

Soft Skills for Ministry Leaders – *Disagreeing Agreeably*

Conflict is not necessarily bad in a church. Disagreements happen in a community when people care and are engaged. A church that is completely conflict free is probably not doing much or attempting much. The opposite of conflict is not health. It is disengaged apathy.

So think of conflict as a sign that people care. When there is a disagreement in your small group or ministry area or in the overall church, think of it as raw material. The presence of conflict is not inherently good or bad. Your response to the conflict is what will send you in a good or bad direction.

(Side note: I am not naïve. I know that some church people become antagonists, pursuing selfish agendas through unscrupulous means. The best way to deal with an antagonist is to starve him of fuel (i.e., do not respond in kind and thus inflame the situation, likely discrediting yourself in the process). When the antagonist finds out he is not going to get what he wants and is not going to provoke you, then he will probably go find another place to try his tactics. If he does not, you will need a pre-existing church discipline process in place that will deal with the antagonist and protect church leaders.)

Here are some recommendations for dealing with conflict in positive ways. Call these *Principles for Disagreeing Agreeably*.

1. *Employ the principle of charity.* The principle of charity means you state the point of view of those who disagree with you in the best possible way. Do not caricature the opinion of others. Do not state their case in an absurd or demeaning way. Make sure you state the other person's viewpoint in the most straightforward, positive way possible. Besides being the right thing to do, there are practical benefits. The principle of charity will require you to listen carefully, an act which honors the other person and builds rapport. The principle of charity will keep you from speaking prematurely – before you really know what the other person thinks. When you have a clear understanding of the other person's best argument, you can then focus on the issue productively. Denigration is the enemy of productive conflict. Decide now that your first response in a disagreement will be to employ the principle of charity. (For further reading on this subject, see chapter one of *What Philosophy Can Do* by Gary Gutting. This is a good read on how to have a productive argument.)

2. *Humble yourself.* Early on in the conflict, engage directly with this thought: "I could be wrong." It is possible there are aspects of the situation you have not thought about or have misunderstood. It is possible you need to rethink a settled position. Humbling yourself will bring two positive dynamics into the conflict situation: It will cause you to reexamine your previous opinions on the matter and it will drive you to the Lord in prayer. Admitting your fallibility and seeking the Lord's wisdom and direction will go a long way toward having a positive conflict.

3. *Watch your tone and body language.* You communicate more with volume, inflection, and posture than with your actual words. Take a deep breath. Do not interrupt. Listen carefully and

respectfully. When it is your time to speak, do so in a way that interjects calm into the situation. Take a non-threatening stance. Repent from using intimidation and bluster. Do not violate personal space. Make sure the way you speak and present yourself adds agreeableness to the situation.

4. *Avoid social media.* Social media has positive uses, but airing out conflict is not one of them. Social platforms are much more suitable for taking shots at our opponents than for having reasoned, thoughtful discussions. The other problem with social media is that it is, well, social. What you say there is said in public. Therefore, playing to the crowd and trying to recruit supporters to your side are big temptations. We are much less likely to practice empathy and charity when addressing a touchy subject on social media. It is simply not a good way to engage in healthy conflict.

5. *Address the issue clearly without attacking or demeaning those who see it differently.* It is a natural human tendency to assume the worst of someone we cast as an “opponent.” We easily assign low motives to them and call their character into question. Avoiding this requires great discipline and a constant practice of the principle of charity. It requires us to focus on the issue, not personalities. It requires us to think before we speak and to express ourselves clearly and succinctly. In other words, disagreeing agreeably is hard work. But remember how much harm a few poorly chosen words can do (see James 3:5 and following). Do the hard work of focusing on the issue and speaking to it clearly.

6. *Build good processes that enable the church to have healthy conflict.* How does your church decide difficult things? How do you decide what to start doing, what to stop doing, and which direction to go? The more complex a decision is, and the more people who are affected, then the more important is the process that produces the decision. Good processes allow time for people to consider an issue and to participate in the discussion and decision about that issue. A good process does not mean everyone gets what they want. That is impossible. A good process is one that produces a broadly-owned decision and does not allow dissenters to say with credibility, “No one asked me what I thought!” Someone will probably say that anyway, but if the process was good the rest of the congregation knows the dissenters had just as much opportunity to participate as everyone else.

7. *Rest on Proverbs 3:5-6.* Do not make winning your goal in a conflict. Make honoring the Lord your goal. Trust him to lead. Rest in his sovereignty over the situation. Honor the other people involved, make the best contribution you can given your role in the organization, and then rest in the Lord. Be willing to accept a result that is different than what you want. Be at peace in Christ.

Ministry leaders, I hope you will develop and practice the soft skill of disagreeing agreeably. I believe it will bring more joy and fruitfulness into your ministry. I am committed to getting better at this soft skill myself. I hope you will join me.