

Extinguish the Spark of Conflict Before it Becomes a Fiery Lawsuit

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This article was written at the request of Brotherhood Mutual and published in the company's October, 2023 "Deacon's Bench" risk management magazine for Christian churches, schools, camps, colleges, and mission organizations.

Many people prefer to avoid conflict, hoping that it will go away. But time only causes the wounds to get deeper, further damaging relationships. When disagreements and misunderstandings occur in the church, they can threaten the unity of a congregation. Experts say the only way to heal conflict is to acknowledge and address it. But how?

Ken Sande is the author of *The Peacemaker* and founder of two Christian conciliation ministries, [Peacemaker Ministries](#) and [Relational Wisdom 360](#). Trained as an engineer, lawyer and mediator, he is a leader in the Christian peacemaking field. Sande has spent more than 40 years helping people reconcile their differences, and he offers some time-tested biblical principles for resolving conflicts in church, work, school, and home before they are blown out of proportion.

In any community of people, disagreements and misunderstandings are inevitable. When those misunderstandings start with something a leader does or says, it can cause serious tension with staff, volunteers, students, or congregants. The way leaders respond to those conflicts can be the difference between an accepted apology and a deep hurt that may lead to draining lawsuit.

"The majority of ministry leaders who offend people don't do it intentionally," says Sande. Sande likens conflict to a fire. It starts with a spark, a disagreement or misunderstanding, but it can burn out of control.

"The sooner you smell the smoke and see the flames, the faster you can put a fire out," says Sande. "With conflict, the sooner you seek to really understand your contribution to a disagreement or misunderstanding, the better you'll be able to see others' perspectives and prevent the fire from growing into an inferno."

To help ministry leaders address misunderstandings and resolve conflicts before they get blown out of proportion, Sande offers seven tips centered on God-honoring, peace-focused responses.

1. Start by Modeling Christ

There is a balance to responding to a dispute or misunderstanding. It's important to avoid acting impulsively or assuming the worst. When emotions are churning, people can mistakenly throw gasoline on a fire instead of putting it out. However, Sande also encourages leaders not to let their emotions simmer for too long.

“Jesus gives us this powerful model of loving others, and the power of the Holy Spirit to live it out,” Sande says. “In Matthew 5, he tells us to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who hate us. Before you respond to a disagreement or offense, take time to pray for wisdom, calm your spirit and ask yourself how you can please and honor God in this situation.”

When addressing conflict, we should consider Jesus’ teaching of removing the log from our own eyes before pointing out the speck in the eyes of others. “Human tendency is to minimize our guilt and magnify others’,” Sande says. “Jesus tells us to reverse that. When we take our sins seriously, it evokes humility and better prepares us to hear what others have to say as we address misunderstandings and disagreements.”

2. Practice Relational Wisdom

When we get into a conflict, Sande says most of us tend to go “two-dimensional.” We focus on the horizontal relationship: dwelling on our righteousness and the other person’s wrongs.

Relational wisdom, a gospel-driven form of emotional intelligence, brings God into the equation. It helps people to view their relationships “three-dimensionally” by seeking to be not only self-aware, but also other-aware and God-aware.

“Through relational wisdom, we can integrate a solid understanding of human neurology with solid theology,” says Sande. “This helps us get our hearts in the right place, so we can help others more effectively. One might start by praying, ‘Lord, give me wisdom and patience with my people. Help me to understand their hearts.’”

Before attempting to resolve an issue, Sande says it’s helpful to apply the “SOG” plan by asking yourself questions from the following three categories.

- **Self-awareness.** What’s going on in my own heart? What am I feeling? Why? How am I inclined to respond? What will I do instead?
- **Other-awareness.** How am I affecting others? What do others seem to be feeling? What do they seem to need? How can I demonstrate genuine love and forgiveness?
- **God-awareness.** What is God up to? Why did he allow this situation? Am I acting in faith or unbelief? What would glorify him?

Sande also encourages leaders to be approachable when it comes to disagreements and misunderstandings. Approachability is cultivated over time by practicing humility, flexibility, and teachability—all core characteristics of a relationally wise person.

3. Recognize Fear and Bias

When people fear something, they typically have one of three responses: control, anger, or withdrawal. For effective resolution, ministry leaders can consider this question: “What is this person concerned about or afraid of?”

Seek to discern and address the fear that is driving others’ behavior. Then, consider how you can talk about the situation in a way that’s sensitive to what the other person is thinking. Based on the other person’s fears and experiences, how can you approach them with a safe, inviting, and supportive attitude?

Once you understand the underlying dynamic of fear and biases, you can resist the temptation to become defensive. When you do so, you can prevent conflict, minister to others, and move your relationships to a whole new level.

“We strongly encourage ministries to get upstream of conflict,” says Sande. “The more quickly you address others’ fears with the gentleness, kindness, and love of Christ, the more often you’ll see a positive result.”

4. Practice the ‘Three Ps’ of Satisfaction

Any time you’re trying to solve a problem, render a decision, or give guidance, you want people to be satisfied with the process, with how they were treated, and with the outcome. Sande calls these the Three P’s:

- **Process satisfaction.** A fair, orderly, and even-handed process. Everyone feels that they’ve had enough time to present their side of the matter.
- **Personal satisfaction.** Treating everyone with respect, courtesy, and equality, just as we would want to be treated ourselves.
- **Product satisfaction.** A final solution that is as reasonable, just, and equitable as is humanly possible.

Even if someone doesn’t entirely like the outcome, Sande says they will often accept the result if they are treated fairly and with respect.

“If you give people process and personal satisfaction, they will usually walk away satisfied,” Sande said. “I’ve seen it again and again.”

The converse is also true, he says. “If you don’t treat people with respect, or if you don’t give them a fair process, they will be bitter toward you, no matter what you decide.”

5. Remember the Golden Result

One of the most effective communication rules Sande has seen in mediation involves the Golden Result: People will usually treat you the way you treat them. It’s very similar to the Golden Rule: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

“Blame others and they will usually blame you,” he said. “Admit where you’ve been wrong, and you’ll be surprised how often others do the same.”

If you listen carefully and with humility, plus take responsibility for your own actions, it generally brings the tension level down. Any time you’re in a conflict, Sande encourages you to ask yourself, “How do I want to be treated?” If you engage others by treating them exactly the same way, he says you’ll be amazed at how often this changes the course of your conflict.

6. Promote Biblical Peacemaking

When people learn peacemaking skills, they’re able to resolve many conflicts on their own, Sande says. One way to familiarize people in your ministry with peacemaking skills and principles is to devote a small group to the peacemaking curriculum, allowing people to enroll and practice the principles in a safe environment.

If the church encourages small group leaders and elders to develop more advanced skills, such as biblical reconciliation, it allows lay leaders to coach individuals and serve as mediators in conflicts. That way, only the really difficult cases among the congregation would be left for pastors to address.

In Sande’s experience, about 80% of the people who think they need a mediator are able to resolve the matter on their own if they are equipped to do so. “With good teaching or coaching for one party—who goes back and just starts living out the biblical principles—that resolves it, most of the time,” Sande said.

Peacemaking principles aren’t difficult, he says. They just involve skills people may not have developed yet.

7. Establish Relational Commitments

Pastoral ministry requires accountability within a community. In Sande’s experience, appropriate discipline can sometimes offend people or make them angry, resulting in a lawsuit for defamation or emotional distress. Sande recommends that ministry leaders work with key stakeholders to develop written [Relational Commitments](#), which will guide members’ actions and interactions with each other.

“Relational Commitments can communicate policies and beliefs that might seem offensive but make sense when explained in context,” says Sande. “It’s important to describe a principle and then provide an illustration in which that principle might be used. For example, your relational commitments might outline your ministry’s policy of informing leaders of another church if someone under discipline at your church decides to attend theirs instead. This commitment may seem like a breach of confidentiality, but what if the person under discipline has a track record of defrauding people for money? Telling other church leaders could help prevent harm to their congregation. Including examples like this in your Relational Commitments can help people who read them understand the intent behind each policy.”

When ministry leaders approach conversations about disagreements and misunderstandings, having Relational Commitments as a reference point can help the parties involved in the conflict find common ground and move toward a resolution. Clear Relational Commitments can also have an impact on the three P's of satisfaction, helping people understand the process through which a resolution can be achieved.

Sometimes, even when you have done everything you can to mitigate risks and resolve conflicts before they escalate, lawsuits can still arise. In those situations, it is important to have wise counsel from a ministry-focused insurance company that can help guide you through the process and protect your ministry and your staff.

By approaching disagreements and misunderstandings with relational wisdom and Christ-like humility, ministry leaders can keep small sparks of discord from turning into costly, fiery lawsuits. They can also develop a culture of relational wisdom within their ministries, leading to stronger harmony and a healthier community.