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Wisdom Worksheet: Wisdom in Conflict Management Styles

Solomon realized that we were guaranteed conflict (two objects attempting to occupy the same space at the same time), so he left us nearly 1,000 wise sayings for conflict management. Psychologists describe a grid of five conflict management styles, each determined by our perspective of another person's interest versus that of our own: (1) *Compromise* (moderate toward another's interest/moderate toward my interest); (2) *Compete* (low toward another's interest/high toward my interest); (3) *Accommodate* (high toward another's interest/low toward my interest); (4) *Avoid* (low toward another's interest/low toward my interest); and (5) *Collaborate* (high toward another's interest/high toward my interest).¹ The challenge is discerning *when* to apply each conflict management style. Fortunately, Proverbs offers insight to this question.

Compromise (moderate toward another's interest/moderate toward my interest) when: *both choices are acceptable* (Prov. 25:8; 28:21). *Compromise* means that each party gives in a little. Thus, we should compromise when both choices at hand are acceptable to us. The key word is *acceptable*. In conflict, if we can accept both choices (our initial position or the proposed compromise) because they have similar outcomes, then we should consider compromise. Often, we see compromise as similar to competing for the best deal. However, Proverbs says that we need to exercise caution in competing because we are not always as right as we think we are (Prov. 25:8). Proverbs

¹ Norman Shawchuck, *How to Manage Conflict in the Church, Vol. 1* (Irvine, CA: Spiritual Growth Resources, 1986), 31.



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tells us that partiality toward ourselves is not good, and it often takes very little incentive for us to demonstrate it (Prov. 28:21). Thus, compromise can be wise.

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Are you in a conflict where you have hardened your heart to compromise? Give in a little to the other person's proposal to do the same or initiate a compromise.

Compete (low toward another's interest/high toward my interest) when: a morally right versus wrong issue is at stake (Prov. 2:12, 16; 19:8). *Compete* means that we will pursue our own interest at the expense of another's, making the perceived task of greater importance than the relationship. It usually implies a zero sum game. We will win while the other person equally loses. Proverbs says that wisdom will save us from wicked competitors whose words are perverted (Prov. 2:12). When engaging in conflict, we run a high risk of losing, especially when the other person is willing to say one thing and do another. However, when there is a moral issue at stake, we must compete.

Proverbs describes a man who is vulnerable to a woman who is not his wife, imploring that wisdom will save him from her seductive words (Prov. 2:16). When we are about to sin, we need to compete wisely for our own interest. Solomon said that is wise to love your own soul (Prov. 19:8).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Are you in a conflict of right versus wrong by biblical standards—an affair, an illegal business proposition, a lie, or a threat to someone's life? Compete for what is right in God's sight. Read the above verses, and go to a trusted friend for wisdom on how to compete for what is right with all your might.



Accommodate (high toward another's interest/low toward my interest) when:
(1) *I am wrong* (Prov. 6:1-5; 28:13; 14:9; 30:32-33); (2) *the issue is of greater importance to the other person involved* (Prov. 19:11; 25:21-22); (3) *confronting might bring irreparable damage* (Prov. 9:7-8); or (4) *the relationship is of greater value than my personal stakes* (Prov. 17:9).

First, we must accommodate another's interest when we are wrong. Proverbs says that if we have been trapped by a foolish decision, then we should go, humble ourselves, accommodate the other person involved, and be free (Prov. 6:1-5). It is foolish to conceal our sin; it is wise to confess it (Prov. 28:13). A wise person finds goodwill in accommodating another, but only a fool mocks at accommodation (Prov. 14:9). If we have played the fool and exalted ourselves over another person, or if we have planned evil, we need to accommodate (Prov. 30:32-33).

Second, we accommodate when the issue is of greater importance to the other person involved. Sometimes, issues are much more important to others than they are to us. When it costs us little or nothing and profits the other person involved much, we should accommodate. Proverbs says that wisdom gives us patience, and it is to our glory to accommodate an offender (Prov. 19:11). Solomon said that God will reward us when we accommodate an enemy by meeting his needs, and our offender will often be ashamed of his actions (Prov. 25:21-22).

Third, we accommodate when confronting might bring irreparable damage. Sometimes, the risk is greater than the return. Proverbs says that when we confront a mocker, he will hate us (Prov. 9:7-8). Thus, we risk losing more than we can gain in



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return. If confrontation will likely bring about irreparable damage to the other person involved, to others, or to us, then we should accommodate.

Fourth, we accommodate when the relationship is of greater value than our personal stakes. Frequently, the maintenance of a relationship is much more important than what we lose by accommodating another person. At that point, we should accommodate. Proverbs says that whoever covers over, or accommodates, an offender promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends (Prov. 17:9).

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Are you caught in a conflict that would dissolve if you would merely accommodate another person? Examine your heart and behavior. Are you wrong and attempting to defend that wrong? Is the issue in conflict of greater importance to the other person than it is to you? Would further confrontation bring irreparable damage to the other person involved, to other connected parties, or to you? Would you rather win the relationship or win the argument? Perhaps it is time to accommodate the other person. If so, simply ask the person with whom you are in conflict, “What can I do to accommodate you?”

Avoid (low toward another’s interest/low toward my interest) when: (1) *it is combat with a fool* (Prov. 26:4-5; 20:3); or (2) *it is not my quarrel, and I am not asked to help* (Prov. 26:17).

First, we should always avoid combat with a fool because we cannot win (Prov. 26:4-5). If we answer according to his tangled web of folly, then we will become like him (Prov. 26:4). If we engage with a fool and let his words go idly by, then he will be



wise in his own eyes (Prov. 26:5). Proverbs says that it is to a man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel (Prov. 20:3).

Second, we should avoid a quarrel that is not our own when we are not asked to help. Proverbs says that a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own is like a person who seizes a dog by the ears—he is going to get bitten (Prov. 26:17). When we engage in such a conflict, we will feel the pain of the teeth of those involved lacerating our flesh.

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Are you nearing combat with a fool? Are you thinking of getting involved in a quarrel that is not your own without being asked? If either answer is "Yes," then avoid the conflict.

Collaborate (high toward another's interest/high toward my interest) when: *most of the time* (Prov. 11:27; 13:15). God's design for wise conflict management is that we work together to seek win-win solutions (Phil. 2:3-4). Proverbs says that we find what we seek. Whoever seeks goodwill (win-win) finds it, but whoever searches for evil finds it (Prov. 11:27). In order to discover goodwill, we must literally co-labor with the other person involved in our conflict. This includes a journey inside each party to move from the *positions* to the *underlying interests* of the conflict. Often, the interests of both parties are the same. Solomon said, "*Good understanding wins favor, but the way of the unfaithful is hard*" (Prov. 13:15). *Understanding* means *insight*. When we ask the Spirit of God to shine light into another person's heart, we are able to see his or her underlying



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interests. Then we can understand those interests and collaborate for a win-win solution to conflict management. God's wisdom will move us through conflict to community.

Pause and Let Wisdom Work

Commit today to collaborating through most of the conflict in your life. Co-labor with others in conflict for wise, win-win solutions by looking not only to your own, unselfish interests, but also the interests of others, including those of Christ (Phil. 2:1-5).