self, e.g., “there is some confusion”, “we need more clarity and openness to a different solution;” barbed humor, distancing comments; withhold information that might serve the other side or damage your side.</p>	<p><b>Need is to keep people close enough to work though their differences</b>, not engage in withdrawal or begin to get aggressive.                  1. <u>Reduce tension and facilitate people’s work together</u>. Encourage people to “hang in,” attend and prepare for meetings; coach people to act, to be assertive, help people fully express their concerns and to listen to the concerns of others; provide ways to build relationships, ways for people to know each other as people, to speak with each other about common interests and needs.                  2. <u>Methods</u> -- role reversal, expectations clarification, paraphrase and itemized response, brainstorm and prioritize, use facilitator, etc.                  2. <u>Establish ground rules</u> -- get agreement about how we will work on the issue, e.g., no threats, identify sources of information, direct sharing of differences, no personal attacks, no withdrawing; norms for meetings, etc.                  3. <u>Make decisions</u> -- collaborative problem solving --- negotiation --- formal authority.</p>

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<p><b>LEVEL III CONTEST</b></p>	<p><b>Objective:</b> win, not yet at level of wanting to hurt the opponent.  <b>Tone/behaviors:</b> win/lose dynamics, threatening, difficult, resistance to peace overtures, hanging back waiting for others to show weakness, personal attacks, emotional appeals, limited social contact; language is distorted - overgeneralized (“you always..”, “everyone..”), exaggerated, making a case, expecting magic or rapid change, expecting others to read your mind, extreme, only two sides, lose the shade/gray.</p>	<p><b>The overall need is to reduce fear and distorted thinking; to provide a sense of order.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. All the strategies mentioned for Level II, as possible.</li> <li>2. <u>Structure the process</u> -- work out a clear process; dates of meetings, time lines, etc. Revise it as needed; but work at maintaining a sense of order and direction. There is a high need for a process that is seen as fair, open, and legal.</li> <li>3. <u>Use an external consultant</u></li> <li>4. <u>Contact between parties to the conflict needs to be carefully managed</u> -- opportunities for people to express feelings and clarify their interests need to be provided for each side; this usually needs to first be done apart from the other side; when they are ready to work together, then have a carefully facilitated meeting.</li> <li>5. <u>Decision making</u> -- the same sequence as at other levels; however, the more persuasion, compelling and voting the more likely that people will leave the organization.</li> </ol>
<p><b>LEVEL IV FIGHT/FLIGHT</b></p>	<p><b>Objectives:</b> hurt/get rid of the others; being “right”  <b>Tone/behaviors:</b> factions inflexible, clear lines, strong leaders emerge; language becomes ideological - about principles, truth, rights; parties detached, causing each to lose sense of the pain they cause; attempt to enlist outsiders in the cause, parties will not speak with each other, self-righteous, cold</p>	<p><b>More tension will require more structure.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Use an external consultant/mediator</u> -- this <b>cannot</b> be someone from the central office.</li> <li>2. <u>Follow the book</u> -- legal issues may be involved, trust is very low; follow the organization’s standards.</li> <li>3. <u>Communicate through third parties</u> - - seek an agreement for third parties to serve as “go-betweens” to carry messages, look for possible areas of agreement, Most likely to be useful when the issue is clear.</li> <li>4. <u>Be tougher about the ground rules</u> -- enforce expectations about personal attacks, loaded language; might have a group that monitors agreements and gives feedback to violators.</li> <li>5. <u>Decision making</u> -- likely to be by formal authority. Some are likely to leave.</li> </ol>
<p><b>LEVEL V INTRACTABLE SITUATION</b></p>	<p><b>Objective:</b> destroy the others  <b>Tone/behaviors:</b> attempts to do serious damage to the other’s reputation, position, well being; attempts may continue after the parties have been separated</p>	<p><b>The conflict is no longer manageable.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Outside authority will need to make difficult decisions.</li> <li>- The parties need to be separated.</li> <li>- Some relationships will need to be terminated.</li> </ul>

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## CASE STUDY:

A church vestry, which is the governing body responsible for management of church finances and property, has been embroiled in a dispute over the last several months concerning whether to stop offering a long-running preschool on the church campus. The Rector generally has authority for worship, spiritual formation, and the *use* of the church property. As with other parishes, these areas of responsibility have overlap and cannot always be clearly separated. Significant factions have developed, and the Rector of the parish, who advocates for closing the preschool, is no longer talking with the Senior Warden (the primary lay leader), who has teamed up with the director of the preschool to try to keep the school open. The vestry itself is split. The Rector has sent emails to the vestry reminding them of his rights under canon law as the final decision maker with respect to use of church property. He notes that he’s been in touch with the Bishop and “has her full support, as well as the full support of the diocese’s chancellor.” Those supporting the Rector routinely use war imagery in their discussions and characterize those supporting the Senior Warden and the preschool director as “traitors.” They also make disparaging remarks about the competence of the daycare director and question the Senior Warden’s motives. The Rector has sent emails to the parish mailing list emphasizing his accomplishments and warning about the dangers of fiscal irresponsibility and mission drift.

There has been some significant “passive” sabotage—for example, the Treasurer has been working on the coming year’s budget but has had difficulty gathering information from some members of the vestry because he’s seen as supporting the “wrong” side. There have been other attempts by members of both groups to block unrelated budget requests seen as important to “the other side.” This has led to some delays in the draft budget and implementation of other projects.

Those supporting the Senior Warden and preschool director are generally less strident than those supporting the Rector. They tend not to bad-mouth the other side, though they have made emotional pleas about “the needs of the children,” and “the dangers of the Church focusing too much on a scarcity versus an abundance approach to our temporal gifts.” They have made some suggestions about possible ways forward that consider some of the Rector’s concerns, but the Rector has not responded. They mostly stick to themselves and focus on the task at hand, including the routine administrative demands of running the church and running the preschool. At coffee hour, they do talk to a few people one-on-one to let them know there’s a problem.

The tension at the church is growing. Some members have left, and a couple of preschool employees are starting to look for other jobs. Attendance at worship and at coffee hour has declined somewhat, and the Senior Warden has missed a couple of Sundays, though she’s continued to respond to messages and attended the last vestry meeting.

Looking at the criteria in the chart, how would describe the level of conflict? Be specific about how you think this conflict fits the model. Our analysis is on the next page.

Level of conflict for those supporting the Rector: \_\_\_\_\_

What behaviors do you see described that fit with that level? \_\_\_\_\_

Level of conflict for those supporting the Senior Warden and preschool director? \_\_\_\_\_

What behaviors do you see described that fit with that level? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Our Analysis – Conflict Level:** In reviewing the criteria in Speed Leas’ model, this is likely a lower Level IV conflict, or a higher Level III. It appears that the Senior Warden’s group is at a somewhat lower level than the Rector’s. It is important to assess the conflict level at the *higher group’s* stage. If one influential group is at Level IV but another is at Level II, the overall system conflict needs to be managed at Level IV.

The Bishop, after having heard from the Rector and several members of the vestry, decides to hire a consultant who proposes getting everyone together to talk it out and “clear the air.” She holds a meeting with few ground rules, few shared norms, and encourages the group to talk about what’s going on after “prayerfully considering” each person’s role in the conflict. The meeting quickly degenerates into a shouting match and ends with the Senior Warden storming out and taking half the group with her.

**Our Analysis – Method Used:** The consultant used a Level II strategy to address a Level IV conflict. This strategy requires relatively high trust levels and relatively low stakes. Predictably, the participants could not make use of the process provided and the situation escalated. In the case described, the Senior Warden’s level of conflict seems to have increased in direct response to the Bishop’s intervention. That, in turn, likely increased the overall conflict level. In our experience, churches often use a lower-level method than is appropriate, perhaps because they assume that shared religious values will overcome the conflict dynamics and help everyone get along. At the same time, use of a conflict method that is geared to a higher-level conflict can also lead to bad outcomes. For example, bringing in a mediator when there’s a simple disagreement could cause participants to wonder what’s happening that they don’t know about and perhaps become more cautious, hesitant, or skeptical. In most cases, using methods that don’t fit can lead to greater anxiety in the system and can make the situation worse.

### Is it a System Conflict?

For a conflict to be a *system conflict* (as opposed to an isolated or inter-personal conflict), a significant percentage of people, or *people with significant influence*, need to be upset with the practices/policies/style/person of the current leadership. In other words, just because one or two people are upset about something, it doesn’t mean that the whole organization is at a level 3 conflict—in fact, it would typically be entirely inappropriate, and even destructive, to respond to the concerns of a few as if they represented the views of a significant critical mass. At the same time, if a few significant top leaders – including very influential parishioners, even if they don’t hold any positional authority – are at Level 3 or 4, you have the makings of a system conflict.

### Leadership & Conflict Management

An important task of leaders is to develop the organization’s capacity to solve problems and manage the “rubs” that are a normal and useful part of organizational life. This allows the organization to be a more productive and satisfying environment while also heading off serious conflict. As part of its life an organization needs to be engaged in a developmental process of building trust, developing communication and negotiating skills, and establishing processes to manage concerns and new ideas. This gives people greater ability to keep conflict at the lower levels.

As conflict moves to higher levels, people tend to resist skill development, elaborate problem-solving methods, the introduction of new ground rules, etc. So, these skills processes are best developed and implemented when the organization is *not* in conflict. Teach people the skills they’ll need to manage conflict when things are going well, and they will be much more likely to make use of those skills when they actually need them.

### Skill Development

Key areas to develop:

- Trust Development. Does the organization—at all levels—routinely demonstrate reliability, responsiveness, congruence, and reciprocity? Does the organization have regular and structured processes

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to share information, gather concerns, and address issues that arise—e.g., new ideas or business lines, direction and goals, implementation problems? Does the organization or team use assessments to regularly gather and share data and to assess satisfaction levels with such things as worship and formation, climate, our interaction with newcomers, and resources needed to work effectively and nurture new leaders?

- **Communication Skills.** Can leaders and parishioners identify and communicate their feelings, thoughts and ideas? Can they distinguish behavior from judgments? Are they able to accurately paraphrase the concerns of others? Do people take responsibility for their own feelings and thoughts while demonstrating openness and respect for those of others? Are methods routinely employed by leaders to elicit participation and hear from everyone concerned, including hearing things they don't like?
- **Decision-Making.** Are decision rights understood by all? Are methods for decision-making clear in advance and generally supported? Are leaders able to distinguish between "taking counsel" and otherwise hearing from others, and where formal decision-making authority is vested? Is this understanding shared more widely in the church? Different churches have different polities and, especially as people come to a church from different denominations (or no church background at all), shared understanding of how this particular church addresses authority and decision-making is important for both avoiding and managing conflict. It's also important for leaders to understand that their technical "right" to make a decision doesn't always mean they should exercise that right.
- **Understanding the Purpose of the Church.** Churches are not simply families, businesses, social clubs, non-profits, or social justice organizations, but members bring these and other images to parish life. They tend to bring images they understand, which often means that they will bring images that don't adequately capture the church's true nature. We think it's important for the parish to be understood on its own terms, in light of that church's tradition, and to be understood as a unique organization that has some parallels with other groups we may be part of, but is profoundly different in other ways. For example, we often talk about the parish church as existing for the worship of God, to form Christians in the Anglican tradition, and to have a sanctifying relationship with the broader community. We also frequently use the image of the Body of Christ, or talk about the parish as a microcosm of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Those ways of talking about the church are very different from saying we're a warm, happy family. Our aim is to create a shared understanding that points to the larger, Spirit-led aspect of common life.<sup>1</sup> The task for leaders is to both weave these images and understandings into sermons, and formal teachings, but also to act in daily life as if these images are true and to notice and respond when the more limited, more partial understandings threaten to take over or assert too much influence. We assume that a shared connection – an incarnated connection - to a life that is bigger than we are is one element in helping prepare a church to handle conflict more productively.

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<sup>1</sup> See *A Wonderful and Sacred Mystery: A Practical Theology of the Parish Church*, © 2021 M Heyne & R Gallagher.