

Wise Doves and Innocent Serpents? Doing Conflict Resolution Better

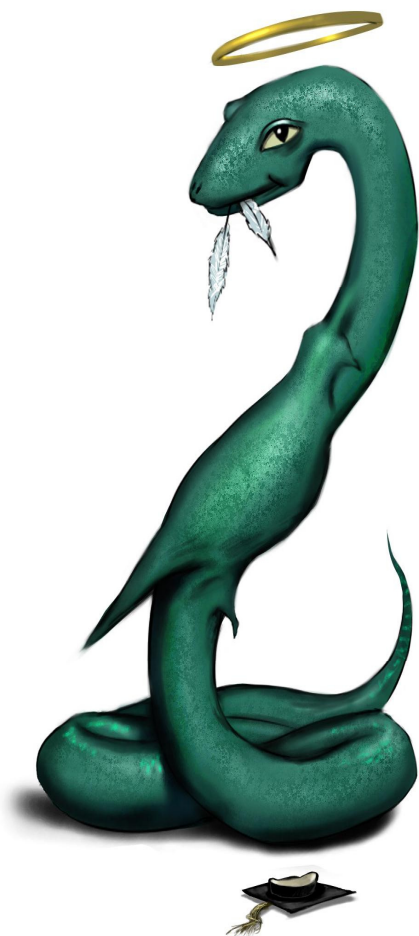
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Adapted from January 2007, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 43, pp. 40-49.

This article may be copied/distributed as of January 2008.

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Translations available at: <http://mcaresources.googlepages.com/realitydose>



What a mess! A respected ministry is losing lots of its staff. Good folks are leaving and some good folks are staying. Many are broken and disillusioned. Sides are formed. Some say the departing staff are insubordinate and not a good fit for the ministry. Others believe there are significant personal and organizational problems that are not being addressed. Mutual friends try to stay neutral, and are baffled. The governing board wants to maintain the ministry, but is also confused about what is going on. There are no written policies for grievances, dismissal, or discipline. No safe forums exist to share personal and work-related concerns as a group. No exit interviews are done. No independent review happens. A few well-meaning folks plead for reconciliation. Something is definitely not right, but no one seems capable or willing to do anything. And over the next several months, the toxins continue to take their toll, as unresolved relational discord and ministry distraction spread maliciously to others. What a mess!

[Discussion point 1: Even with “proper” procedures there can be a mess. Do recognised protocols and Christian values/commitments always function as protective factors—especially where there is dysfunction?]

How many relational conflicts have you experienced in the last couple years? How much time, energy, and sleep have they taken, or stolen from your life? Perhaps 10% of my work life—part of my unofficial job description—is devoted to working through various conflicts. I believe this is true for many of us. Research also supports what we know from painful experience: struggles with colleagues stress us out (Gish, 1983, Carder, 1999). Conflicts can lead to personal growth and closer relationships, but not always.

In this article I review two important areas for healthy relationships in Christian mission. They are the role of human *dysfunction* (problems resulting from significant weakness and wrongness) and the role of Biblical *discipline* (correction helping to restore people and organizations). Upgrading our skills in these two areas is fundamental for preventing and managing conflicts better. How do we help people and organizations that negatively affect others—and sometimes many others—over time? And what type of help or discipline is appropriate? I want to look realistically at our “**relational reality**” in Christian mission so we can learn from our impasses and struggles. My intent is not to blame but rather to build our “**relational resiliency**”.

[Discussion point 2: What recognised ways exist in our groups/organisations to help review our “relational reality”? Is “A bitter truth is better than a sweet lie”, as the Uzbeks/Russians say?]

“Dysfunctional” is a good term that when used carefully can help us understand people and organizations better. By dysfunctional I mean a consistent pattern of relating to oneself and others that is hurtful or “toxic”, characterized by such things as authoritarianism, closed/secretive communication, high control, and denial of what is actually happening (see Table 1). Such dysfunction can be compounded when no one sees it clearly, when it is imbedded in more functional behaviors, or when no one wants to or can do anything about it. It can be further compounded by the various ways that all of us from different cultural, theological, generational, and organizational backgrounds understand “relational discord” (e.g., how to be both “respectful” and “honest” when discussing concerns).

[Discussion point 3: What other behaviours are dysfunctional—lying, retaliating, humiliating?]

Table 1. Signs of Organizational Dysfunction (based on Hay, 2004; Aterburn, Felton, 1998).

- ◆ Poor leadership and management as evidenced by:
High control, withholding information, rigidity, legalism, intolerance of questioning, punitiveness, blaming others, not admitting one’s problems, keeping up the image of the organization at all costs, high priority on giving money to the organization, limited accountability; influential people with pervasive character deficits, narcissistic traits, bruised backgrounds or addictive behaviors; poor history of staff retention/relationships

- ◆ Lack of satisfaction and optimism in staff as evidenced by:
Feeling one is “dispensable”, lack of work/life balance, lack of opportunities for development and learning, not being able to talk openly about the “reality” of the situation, not expressing one’s feelings unless they are positive, not being able to make “mistakes”, not doing anything outside ones “role”, not being able to trust, not having the freedom to make mistakes

Distortions and Discernment

We all tend to see ourselves as all or mostly right in the face of interpersonal tensions and the other party as being all or mostly wrong. Friends can become *fiends*. Leaders become *lepers*. Organizations become *ogre-nizations*. Labeling others’ differences as being dysfunctional, although a “normal” tendency for us all, is clearly dysfunctional itself! We so need to be grace-oriented disciples rather than judgement-oriented derelicts. Who are we to call down fire from heaven on our brethren, as James and John wanted to do upon the cities that rejected the apostolic band (Luke 9:54)? As the psalmist says, ‘If the Lord numbered our sins, who could stand in His presence (Psalm 130:3)?’ And as Paul warns, ‘Who are we to judge one another’s servant, for before his/her own master he/she will stand or fall (Romans 14:4).’ Conflict, more often than not, is a two-way street. God help us, because we are all sinners! We are all both weak and wrong.

But hold on. We must also be concerned about the other side of the distortions—downgrading clear dysfunction and referring to obvious deviance as merely being “differences”. Surely we must not make a mountain out of a molehill, as the saying goes; yet we should not make a molehill out of a mountain! The tricky part comes in trying to discern who has a clear or at least the clearest perception of what constitutes a mountain or a molehill. It is also tricky when things are not so black and white. As Proverbs says, ‘All the ways of a person are right in one’s own eyes, but the Lord weighs the motives (16:2; 21:2).’ And again, ‘The first to plead one’s case seems just, until one’s neighbor comes and gives input (18:17).’

However, there are many examples in Scripture when sin is identified, whereby some form of Christian discipline is clearly needed (Matthew 18:17, I Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14). Ken Williams says in *Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills* that “Scripture teaches us that in some cases our relationship with others must be secondary to the issue. We need to know when to put the issue first, even if it means the relationship is harmed or broken” (2002, p. 114). Similarly Cloud and Townsend state in *Safe People*: “The necessity of separation is a grim reality. God wishes it were not so (2 Peter 3:9); so do all of us. But the truth is that some relationships are not workable if someone is not willing to change and reconcile” (1995, p. 197).

The problem is further complicated when there is not proper accountability in place, or when there is not enough history with a person or an institution to really confront it and require verifiable changes. I am not talking about how to handle situations where folks simply differ (which is usually the case fortunately), but rather where there is significant personal and organizational dysfunction. So in other words organizations and people, whether they are aware of it or not, or willing to admit it or not, have a “toxic” influence on people. And as a result, unless we are spiritually discerning; “street wise”; well-versed in the behavioral science areas of systems, recovery, clinical disorders; and grounded in the full counsel of Scripture regarding the conflict resolution process, we can end up being “wise as doves” as we interact with others who may be “innocent as serpents.” **Truth without grace may be brutal, but grace without truth can be lethal.**

The sad fact is that many times we can be seriously '**duped**' by dysfunction. Here's how.

- **Deny.** The first task of dysfunction is to conceal itself. "Don't ask about problems, don't tell about problems" is a pervasive, core, unwritten rule. In short, deny reality.
- **Downplay.** If that does not work, then the second task becomes getting folks to minimize it by downplaying its negative impact, stating that the group/person is going through a “normal” stage of adjustment; or simply changing the subject. Relational unity/conformity takes precedence over relational truth/connection.
- **Distract.** If that does not work then the third task is to distract from the real issues, “feign pain” and get sympathy, or admit that something in a fuzzy way is “not exactly right” and perhaps refer to problems as being largely a matter of having different perspectives/preferences. There is little commitment to acknowledge real issues and little capacity to address them.
- **Discredit.** If that does not work, then the fourth task, which can actually occur simultaneously with the previous three, is to discredit those who point it out, no matter how sensitively they try to do so. A common mistake of leaders/consultants who are trying to help is to overestimate one's ability to understand and deal with dysfunction...and to also not be wounded (e.g., discredited) in the process.

[Discussion point 4: What other ways can we be duped? How might we dupe ourselves?]

Resources to Help

There are many fine materials on how to help people resolve differences. Yet these usually assume that people are playing fair and that there is not significant dysfunction in one of the people/organizations involved. Helpers and mediators usually default towards wanting to stay neutral, helping people agree to disagree, believing the best in each other, preserving unity, increasing mutual understanding, arriving at a “win-win” outcome, etc., which is usually sensible of course. However there are times when this approach is inadequate, and confrontation and discipline are required. This is tough love that requires contrition and change. Otherwise innocent people, now and in the future, get hurt. And justice is not done. Robert Schreiter's sobering comments on reconciliation at the societal level are also applicable at the interpersonal level.

Truth-telling, struggling for justice, working toward forgiveness: these are three central dimensions of the social process of reconciliation. In all situations I know, they are never undertaken on a level playing field; the consequences of oppression, violence, and war are not predisposed to honesty, justice, and even good intentions in all parties. Nor are the processes, for the most part, orderly. And they never seem complete. In fact, we usually experience them as truncated, prematurely foreclosed, high-jacked by the powerful...We can find ourselves acquiescing to half-measures, half-truths, compromised solutions. (Schreiter, 2005, p. 4).

So how do we upgrade our conflict management skills? First I want to highly recommend taking the one-week Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills Course. This course is designed to help us apply Scriptural principles in preventing and working through some of the more typical problem areas. When significant dysfunction is present, I strongly recommend the use of additional approaches, as summarized in Table 2. Study these carefully! Be sure to also review the core resources at the end of the article.

Second, let me encourage us and our organizations to develop clear, written guidelines for handling conflict. Be sure to include the place of Biblical restoration and discipline, along with justice issues, rather than solely having an end goal of reconciliation (see Gardner's tool/guidelines below). Note that where there are no clear or thorough guidelines, we may tend to make them up, often to our own advantage rather than with impartiality/others in mind. Our organizational guidelines also need to stand the test of conflict/discipline situations that are ambiguous and/or where there is lots of toxicity. There are some internal organizational documents that can help. One example is contained in the by-laws of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (info@paoc.org; By-Law 10.6 and 10.7.) Another is the Reconciliation and Justice Guidelines by Youth With A Mission (www.ywam.org).

Table 2. Ten Suggestions for Dealing with Dysfunction/Toxicity

1. There is a continuum of responses to carefully consider. It ranges from prudently withdrawing and protecting oneself (Proverbs 27:12) to prudently confronting and holding one's ground (Proverbs 25:26). Act with integrity, without wavering, based on your convictions and wise advice.
2. Confrontation of serious dysfunction is done as a group, with solidarity, not by oneself. Get ongoing, experienced, outside consultation, at times including legal advice. Well-intentioned colleagues wanting to help, yet with limited understanding of dysfunction/discipline, can create even greater problems. Refer to any organizational policies for conflict resolution, grievances, and whistle-blowing.
3. Confrontation is usually a necessary step (e.g., clinical/recovery interventions) prior to or as part of mediation and reconciliation approaches. This assumes though that there are people willing to take some risks and that there is an authority structure in place for leverage and accountability. Always include an historical review to help identify pervasive patterns. In mercy, focus on truth and justice, and don't get sidetracked or duped simply with anyone's real, embellished, or contrived "pain."
4. Core parts of the reconciliation process in dysfunction/toxic situations include truth, justice, contrition, forgiveness, restitution, and discipline. Prematurely seeking for reconciliation is never helpful. In certain situations, the reconciliation process takes years. And without verifiable contrition and change, sometimes all we can do is "cut our losses", move on, and entrust ourselves to our faithful Creator (1 Peter 4:19). Forgiveness though, is a command in Scripture to intentionally pursue (Matthew 18: 21,22).
5. Impartiality and objectivity do not necessarily imply neutrality. Don't be afraid to take a stand. But beware of seeing any party as being "all bad" or "all good". Truth, packaged diplomatically, is usually a good way forward. Talking in terms of behavior patterns rather than personality problems, and situational influences rather than dispositional inadequacies, may help make the input/process more acceptable. But be realistic: certain pervasive and ongoing character/systemic issues are not amenable to change.
6. Make room for cultural, generational, gender, and organizational variation. Difference is not deviance. Preferences are not usually pathogens. In many cultures, direct approaches may not be appreciated, no matter how diplomatic or respectful one is.
7. Expect there to be diverging accounts of "truth" and deflecting responsibility, plus being misunderstood, manipulated, and blamed. It is a messy process. One must be willing to live with compromise, incomplete closure on important issues, minimal contrition, and partial justice.
8. True trust is earned and not assumed. One needs good reasons, over time, to deeply trust others where there is a history of dysfunction. Trust is slowly built, easily broken, and slowly rebuilt.
9. If you think you are going crazy as you deal with toxicity, you probably are. Dealing with toxicity takes a high toll on our sanity. Get outside reality checks and support. Don't overestimate your ability to repel toxicity or to avoid becoming toxic yourself. Bitterness defiles. Resist it! (Hebrews 12:15).
10. Maintain a solid Biblical perspective: Our Lord cares for us often by refining us through desert experiences and through injustices. He zealously loves others, even dysfunctional people, as much as He loves us; and we are all major debtors in need of unmerited mercy (Matthew 18:23-35).

Third, I suggest that organizations have clear guidelines for handling grievances and for "whistle-blowing" (recognized procedures for pointing out serious problems in an organization). These guidelines are part of good management practices, and are in addition to those for conflict resolution. Check out the helpful material from People in Aid in the United Kingdom, for example, especially the brief "policy pot" document which discusses whistle-blowing (www.peopleinaid.org). Also look at the detailed mediation approach used by the Peacemakers consultancy group (www.hispeace.org). Such guidelines reflect Charles Handy's appeal for good management in *Understanding Voluntary Organisations*: "Virtue does not have to be so painful, if it is sensibly organised" (1988, p. 9).

Tools for Organizational Health

Here are two other materials to help us strengthen our organizations as we deal with actual or potential dysfunction. These tools require committed people with integrity, who have "soft hearts, sound minds, and skilled hands" in order to use them well. The first tool, by Laura Mae Gardner with Wycliffe International, identifies three broad steps for restoration in cases of moral failure or other serious sins. The second tool is used by Rob Hay, with Generating Change in the United Kingdom. He provides a list of key questions adapted from the ReMAP II study on staff retention, that organizations and their staff can use for monitoring their levels of health and toxicity (results of this study are in the June 2004 issue of *Connections* at www.wearesources.org).

[Discussion point 5: List a few other core materials to help.]

Tool One: Restoration for Colleagues, by Laura Mae Gardner

Under what circumstances can a person with significant struggles, who has sinned greatly or committed a moral lapse, be restored to full membership and a position of responsibility within a Christian sending organization? I would like to suggest the careful consideration of the following three steps. These steps are offered in the spirit of "corrective grace" and with the understanding that organizations, like their staff, also have areas of weakness and wrongness.

Step I. Discipline

The leadership within the organization ought to institute some form of discipline. This would not be counseling at this point. It would probably involve some change in status, some public statement, some loss of position or the like. It may or may not include reporting to the member's home church.

Step II. Recovery

Repentance. The circumstances surrounding the coming to light of the sin--was it confessed in response to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, evidencing that the person is responsive to God and wants to live a holy life, no matter what the cost, and at all cost being free from the burden of guilt or sin? Or is this sin one in which the person was 'caught,' in which case the tears might well be tears of remorse, the shame and embarrassment of exposure? I think in this case the person's repentance is in serious question, and should be held tentatively.

Restitution. Does the person demonstrate awareness of the pain his/her sin has caused others, and has the person taken all possible steps to make amends and bring healing to those he/she has hurt? This would mean the person has "owned" the sin—he/she is the one who did this, and it is his/her responsibility to help his/her victims as much as possible. One's willingness to enter into restitution in the event of getting caught rather than confessing the sin is one way to measure true repentance.

Rehabilitation. The person is willing to take a hard look inward and try to identify the areas of vulnerability and susceptibility in his or her own life to see what triggered the sin, where he or she needs to be careful in the future, and how he or she can strengthen his own life. Again, one's willingness to engage in this sort of thing will be a manifestation of repentance.

Time. All of the above will take a good amount of time. This cannot be done overnight. Healing, developing self awareness, taking responsibility for behavior and making matters right, developing biblical standards of right and wrong—all of this will take a substantial amount of time, and probably is best engaged in the company of, under the guidance of a godly counselor. This counselor will pay attention to the impact on the spouse of the perpetrator, since this person may be either part of the problem, or a deeply injured party. Healing will need to go on in this area too.

Willingness to re-earn credibility. People will naturally, and rightly be skeptical, and have a ‘show me’ attitude, and the person who has sinned must not condemn them for it but on the contrary, must be willing to take whatever steps and time is necessary to win back the respect and trust of others. Far too often, we see the person who has sinned becoming very angry at others for ‘not forgiving him/her’ or for imposing some discipline. This certainly does not demonstrate a repentant heart or a ‘broken and contrite spirit.’ It does not evidence an ownership of the sin, or an awareness of how much the person has harmed others or brought shame on the Lord’s name or on the organization.

Without these five elements, I do not see how a person who has committed a moral sin, or who has significant struggles that affect oneself and others, can expect to be fully restored to a position of responsibility. If a person was ‘caught’ and did not initially confess his/her sin, then there is all the more reason to demonstrate repentance by diligently working on all five aspects of one’s recovery.

Step III. Restoration

Galatians 6:1 does command the body to work for restoration. Exactly what restoration means—does it mean a full return to status, position and privilege? I am not sure. Many leadership responsibilities are based on earned trust gained through character and proven trustworthy godliness, and this has been destroyed. It is doubtful whether the person can ever fully gain back the original confidence of his followers; certainly the only means of doing that is through a demonstration of godly sorrow, repentance, and a humble walk with the Lord in obvious dependence on Him, along with relationships of accountability, and strategies for maintaining spiritual vitality and holiness.

Tool Two: Organizational Life, adapted by Rob Hay

This is an exercise to do individually or preferably as a group. Spend a few minutes reflecting on some of your organizational practices. For each of the following questions, enter a score between 0 and 6 where: 0 = not done, 1 = not done well, up to 6 = very well done (as evidenced by time, effort, and effectiveness). Add up your scores and enter the total in line A, then divide A by B and enter in C. Which scores are highest, and which are lowest? What is being done well, and poorly? How can the quality of work and life be improved? “Members of great teams improve their relationships by holding one another accountable, thus demonstrating that they respect each other and have high expectations for one another’s performance” (Lencioni, 2002, p. 213).

1	Vision and purpose are shared and understood throughout the agency
2	Plans and job descriptions are communicated clearly to staff
3	There is a free flow of communication to and from the leadership
4	There is effective communication between sending base and field
5	Staff are included in major decisions related to the field
6	Policies are well documented and understood
7	Most leaders are a good example of the agency’s beliefs and values
8	Most leaders identify problems early and take appropriate action
9	Good on-field supervision is provided (quantity and quality)
10	Leaders conduct an annual performance/ ministry review with each staff person

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11	There are documented procedures for handling complaints from staff
12	Effective on-field orientation is in place for new staff
13	Staff are assigned roles according to their gifting and experience
14	Staff are given room to shape and develop their own ministry
15	Staff are committed to their ministry
16	Staff are committed and loyal to the agency
17	Staff are generally not overloaded in the amount of work they do
18	Staff regularly evaluate and seek to improve the agency's ministry
19	Staff are actually achieving the agency's goals and expectations
20	Staff are developing good relationships with the people they serve
21	The people our staff serve are becoming followers of Christ
22	The church on the field values the ministries of our staff
23	Staff are developing leadership among the people they serve
24	Staff experience a sense of fulfillment in their ministry
25	Staff are effective in providing each other with mutual support
26	Effective pastoral care exists at a field level (preventative and in crises)
27	Interpersonal conflicts are resolved in a timely and appropriate manner
28	Emphasis is placed on the maintenance and growth of personal spiritual life
29	Health care services for staff and their families are satisfactory
30	Time for an annual vacation or holiday is provided
31	Risk assessment and contingency planning is in place in all fields
32	There is financial back-up for staff with low or irregular support
A. Total B. Divide by 32 C. Average D. Highest and lowest scores	

Final Thoughts

In our commitment to friendship, forgiveness, and informality, I wonder if at times we are being too naïve, making ourselves too vulnerable, and side-stepping good practices. Yes indeed! I also wonder about our own remarkable capacity for self-deception, distortions, and defensiveness when working through conflicts with colleagues. And above all, I wonder about the confounding toxins and nefarious schemes of “the biggest Troublemaker in the cosmos”. Again I say, God help us, because we are all sinners, in dire need to receive and give mercy (Galatians 6:1ff)!

[Discussion point 6: What can we learn from our “secular” or non-Christian colleagues about managing dysfunction? Consider this in light of Luke 16:8 “the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light.” What are some examples of the toxins and schemes of the Evil One? How do we deal with these factors?]

There is an Arabic proverb which says ‘The greatest crime in the desert is to find water, and remain silent.’ I would like to suggest a rejoinder to this proverb: ‘The second greatest crime in the desert is to find *poisoned* water, and remain silent’ (see also Proverbs 25:26). Sometimes people get into trouble because they blow whistles and because they confront poisoned water. They act with integrity both publicly and privately. This is not easy to do. Neither is it easy to do well, nor to do well by oneself. It is often scary and risky. Sometimes the wisest thing to do is to back away, or move on. Other times we must stand firm, and say to dysfunction what Gandalf said to the monstrous balrog in the Mines of Moria: “You cannot pass!” (Tolkein, 1973, p. 429).*

[Discussion point 7: Have you had to confront “poisoned water”? If so, what were the outcomes? What did you learn?]

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