

How to Handle Conflicts and Disagreements

(pg. 1)

There are no perfect partnerships. Unmet expectations, miscommunication, and cultural miscues are bound to create tensions. If you apply the principles of this book you can prevent many of these, but human nature being what it is, you can count on your fair share of conflicts and disagreements. It is neither helpful nor realistic to try to keep conflicts from occurring. A better way is to set up guidelines so that disputes are resolved without delay,

Addressing conflict immediately, however, doesn't necessarily mean relying on the direct, confrontational approach of Anglo American culture. On the contrary, Americans are advised to use an indirect approach suitable to their partner's culture. Writing on how to handle conflict in cross-cultural ministry, Duane Elmer points out six critical perspectives.

1. Most people in the world value relationships above other values. This is in bold contrast to American pragmatism that puts achievement first.
2. For most people, to criticize a person's words or acts constitutes an attack on the person and is seen as rude if not vicious. Anglo American partners who are quick to "tell it like it is," will succeed only at driving injury and alienation deeper.
3. Cross-cultural effectiveness begins by postponing judgment, asking questions, and taking a learning posture. Most people can easily read the difference between genuine respect and condescending tolerance.
4. Great care must be taken in making evaluative statements or comments that "place blame" on one person or group. Most Americans are not skilled at understanding people who express themselves indirectly.
5. While Anglo Americans prefer a direct and frank reply, an indirect approach marked by deference, courtesy, and patience will accomplish far more in non-Western cultures.
6. The outsider should have a trusting friend in the host culture to act as a cultural interpreter and bridge-builder. A friend can be given permission to instruct you, give advice, and intervene on your behalf.

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(pg. 2)

The challenge of cross-cultural conflict is immensely important and deserves more attention than I can give it here. For further study, I recommend *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* by Duane Elmer (1993). You will especially benefit from the principles listed in the last chapter of his book. Provided you have done your cross-cultural homework, ground rules such as these will help you resolve most issues:

1. Handle any mix-up, mistake, or disagreement in a prayerful, courteous, and constructive manner.
2. Consider a culturally appropriate way to broach the subject, preferring to assume the best of others, and to minimize any loss of face.
3. Listen carefully to one another, to understand the concern, and to learn one another's perception of the problem. This includes asking open-ended questions in a non-accusatory way to fully understand the circumstances.
4. Remain descriptive, citing what you know as opposed to what you surmise or suspect.
5. Aim to meet the needs of both partners, and to state your needs clearly and forthrightly.
6. Concentrate on fixing the future rather than rehashing the past and reopening old wounds.
7. Accept responsibility when you have made a mistake, then make it right quickly, graciously, and generously.

1. Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993. 178-180.