

PATIENCE

JEN SCHWANKE

ELOQUENCE

CURIOSITY THE CONFIDENCE

PRINCIPAL'S

EMPATHY

GUIDE TO

ATTENTIVENESS

CONFLICT

CLARITY EQUANIMITY

MANAGEMENT

CHARACTER

ACCEPTANCE



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Introduction

Managing conflict is an important skill for principals to develop, but rarely do principals receive specific training to prepare them for the conflict that might arise between parents, staff, and students. Many principals feel overwhelmed and underprepared as they address conflict, and it can begin to wear on them over time—especially if their efforts to alleviate or eliminate conflict fail.

Conflict does not always indicate a larger problem—it is simply the results of human beings working together. Many times, no intervention is needed at all. I recall one such conflict that occurred my third year of teaching. I found myself in a philosophical crossroads with the guidance counselor assigned to my teaching team. I'll call her Michelle. She was a well-respected, knowledgeable, and skilled professional, but I saw her as aggressive and domineering. I was the team leader, and she was our school's lead guidance counselor. We had a bit of an argument in front of our colleagues. Afterward, we were both angry, and for several days, there was a thick and impenetrable silence between us. I had no intention of backing down. I told the story wherever I could tell it, feeling pleased every time one of my colleagues commiserated with me—the counselor was bossy, they agreed, and taking liberties with her power. I was right. She was wrong. *Ha*, I thought.

One day after school, I was picking pencils up off the floor when my principal entered the room and closed the door.

"Listen," she said, "I spoke with Michelle today, and I know the two of you are not in a good place."

I felt a flash of anger. How dare Michelle tattle on me?

“What did she tell you?” I asked.

My principal, not one to suffer fools, got right to the point. “This has nothing to do with who said what to whom. I encourage you to work with Michelle to get through whatever issue has been created between the two of you. She is headstrong, but so are you. It is important that the two of you work as a team. If you don’t, there will be a rift on this staff, and it will damage our school’s mission. I recommend you set up a time to have coffee with her and talk it through.” She stood to go. “And for the record, I have communicated the same message to her.”

That evening, grading papers in my apartment, I thought through her suggestion. As much as I wanted to resist, my instinct reminded me that my principal was an experienced and visionary leader. She hadn’t asked me to a meeting for her to mediate; she’d told me to figure it out. She’d said “recommend,” but I knew it was stronger than a recommendation. I could ignore it . . . but I’d better not. The next day, I stopped in the guidance office and asked Michelle if she’d like to meet for coffee.

“I’d love that.” She smiled.

We spent an hour in Starbucks after school. I worked to understand her perspective, and I could feel her working to understand mine. We arrived at a truce and agreed to put on a united front for the team and our colleagues. Our goal, we agreed, was to work together as a team. And that’s just what we did—slowly, carefully, and with intentionality.

Over time, I developed a great deal of respect for Michelle and her work. I learned a tremendous amount from her, and she and I developed a powerful professional relationship. To this day, over twenty years later, even as she enjoys her retirement away from public education, we remain close. Had my principal not “recommended” a mature and timely response, I fear I would have missed out on a meaningful professional and personal friendship.

Unfortunately, not all conflicts are resolved this quickly or with such a positive outcome. On the contrary, some conflicts damage the collective efficacy of a staff, the effectiveness of a teacher, or the experience of a student. When left unresolved, it can fester and begin to affect the student experience. We see this most often with student-to-student conflicts, but even conflicts between a student and a teacher, or a teacher and a parent, can negatively affect the teaching, learning, and social

environment for students. Unresolved conflicts can affect the climate and culture of a school for weeks, months, or even years. They manifest in emotions and feelings and are complicated by goals and actions that may not be in full alignment with others' goals and actions.

We would all love a conflict-free workplace, but it is fruitless to wish for one. Conflict is inevitable. For that reason, our goal should be to accept it, embrace it, and learn how to make it a healthy and productive part of what we do. We can do this by recognizing what mindsets and skills we will need to address conflicts and then following a three-step process to *anticipate, analyze, and act* upon them.

This book will help principals by providing insights, scenarios, tips, and strategies for leading through conflicts that arise in most school environments. Let's get started by taking a deeper look at some of the conflicts that arise in school and what can be done about them.

1

Conflict in Schools

I dislike conflict. As a child, fights with my siblings or arguments between my parents made me anxious and upset. Later, when I began working as a teacher and principal, any type of conflict—sometimes even the potential for it—would keep me up at night. I would imagine worst-case scenarios and visualize the darkest possible outcome. With time and experience, I have learned to manage conflict anxiety by using a calm, clinical, and process-driven mindset. Most important, I have learned to accept the inevitability of conflict—and even embrace it.

As educators, we are always attuned to the rise, fall, and impact of various types of conflict. Because everyone has, at one point, attended school in one educational setting or the other, they all feel they are the experts on schools—who does it well, what are the biggest problems, what changes should be made, and so on. There is no other public entity where literally every person has an experience to share, and they do so under the assumption that their experience is an accurate representation of everyone else's experience. Moreover, because any one of those people can take to social media to air complaints, their criticisms have, in recent years, eroded trust in teachers and schools, creating an environment in which educators have to build trusting connections with an increasingly dubious school or classroom community. Additionally, input from politically divisive legislators, legal challenges heard

in courts, and a nonstop stream of stories in the media are fueling the flames, putting teachers and principals further on the defense against a seemingly endless stream of criticism and conflict. It often feels like a snowball barreling down a hill, gaining speed and impossible to stop.

Principals have a wide spectrum of approaches and responses to conflict. There are principals who fear it. They worry they cannot handle it—or feel they shouldn't have to—so they bury it, ignore it, or avoid it. Other principals respond by getting defensive, building a counterattack, or using their position of power to quell it. But there are also principals on the other end of the spectrum. When they approach conflict, they remain confident and calm, navigating it without ever missing a stride. They consider their management of conflict to be an opportunity to build trust and respect from our stakeholders. They follow a process that ensures fair, honest, open communication, and they advocate for resolution that will improve school culture. In that sense, conflict management has enormous potential and possibility, because when it is handled well, it can maximize a principal's leadership impact and create schools built on empathy, kindness, and respect.

In other words, conflict is often seen as a negative experience, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, my hope is that, by using some of the strategies in this book, principals will move away from seeing conflict as a negative part of their job and toward embracing its inevitability and its potential.

Types of Conflict

To be human is to experience conflict—with ourselves, with others, and with the places in which we exist in the world. In a school environment, conflict is inevitable. It appears with regularity, sometimes as expected and sometimes without warning. Conflict can be silent and passive. It can be open, angry, and explosive. It can be ongoing, simmering conflict that does damage over time. It pops up between students, staff, parents, community, and any combination of these groups.

When it appears, principals are often looked upon to resolve, mediate, and eliminate it—not an easy task, especially these days. First, as

explained above, many parents and community members feel like they are experts on education. They criticize teachers and administrators for perceived wrongs, creating layers of conflict that must be managed and resolved. Second, schools hold the responsibility of educating young people, each of whom comes with a set of loving, opinionated stakeholders—parents, family, friends, neighbors, teachers, and supporters—who want to advocate for the child. Finally, schools operate on the skills and talents of an entire staff of professionals, all with their own opinions and philosophies, varying work ethics, extensive background stories, and so on. Given all these factors, it is no wonder schools seem to have an endless serving of fresh conflict.

In my experience, there are two types of conflict: positive and productive or negative and damaging. The positive type has value for the school community and can be a sign of a healthy school culture. Healthy conflicts can lead to improvements in relationships, processes, and perspectives. It can mesh ideas together to create outcomes that have more impact; those outcomes, in turn, can enrich the experiences of staff, students, and families. On the first teaching team I worked, there were four of us, each with different backgrounds, training, and levels of experience. We were even generationally quite different. Yet, when conflict arose, it never threatened to harm our team dynamic, because trust and respect were firmly in place. The focus with which we listened to one another, the willingness to brainstorm solutions to problems, and the efforts we put into compromise and consensus were helpful and healthy. We certainly disagreed at times, but working through disagreements strengthened our team's dynamic.

When differing opinions are valued, considered, and folded into shared solutions, they can add a richness to the school's mission and purpose. It is a wonderful thing to experience a meeting or conversation in which someone can listen to one point of view and then safely and professionally provide an alternate viewpoint. Someone might say, "I actually disagree with that perspective, and I'd love to explain why." Or "I like that idea, and I think I can add something that might be even more effective." It's powerful, both as the giver and as the receiver of an alternate point of view, when conflicting opinions are a natural part of a problem-solving process.

Let's take a look at a few examples of common conflicts and how they might have a positive impact on a school.

Productive Conflict

Disagreements on Process

In schools, we often do things because we've always done them that way. When someone suggests an alternate approach, and others are willing to listen and consider the new idea, the conflict can inspire ideas and solutions that result in a better outcome. What starts as a disagreement can turn into a healthy and essential step to building a school community that is rich with diverse thoughts and viewpoints.

Opinions on a Student's Performance

Every student should feel successful at school. Relying on varying perspectives helps ensure each child has an advocate who sees their gifts. Teachers who have students struggling in their class might know of another teacher who has no problems with that student. Ideally, the first teacher might reach out to the second and say, "I am really struggling with a student and could use your help. Can you tell me what you did to have this student respond so well to your class?" Or "This student admires and respects you. I'd love for the three of us to sit down so I can observe your interactions with the student and learn how to connect the way you have." These varying experiences and opinions can merge to enhance a student's chance of success in all learning environments.

Teaching Philosophy

Not all educators—teachers or principals—share the same instructional philosophy. Just as there are variations in a teacher's purpose, priorities, and patterns, there are innumerable variations between teachers with what they hope to achieve in their teaching. Some will say they believe in building student confidence. Others are aiming for content mastery. Others want to expose students to the skills necessary for further independent exploration.

I can't help but think about two teachers at one of my previous schools. Both were masterful in the art of teaching, both were well loved

and admired by students and colleagues, and both had consistently strong student data to support their approach to teaching—yet they had very different philosophies. One told me, “My goal is not to have my students memorize facts or formulas. I model kindness, patience, and perseverance, and I expect the same of my students. In that way, my teaching provides a learning environment where students can take risks and gain expertise at their own pace.” The other teacher was very content driven. He worked tirelessly to have his students master mathematical formulas, equations, and algorithms because he was convinced that a deep understanding of math would help his students gain confidence in every other area of study they’d encounter.

Their philosophies were very different, but the outcome was the same: a positive learning experience for students and an eye on their future success. Varying philosophies have the potential to cause conflict, unless teachers accept that there is not one “winner” in instructional approaches. On the contrary, variety can be a way students experience diverse learning environments, which builds their skill to adapt and adjust to a similarly diverse world they will face in college and in their career.

Teaching Style

Similarly, teachers vary in their style and approach to teaching. Several years ago, I worked with two teachers who were teamed together, sharing a roster of students. One taught math and science; the other taught language arts and social studies. One of them valued a quiet, routine-rooted classroom. She never raised her voice, speaking only in soft, soothing tones; she kept lights low and the atmosphere calm; she avoided changes to her plans or spontaneous decision making. Next door, her teammate was a gregarious, loud, fun-loving jokester who would routinely abandon his original instructional plan, spontaneously deciding to present the day’s concept in an unexpected and unique way. He loved finding “rabbit holes,” as he called them—the chance to chase an idea down a different instructional path.

So different were their styles, it would be easy to assume the two couldn’t possibly work well together. On the contrary, they were a beautiful pair, both accepting the differences of the other person and appreciating

the value of having “an opposite.” They even embraced it publicly. At the annual Back to School Open House event for parents and students, they showcased their differing classroom environments, although they took care to point out how both classrooms shared norms and expectations for behavior and academics. They believed their contrasting environments enriched the student experience and encouraged their students to adapt just as they would need to do in the real world. At the end of each year, in an effort to know how successful they’d been as an unconventional team, they asked students and parents to complete an exit survey indicating which approach the students and families preferred—a calm, quiet, predictable classroom or a less structured, unpredictable, and lively environment. Interestingly, year after year, the results were split almost exactly down the middle. Almost all respondents expressed that they appreciated the variations between the two classrooms.

Parent Input

When parents are concerned about their child’s progress or achievement in school, their perspective can be a welcome addition to what we know about a student. Teachers and principals often toggle between wildly different parent expectations: sometimes parents are disengaged and never contact the school; other parents are heavily involved and want ongoing interactions with teachers. While working to engage the former group and set up healthy boundaries for the latter, teachers and principals can enhance school–parent partnerships by working toward mutually acceptable outcomes. I try to turn conflict with parents into a positive experience, using terms like *we* and *us* to demonstrate camaraderie and shared goals. With the right approach and mindset, disagreements with parents can lead to insights and ideas to better support the child.

Damaging Conflict

Unfortunately, it’s not a certainty that conflict will result in a productive outcome. In fact, it’s just as likely that a conflict will create ongoing negative friction. When conflict presents itself as a barrier to results, or when it becomes personal, it can damage relationships and trust

for years. I know a teacher who hasn't spoken to one of his colleagues, beyond the perfunctory "hello" and "goodbye," for two decades. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon; we all know people who live with the long-term effects of a poorly handled conflict. When it escalates toward hurt feelings, blame, shame, resentment, accusations, or gossip, the aftermath of a conflict lingers for a very long time. Let's look again at the healthy outcomes listed above and see how the exact same conflict might, if managed poorly, cause long-term damage.

Disagreements on Process

If we've always done something a particular way, and a suggestion or idea is introduced to modify or modernize the approach, it can be met with resistance from those who fear change. If both sides dig in, it becomes a two-sided, unwinnable argument, forcing someone—usually the principal—to step in and choose one particular path. Unfortunately, that often means choosing between an old guard ("That's the way we've always done it; it works and we shouldn't change it") and a fresh perspective ("We need to evolve, and we have innovative ideas about how we can do it"). It's an impossible battle to win and can cast a negative shadow over the process of improvement and positive change.

Opinions on a Student's Performance

When one teacher struggles with a student and knows a previous teacher did not, the first teacher might assume the worst from the previous teacher. Years ago, a principal I know was approached by a teacher who was struggling to manage the escalating behaviors of one of her students, whom I'll call Weslyn. Since it was the first time Weslyn had ever exhibited aggressive or combative outbursts, the principal encouraged the teacher to reach out to Mr. P, Weslyn's previous teacher. She refused to do so, discounting his role in any previous successes. "I know Weslyn had no behavior problems in Mr. P's class, but that's because Mr. P just gives A grades to all students and doesn't challenge them to do anything. He was fine letting Weslyn just sit there and do nothing. In *my* class, she is actually required to do work, and she doesn't like it. I'm not going to ask Mr. P for help because I don't want his type of help." Unfortunately, the teacher also shared this perspective with her colleagues, and word

traveled back to Mr. P. When he heard what the teacher was saying about him, trust was broken and never really restored.

Teaching Philosophy

Teachers watch, evaluate, and judge the philosophical approach of other teachers. Especially in an era of accountability, teachers can fall into a trap of competitive culture, judging themselves against the skill and expertise of their colleagues. They compare data on student growth and achievement. They watch which teachers are favored and which ones work the hardest. They see who follows expectations and who cuts corners. But environments driven by judgment are not healthy. If individual teachers have set attitudes and ideologies about their own work and refuse to accept the value of a different perspective, it becomes a never-ending tug-of-war game—who is a good teacher and who is not, who is there for the right reasons and who is there for the wrong ones.

Teaching Style

Similarly, when teachers assume their teaching style is the best and only way, conflict can arise with a colleague who has a vastly different way of teaching. The loud, fun, rowdy classroom against the quiet, ordered, structured one; the relaxed, laid-back teacher against the serious, goal-driven one. These dichotomies can create a negative divide if there is not a mindset of acceptance and universal value.

Parent Input

When parents raise questions or concerns about their child's learning experience, if teachers or administrators react in a negative, defensive way, it perpetuates the feeling that the teacher or school is wrong or has something to hide. Negative conflict festers when parents feel they must fight the school, shifting the relationship into a contentious one framed by the loss of trust.

Knowing about various types of conflicts still doesn't clear up *if* a principal should intervene, *when* they should do so, and *how* they should do it. Answering those questions requires a look at the role a principal has in helping others manage conflict.

The Role of the Principal

When people can't get along, is it the principal's job to intervene? It depends. We'll dive into that question throughout this book, because there are times the answer is an empathic "yes," such as when someone is a victim of bullying, aggression, or targeted abuse. There are also times a principal should intervene but should do so judiciously—perhaps from a distance or perhaps by supporting and empowering others to manage the conflict. And there are times when a principal should not intervene at all.

How do we know what path to take? The first step is to determine what *to intervene* means in any given situation. Intervention implies efforts to *fix*, *mediate*, or *resolve* conflict, but doing so can complicate the circumstances that created it in the first place. Besides, if principals tried to intervene in every conflict, they would never be able to keep up with the volume of issues—past, present, and future—that are guaranteed to pop up. *Managing* conflict, though, is something that is . . . well, manageable. It involves a process to *anticipate*, *analyze*, and *act* toward a positive outcome. Notably, the act part might not require actual action from the principal—instead, it might mean staying one step removed and empowering those who are involved to resolve it.

Early in my career, I was assistant to an excellent principal who deliberately did not step in when the conflict did not affect the work of the school. I was eager to be seen as effective, so I thought I needed to be everything to everyone. When a physical education teacher came to me to complain about the way her co-teacher took attendance, I listened carefully and then told her I'd get back to her with solutions. I went to my principal and recounted the whole story. "What should I do?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" I thought he must not have understood the urgency of the situation. "This is a big deal!"

"It is not. It is a silly disagreement. The two of them need to work it out," he said. "If she feels strongly enough that something needs to change, she will need to talk to her co-teacher herself. By coming to you, she's made it a bigger issue than it needs to be. She's essentially tattling and asking for you to take her side." He cautioned me against

micromanaging—and getting into a spat about methods to take attendance would definitely be micromanaging. The better approach, he said, would be to encourage the teacher to talk to her teammate and work out a compromise—and if she wasn’t willing to do so, she’d need to learn to live with the system the way it was. “No one is getting hurt, and there are no long-term consequences. In fact, no one is really even affected,” he pointed out. He advised, “Know your role. Stay out of it.” It took about 10 more situations just like this, with him mentoring me away from jumping in where I wasn’t needed, before I truly understood the value in staying out of lower-stakes conflicts.

With time and experience, I can recognize that this wise principal was doing something beyond staying out of conflicts. He was also making it clear he would not intervene in disagreements that weren’t critical, thereby establishing an expectation and culture in which teachers were empowered to work through minor issues on their own. This was especially applicable with some of the pettier complaints lodged from one person about another. He called them “ticky-tacky” conflicts—inconsequential, flimsy, and not worth considering. “Awww, that’s just a ticky-tacky complaint,” he would say. He knew that if we got involved in small things, well, then we would be asked to get involved in *other* ticky-tacky complaints and, worse, perpetuate a culture in which bothersome, annoying inconveniences were turned into big issues. When he heard about one of these types of conflicts, he would shrug and dismiss the problem from his consciousness. From him, I learned—and I offer this as a primary takeaway of this book—that many conflicts shouldn’t even make it into the principal’s awareness. They should be handled by those involved, or they should be given time so they can fizzle out. In other words, at times, the best course of action is no action. Principals can—and should be able to—count on others to work through small conflicts on their own.

Of course, some conflicts might need a principal to step in—namely, if they have potential to evolve into larger problems. It takes thought and care to decide when and how to intervene. In Chapter 4, we will specifically outline a process that will help principals decide if and how their input will be helpful. In the meantime, though, let’s look at a few nuances of conflict and how they might affect the work of a school.

Conflict vs. Disagreement

Differing opinions, perspectives, experiences, and hoped-for outcomes create all sorts of disagreements. Disagreement isn't necessarily a precursor to conflict. A disagreement might be uncomfortable, but accepting it and embracing different opinions makes us better educators. Every day, teachers manage student disagreements. They instruct students to work through them during class, group work, or social situations. The same approach can be applied to adults, too, by accepting that a disagreement doesn't mean someone or something is wrong. It doesn't need to evolve into a conflict with bigger, long-lasting implications. It's just a difference of opinion, which is often a positive thing.

Conflict vs. Confrontation

In my experience, confrontations are to be avoided, because they are surprising and one-sided. They occur when a disagreement escalates into a conflict, is left unresolved by those best equipped to manage it, and then takes on an urgency in which at least one person thinks there should be a resolution—and it needs to happen *now*. Confrontations are the result of emotion and urgency. They cause drama, gossip, and anxiety, regardless of whether they occur with students or adults. Many people dread confrontation, because they dislike being surprised by someone who wants to power through a complicated problem in the heat of the moment.

Not many disagreements lead to confrontation, but when they do, it rarely goes well. We see this with students all the time—one student is pushed to the point of frustration or fury, and their heightened emotions explode into an argument or fight. The same is true for adults, although it occurs less often. The hope is that adults have the self-discipline and training to soften a potential confrontation into a calm, professional conversation.

Call Out vs. Call In

There is a key difference between calling someone out and calling them in. To call someone out is essentially a confrontation and implies

you want them to know, publicly and emphatically, that they have done something wrong, and you intend to expose them. Calling someone *in* means you want to know more about their perspective while offering your own thoughts; you have the conversation quietly, privately, and with no discord.

When I hear someone struggling with conflict because they feel offended or hurt by someone else, I try to coach them toward a call-in. I ask, “Have you discussed your feelings with the other person? Do you feel you can both share your experiences and come to a common conclusion? What would be the appropriate setting to have a conversation? When might you feel ready to approach this in a calm and productive way?”

Outlier vs. Larger Problem

As a principal, I once had a student get in an altercation in the hallway. I’d known the student for five years, and she’d not so much as raised her voice to another student. Here, suddenly, she was kicking and screaming and fighting with a fierce intensity. Everyone involved, including the teacher who stopped the fight and brought her to the office, was surprised. We were all more interested in figuring out what had happened to trigger her anger rather than considering discipline, because her behavior had been so uncharacteristic. On the other hand, we often have students who are involved in altercations with peers with some regularity. The same is true with teachers and parents. If a teacher never escalates a conflict, but then something occurs that really bothers them, it’s different from the teacher who has a daily complaint about something. If you go years without hearing from a particular parent, but then they reach out and want an immediate conversation, it’s different from the parent who lodges complaints regularly. I don’t approach these situations the same way, because an outlier will require different management than a repeated incident will. Outliers might be solved with conversation and support; frequent conflicts might involve more significant structural changes.

Flow

My superintendent talks about his goal in leadership: He wants all members of the staff to be in “flow.” Flow happens when everyone knows

their role, all opinions are valued, decisions are collaborative, and ongoing communication increases knowledge and buy-in. To achieve flow is to have a culture that works well without anxiety, competition, threats to territory, or unwelcome input. Students can find flow in a school, too, when they know the environment is calm and productive. Disagreement is part of flow, accepted and acknowledged without slowing the momentum of strong teaching and focused instruction. Disruptions to flow—confrontation, fights, disorganization, lack of shared goals—cause ongoing conflict and resentment.

Impact on Student Experience

As stated earlier, some conflict rises and falls without incident, and other conflict has potential for long-lasting damage. Knowing these things, one of the measures for how to manage it should be pointed toward the student experience. If the conflict has a negative impact on students or on the staff and community that serves students, it will need to be addressed. Why? Negative effects of conflict impede communication. It eliminates open, two-way dialogue, because people avoid or eliminate effective communication and thus create an environment in which people are misaligned. Ideally, with professional flow and with a productive communication culture in place, conflicts can actually improve the student experience.

Parent and Community Trust

For outsiders, watching, intervening, or hearing about conflict can feel exciting and dramatic—after all, it's what breaking news stories are made of. In a school setting, though, conflict should not be visible or affect the community. Years ago, my district was in local headlines for conflict between high-level district leadership, and the story dominated our community's conversation for several months. People talked about the conflict, not the good work of the schools. It took a long time to recover and shift the focus back to students, teachers, and the amazing growth happening every day. When conflict festers and communication breaks down, or if it permeates into a larger and much-discussed

problem, it diminishes the positive things schools do and creates questions about trust and believability.

Culture and Climate

When a tiny pebble gets lodged in a shoe, it creates discomfort with every step taken. The same is true of conflict. One small conflict can fester into something painful and damaging to an entire school. There are many reasons why this happens. It might be teachers who simply cannot get along. It might be students who are constantly arguing, competing, or fighting. It might be a parent community that is intensely involved and does not have healthy boundaries to let the school function as it should. Finally, it might be attributed to principals who don't set the expectation of how to work through conflict in a healthy and productive way. Culture and climate can lead to positive results—or they can cast a pall on everything a school tries to do.

Modeling

Principals who effectively work through conflict are modeling for others how it can be done well. Unfortunately, I have known principals who do the opposite. They seem to thrive on the drama of conflict. They rush from one interpersonal crisis to another. They discuss it with others who are not involved, flaming the problem and increasing its reach. They take sides. They jump to conclusions and intervene with erroneous information. All of these missteps create a culture in which the school not only accepts constant conflict but also cannot function without it. Years ago, in my early years of teaching, I was in a school just like this. Teachers gossiped constantly about one another, their students, and their parent community; parents threw fits in an attempt to be heard; students created and fed drama. It was exhausting. And the principal was right in the middle of all of it. When I later moved and took a job in another part of the state, I spent the first six months wondering where all the drama was. It took me a long time to see that the principal's calm, professional modeling of conflict management permeated the mindsets of everyone in the school, so we had a school environment that was largely drama-free.

Support

A principal's involvement in conflict often comes down to various stakeholders vying for the principal's support. *Support* is a complicated concept, though, and it's worth considering what it means in the context of conflict management. Rather than supporting a particular side, I argue that support means the *principal is in favor of the conflict itself*, because rather than assume there is a right or wrong perspective, the principal can embrace the value of multiple perspectives.

In my favorite example of this, I once led a mascot review with a team of teachers in my school. The teachers on the committee came to the first meeting with very strong views. One side felt we should stick with our current mascot—a cardinal—because it was a long-standing symbol that was easily recognizable by students and families. The other side expressed their discomfort with the current mascot, pointing out the cardinal had been chosen as the mascot years ago because of an unsavory incident of equal parts horror and humor—a cardinal had apparently repeatedly crashed into a classroom window, over and over, until it fell to the ground, dead. Rather than choose one side, I proceeded as if each perspective were valued and worthy. In that way, I was able to support every person in the room. In time, we decided to leave the mascot alone, agreeing we would neither eliminate nor promote it; instead, we used a process to choose a school motto, which we actively promoted and utilized with the students. The cardinal faded away, but the motto remains in active use today.

Now that we've discussed some of the repercussions of conflict at school, let's think about how principals can know when to step in. Knowing that peaceful, productive resolution is not always possible, we'll talk about some strategies and solutions to ensure the good work of a school continues to flourish—in spite of the inevitable existence of conflict.

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About the Author



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Related ASCD Resources

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses).

- Compassionate Coaching: How to Help Educators Navigate Barriers to Professional Growth* by Kathy Perret and Kenny McKee (#121017)
- CRAFT Conversations for Teacher Growth: How to Build Bridges and Cultivate Expertise* by Sally J. Zepeda, Lakesha Robinson Goff, and Stefanie W. Steele (#120001)
- Forces of Influence: How Educators Can Leverage Relationships to Improve Practice* by Fred Ende and Meghan Everette (#120009)
- From Underestimated to Unstoppable: 8 Archetypes for Driving Change in the Classroom and Beyond* by Ashley Lamb-Sinclair (#123017)
- The Principal as Chief Empathy Officer: Creating a Culture Where Everyone Grows* by Thomas R. Hoerr (#122030)
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- Teacher Observation and Feedback (Quick Reference Guide for Leaders)* by Jen Schwanke (#QRG123047)
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