

Don't Make Me Come Over There

How to Manage Conflict Well...and With Humor

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“Do it Well. Make it Fun.”

Whenever someone challenges or questions me, something in the pit of my stomach turns and then I feel a burst of adrenaline, probably the fight or flight mechanism that I learned in graduate school, and I feel compelled to battle. That is, unless the challenge occurs at night in a dark alley on the bad side of town where I shouldn't be in the first place. Otherwise, I feel that I must enter into the conflict.

The first successful conflict I remember was in Mrs. Sturgill's sixth grade class. Mrs. Sturgill was a slightly over...bearing. She was a large woman with big hair and she would sit at her desk behind a big wicker purse twirling her hair while peering into the mirror on the underside of the purse's lid. It was very intimidating. Every few minutes, she would look out from under the purse to see if we were behaving. Most of us were afraid of Mrs. Sturgill even though we never saw her eat a child or bury one in the playground.

Mrs. Sturgill's punishment involved writing Proverbs. For instance, if you got out of your seat when you were supposed to be seated, Mrs. Sturgill would reprimand you and assign you to writing “A rolling stone gathers no moss” 500 times. In the big scheme of things and except for the hand cramps, it wasn't that bad. We did learn a lot of proverbs which can be handy rules for life.

One day, Mrs. Sturgill had told us to quietly work at our desks. The problem was that sixth grade students had not yet developed the ability to work quietly. There was a talkative gland that activated whenever our ears heard the word quiet. So, as was our nature, we were talking. More specifically, I was talking. Mrs. Sturgill came out from behind the wicker and slammed her fist down on the desk. She said, “You, people would talk until doomsday someone didn't stop you.”

I raised my hand.

“What?” she said.

I said, “Well, wouldn't that put an end to it?”

Several kids laughed. Several others slumped lower in their seats. Mrs. Sturgill covered the snicker that was forming on her mouth. Then, she composed herself, and in her big way said, “Ronnie Culberson, I want you to write “Look before you leap” 40 times.”

I was shocked. 40? It was usually 500 or at least 400. None of us ever got just 40 as the punishment. Clearly, I had won. It was a small victory for 6th graders everywhere and for the power of a little humor in the face of conflict.

Wouldn't it be great if every conflict was that easy to resolve? Unfortunately, it's not. We find ourselves in battles with others and whether consciously or not we enter into the fight because our egos have been damaged. We see the face of our abusive father in the eyes of our opponent or once again our ingrained feelings of inadequacy are surfacing and we need to prove our worth. Often the situation at hand gets blown out of proportion and we find ourselves reacting as if our world hangs in the balance.

I was a born arguer in the first half of my life. I loved to debate. And often after a good heated argument, I would go home and consider the points of my fellow arguer and adjust my own thinking. It was my way of learning and of seeing another perspective. I remember having a two-hour argument with my future wife about the moral implications of abortions. Our argument almost led to a breakup and yet after two hours, we discovered we were both on the same side of the issue. I was clearly charged up by the fun of the fight. If I had considered exploring her perspective before jumping with both feet into my own position, perhaps we could have salvaged the time and spent it on a more relationship building conversation.

A friend of mine, Rick Maurer, wrote a great book called *Why Don't You Want What I Want?* While the book mostly deals with selling new ideas, the title identifies the central challenge of resolving conflict. We don't see things as others see them. It's a fundamental life dilemma but one that is pretty obvious, right. *Why would* someone else see the world as we see it? And why would we insist that they do?

The key to managing conflict is to first and foremost recognize that people are different. We come into the world with different values, priorities, and perspectives. Then when our jobs or our marriages put us all together, we try to make each other the same as if being the same would enhance our existence. If everyone only liked vanilla ice cream, we would never get to experience hot chili and basil ice cream as I did at a funky restaurant last year. If everyone only drove Fords, we would never have the Cooper. OK, on second thought, maybe we should all drive Fords. See, my opinion is not necessarily yours but that's alright.

I remember a great story my pastor told about a man and woman who were attending church and the preacher was ranting about how the man needs to be in charge of the household and that the woman's role is to serve the man. The more he developed his thesis, the higher in his seat this man sat. About halfway through the sermon, he looked over at his wife and she was frowning. After the service, the man and woman were leaving the church and the man said, "That was a pretty good sermon, wasn't it?"

The woman did not respond.

When they got home, they were standing on the back porch when the man said to his wife, "I just want to tell you that the preacher's message is the way it's going to be around here from now on."

Well, he didn't see her again for two weeks. And after two weeks, he could only see her a little out of one eye!

I love that. It illustrates the pomposity of our belief that our perspective is any better than someone else's. And while I certainly understand that we all have beliefs and causes about which were passionate, we must realize that just because we say it's important, it does not mean that someone else believes it to be so.

Look at the divisions that religion has created. We've got Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and many others. Within each religion, there have been many splits because the congregations can't agree on the views of the church. One of my favorite religious jokes is about a man who was rescued from a small deserted island. When the rescuers landed onshore, they saw three buildings the man had built. They asked him what the buildings were.

He said, "Well, that first one is my house. The one over there is my church. And the one over there is where I used to go to church."

It's sad but true. Because we can't resolve questions and conflicts about beliefs we hold dear, we leave and start a new organization with the people who think like we do. That is, until they no longer think like we do and then we split again.

We see these differences in politics as well. There is as much fighting about the fact that we don't agree as there is about the issue being debated. It's an either-or mentality and until we are able to see another option, we will continue to battle.

So, how do we effectively conflict well? It's really quite simple but it requires that we no longer be married to our own views to the point that we can't see another's perspective. Here are the steps:

1. Identify the source of the conflict. Is it a difference in values, information, goals, or methods? Once you identify the source, you can tease out the differences.
2. Discuss (not argue) the vested interests of each person. Why is the issue important?
3. Brainstorm all creative options for compromise.
4. Choose the best possible win-win solution.

A older gentleman was having trouble with a group of kids who kept throwing rocks at trees in his yard. When he confronted them, he ignored them. So, one day, he told them he would give them a dollar each for each day that they threw rocks at his trees. A week later, he told them he would give them fifty cents for each day that they threw rocks at his trees. The third week, he told them he would give them a dime for each day they threw rocks. One of the kids looked at him and said, "Nah, it's not worth it."

A very creative solution to a conflict that most of us wouldn't consider when we're in the midst of a heated conflict with someone else. And that may be one of our biggest barriers to resolving conflict. It's emotional and sometimes our emotions react before our brain does. That's why it's important to take time to consider the others involved before we simply react.

Humor is a great tool to manage conflict. As the example in the previous chapter of the two men arguing shows, it puts on a level playing field - a more human playing field before the conflict gets out of hand.

Ed Gulnac has a master's degree in Guidance and Counseling. He was the Executive Director of a residential treatment center for some of the most difficult youth in Erie, Pennsylvania. One day, Ed was leading a group counseling session when one young man became angry, stormed out of the room, went through the kitchen and out the back door of the building. Ed ran out the front door to cut the guy off in the driveway.

The young man had picked up a butcher knife in the kitchen when he met Ed in the driveway and he waved the knife at Ed in a threatening way. The residents in this facility had served time in jail, so stabbing a counselor was not out of the question even though it would result in being sent back to prison for a much longer time. Ed had a black belt in karate and could have easily taken the knife away from the young man but he knew the kid had potential and didn't want to see him go to jail. So Ed knew he had to do something before the young man made a that would change his future.

Ed had gotten married a few weeks before and the shirt he was wearing was a gift from his new wife. He said to the young man, "Have you ever tried to get blood out of a shirt?"

"What the hell did you say?" the kid responded.

"Have you ever tried to get blood out of a shirt? If you stab me, my wife will be so upset about blood on my new shirt, she will hunt you down."

The thought of this ludicrous idea caused the young man to burst out laughing. He handed the knife back to Ed and said, "Man, you're crazy."

After a soda and a long talk, the situation improved and the young man remained in the residential program for further treatment.

"If it hadn't been for humor, this young man would have been sent to jail, one of us would have been moderately hurt, and the other one would have had serious injuries," Ed said. "Humor saved the day for both of us."

Conflict is inevitable. But you can do it well and make it fun.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP, CPAE is a speaker, humorist, and author of four books including ***Do it Well. Make it Fun. The Key to Success in Life, Death, and Almost Everything in Between.*** His mission is to change the workplace culture so that

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