

Defusing Explosive Meetings

 rw360.org/2017/07/23/defusing-explosive-meetings-2/7/23/2017

Have you ever been in a meeting that was about to explode?

You could feel the tension building with each person's comments and knew it was just a matter of time before the dynamite went off.

It might have been a conversation with your spouse or teenager. Maybe it was a staff meeting at the office. Or, sometimes most volatile of all, a congregational meeting at your church.

Well, here is a creative way to “de-fuse” this kind of dynamite.



Bill and Peggy White, two of our most active Certified RW Instructors, told me about a tense meeting at a Christian school in their community. About fifty parents were gathered together to voice grievances.

The pastor who led the meeting was a seasoned veteran—combat-tested not in Afghanistan but in his local church. He knew how quickly such meetings can escalate into harsh accusations and demands for termination.

So at the beginning of the meeting, he briefly summarized the problem they were there to discuss. Once he got agreement on the issue people wanted to address, he set forth one simple ground rule: anyone who wanted to speak had to follow the same format by answering six questions in a specific order:

- Briefly stated, how do you feel because of this problem?
- What have you done that might have contributed to this problem?
- What do you think would please God as we work through this situation?
- What steps have you already taken to make things better?
- What are you now willing to do to help resolve this problem?
- What do you suggest others do to help resolve this problem?

Six simple questions that helped people to become more God-aware, self-aware and other-aware by remembering God's involvement in the situation, empathizing with one another, recalling their shared frailty, getting the logs out of their own eyes, showing respect and accepting responsibility, and by being solution-minded rather than attack-oriented.

Now that's relational wisdom!

Try it the next time you're faced with a tense conversation, whether at a congregational meeting or with two squabbling children.

– Ken Sande

Reflection Questions

- How do these Scripture passages support the five questions listed above: 1 Peter 3:8, John 8:1-11, Matthew 7:3-4, Philippians 2:1-11, Ephesians 4:29? Can you think of related passages?
- Without identifying individuals, describe a conversation or meeting that escalated into accusations and demands. What were the key relational failures that caused it to go downhill?
- Think of a person who is skilled at managing tense or volatile conversations. What does he or she do that helps others to converse reasonably and constructively?
- How could you apply some of those same skills in your life today?

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1 Peter 3:8 Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

John 8:1-11 Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Matthew 7:3-4 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?”

Philippians 2:1-11 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.