

The Red Zone, The Blue Zone Surviving and Thriving in Church Conflict

Introduction

Life can be dangerous. Church life can be especially dangerous. As I've coached ministers through the years, most would implicate conflict as the top culprit that makes church leadership such a challenge.

As I have said to countless ministers through the years, Ministry doesn't involve conflict, ministry IS conflict. Consider the life of Jesus in the gospels. Nearly every interaction involved conflict that need to be successfully negotiated. Several, such as when he is confronted with whether to pay taxes, were actually life-threatening.

Now consider this. The healthiest churches are loaded with conflict, as are the least healthy. It's not the conflict per se, it's the very nature of that conflict that counts. And understanding how that conflict works is critical.

Conflict: Friend or Foe?

Most ministers I've worked with run from conflict. And yet conflict has a niggling habit of continually showing up, even though every possible measure is taken to prevent it. We have a different slant on conflict:

- You can't escape conflict. The issues on which we can disagree are endless.
- Conflict isn't really the problem. The problem is how people relate to one another when they are in conflict. Conflict is not only *NOT* a bad thing, it's a good thing, and a necessary thing.

The Faces of Conflict

Understanding conflict, and its place in your life and ministry is absolutely critical to successful ministry. I'm not going to unpack all of this issue, just hit the highlights. I encourage you to read my book, *Thriving Through Ministry Conflict* (Zondervan).

We realize that the word conflict is loaded emotionally. Many people associate conflict with destructive images, of people shouting at one another, of gangs shooting at each other, of countries bombing one another. Certainly those are conflicted situations. But conflict, at its core, involves disagreement, differing ideas and opinions, discrepant evaluations and judgments. People are different. Each person walking this earth has a different slant on things, different ways of seeing what is unfolding, differing priorities,

different strategies for dealing with all the situations life throws at us. Issues regarding conflict are confusing. Is conflict good, or bad? How do I manage it? Let's put one proposition on the table right up front: Conflict is necessary and beneficial, at least conflict that is focused properly (i.e. the Blue Zone which we will discuss later). As conflict strays away from issues, and accesses personal stories (i.e. the Red Zone), conflict becomes unmanageable and destructive.

Let's make some distinctions that will help us understand conflict, and the way it can be helpful or destructive. I like to divide conflict into two classes, the Red Zone conflict, which is destructive and personal, and the Blue Zone conflict, that is professional and helpful. Look at the chart.

Red Zone	Blue Zone
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This conflict is personal. • It's about me! • Emotions rule without being acknowledged. • I must protect myself, because I'm feeling weak. • Emotions are denied in myself, therefore "projected" on others. • The situation escalates. • Behaviors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I disengage ✓ I become easily annoyed ✓ I'm resentful ✓ I procrastinate ✓ I attack the other personally ✓ I use Alcohol as medication ✓ I avoid people , situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This conflict is professional. • It's about the church. • The mission of the church rules. • I must protect the staff team and the church. • Emotions are understood and acknowledged in myself, but my intellect rules. • The situation is reframed into a more useful construct. • Behaviors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I'm thoughtful ✓ I'm reflective ✓ I listen deeply for what the underlying issue might be ✓ I do not see negative intent in other people.

The Red Zone

The Red Zone is where the atmosphere is characterized by a lack of professionalism and emotional heat. When we talk of Blue Zone conflict, we're not talking about conflict that has no emotion. That's absurd. But in the Blue Zone the emotion is in the service of the intellect, because the primary source of the conflict is not emerging from my personal story, but from the mission of the organization. In the Red Zone, the conflict now revolves around me, my story, my neediness, my personal issues. The Red Zone emerges from the emotional centers within the brain.

As I sink into the Red Zone, my personal story begins to emerge. That story has a central theme or premise that is central to that story: Will I survive? Am I acceptable? Am I

competent? Am I in control? As a person begins to sink into her Red Zone, it is usually the same core theme that emerges. Consequently, you will hear out of the mouth of a person the same general theme over and over again. *You're trying to control me!* (control) *Don't you think I can do this?* (competence). This Red Zone theme can color every interaction unless a person becomes aware of this and is able to manage it appropriately.

In the Red Zone the focus becomes personal. Even though we might verbally be still disagreeing about an issue involving the organization, the real energy is coming from a personal, emotional place. The main focus is not furthering the mission of the organization, but self-protection. As I sink into the Red Zone, I disengage becoming distracted and easily annoyed. As I become more resentful, I may attack the other person, or avoid them and may use alcohol or other artificial means to distract myself.

Red Zone Themes

The Red Zone tends to elicit one of four themes: Survival, Acceptance, Competence, or Control. As the Red Zone core theme is activated, the feelings associated with that issue are also activated. The person then sinks down deeper into a morass of feelings, many of which come from stories long ago completely unrelated to the current story that has provoked the Red Zone response.

Survival. "I must take care of myself. The world is full of peril, so I must enjoy the moment." These people often grew up in very dysfunctional homes where their caregivers (usually parents) were inconsistent, unavailable, or abusive. Because of this, these people at an early age were thrown onto their own resources rather than those of others. These people have traits of competence, self-reliance, and responsibility. These people lack the ability to trust others (their initial caregivers were untrustworthy) and tend to be wary and troubled in relationships. They may have little interest in anything but what is of practical benefit. They become angry and panicky (Red Zone) whenever they feel their survival has been threatened.

Acceptance. "I will do anything to be loved and accepted by others. I am a people-pleaser." These people have a heart for serving others and are very attentive to the needs and feelings of other people. These people can be overly compliant and self-effacing. They tend to be rescuers. They become angry and carry personal grudges (Red Zone) whenever they feel they have been rejected. But they can also read people and situations very well.

Control. "The world is a threatening place, and the only way I can feel safe is if I can control every situation and the people around me." These people tend to have strong leadership qualities. They are vigilant, highly organized, and have high expectations of themselves. These people often wall themselves off emotionally. They

do not let others get too close to them. They can be overly controlling toward others—bossy, directive, demanding, rigid, and nit-picking. They impose perfectionist demands on others. They become anxious and angry (Red Zone) whenever anyone or anything threatens their control. Often, though they make good leaders, they can make poor followers.

Competence. “I am loved only on the basis of my performance. My performance is never good enough, so I never feel worthy of being loved.” These people tend to be high achievers. If you are a leader, you want these people on your team, because they will work hard to achieve a great performance. They are never satisfied with their achievements. They have a hard time receiving from other people. They impose perfectionist demands on themselves. They are defensive and easily angered (Red Zone) whenever they perceive that their competence has been questioned.

As the Red Zone core theme is activated, the feelings associated with that issue are also activated. The person then sinks down deeper into a morass of feelings, many of which come from stories long ago completely unrelated to the current story that has provoked the Red Zone response. These feelings then become more prominent than the ability to clearly think. As a result, the person carries on the conflict immersed in her own story and the feelings associated with it. This obviously colors her actions and reactions. And the ability to clearly understand the issues involved in the conflict are compromised.

Postures we assume in the Red Zone

Understand that not everyone appears and acts the same way as they descend into the Red Zone. Some people become overly angry and shout and scream. Then it’s obvious they’re in the Red Zone. But others remain cool on the surface, and quite possibly even sound very intellectual. But underneath, they too have descended into their own stories and the issue has turned emotional and personal for them as well. Sufficient to say, if the disagreement around an issue is too intense, and the disagreement lasts much longer than one would consider reasonable under the circumstances, the conflict has usually entered the Red Zone for one or more people.

Activating the Red Zone

You might be asking yourself, How does the Red Zone get activated? I’m in a disagreement with a church board member about the color of the new carpet in the sanctuary. All of a sudden, I feel a whole load of energy rising within me that causes me to feel contempt for the board member. This energy apparently springs from nowhere. If I’m not careful, I’ll begin to speak to the board member contemptuously (my usual MO when I’m provoked this way).

I would argue that at this point, you are no longer talking about carpet. Quite probably the board member’s manner and the fact that she was disagreeing with you (and as you

see it, an affront to your authority? or that you weren't competent enough to pick a good color?) was the activator.

Your brain has a structure that culls through incoming messages and stimuli and determines where those stimuli should go. If the message is sent to the intellectual centers of the brain, you'll be able to think through the situation rationally (Blue Zone). But if the message is sent to the emotional centers, the response will be quite different (Red Zone). Oh yes, you might sound quite rational, but underneath, your responses will actually be shaped by emotion (*How dare she!*), not by rational contemplation (*Let's see, does her suggestion of red carpet make more sense than my preference for green?*).

Those emotional centers deep within our brains are also where our stories are kept. By this I mean that every life situation you experienced and every person you encountered are still there. Not only are these people and experiences there, but the meaning attached to each of these situations is also there, and the reactions you had to all of these people and situations. So as these stories are evoked by present day circumstances, all of the emotions surrounding those stories are elicited.

The Same People Keep Showing Up in My Life

These concepts may be hard to grasp, so let's walk dig a little deeper. When we are growing up, certain people, beginning with our primary caregivers, carve an indelible impression on our brains – into our personal stories. Each of these important people have distinct characteristics that influenced us. These can be positive and negative. The kindly grandmother imprints the characteristics of love, acceptance, and nurturance. The overbearing father imprints control, disapproval, and non-acceptability. These characteristics remain buried in our stories in the emotional centers of our brains, and are summoned later in life as we encounter people who remind us in some way of that primary person who first influenced us. And what it takes in another person to remind us of the primary character is often minimal (e.g. a boss is nothing like my overbearing father, but he is in a position of authority over me, and that's enough to activate dad's characteristics).

So as I meet a person later in life who reminds me of the primary person who imprinted my brain, I place on that person (i.e. project) the characteristics of the primary person. I meet an older woman with a certain smile, and I place on her the characteristics of my loving grandmother, and then expect her to act in a similar way. I meet the boss who can be gruff at times, and place on him all of the characteristics of my overbearing father, and act toward him in similar ways (or in ways I would have liked to have acted) toward my father, all the while expecting him to be that father person I so disliked.

And our minds also play tricks on us. Our minds, once the primary characteristics have been projected, only see in the other person those actions and behaviors that confirm our suspicions that person is just like the primary person. In other words, when my

'overbearing' boss acts kindly toward me, I just might dismiss or ignore that behavior. I filter out the good in my boss, only seeing those behaviors that confirm what I have already made him out to be.

So these primary people, the good ones and the bad ones, keep showing up. You might be saying, this sounds a lot like prejudice, and you're right. Prejudice has to do with pre-judging another person before you really get to know them. And once the judgment is made, it is often very difficult to disconfirm what we have already judged to be in that other person, because as we said, our minds censor out disconfirming data, and only allow that data which confirms our pre-judgment.

Let me give you an example at this point. A pastor told me that he was having disagreements with his board chair, and he was getting no where with him. He began to pray that God would give him discernment. He then began to realize that this board chair was pushing all of his "daddy buttons," reminding him of his father's arbitrary nature. This minister told me, "It was like putting on sun glasses. All of a sudden I could see the situation without all of the glare." He was able to move into the blue zone, own his part of the conflict, and move the relationship to a much better and more productive place.

Now take some time to fill out the graph below. Note those people who had the most influence in shaping who you are (for good or ill) when you were growing up. Pay special attention to the fourth column, where you have to discern characteristics that you tend to miss about each person.

People who were initially very influential in my life	Most important characteristics	People in my life today who exhibit the same characteristics	Ways I react when I'm around this person
Mother	Warm, loving, accepting, non-judgmental	Susie, Mr. Jones, Mrs. Smith	I feel close, accepted. I am more open.

Blue Zone as our Life's Work

People who are well-defined (as discussed in Chapter 1) are the people who tend to stay in the Blue Zone most of the time. That's because they have a much firmer grasp of who

they are – their values, beliefs, talents, gifts, and abilities. Intellect (the primary domain of the Blue Zone) rules over emotions (the primary domain of the Red Zone). The Blue Zone allows them to have conflict, even heated conflict, around ideas, values, mission, and strategy, without seeing the conflict as personal (about me). Blue Zone conflict moves us toward a common purpose.

Creating the Blue Zone is essentially the life work of everyone who aspires to lead a deeply meaningful life. The first step is of course the most difficult. It requires that we are completely honest with ourselves in identifying our core issues – and by extension honest with those around us. The Blue Zone is the willingness to accept responsibility for all our behavior and the consequences of our behavior. It is the continual refusal to shift responsibility for our actions to anyone or to any institution or to any system.

The Blue Zone allows us to have conflict, even heated conflict, around ideas, values, mission, and strategy. That's because the thought process is conducted in the brain's frontal lobes where rational thought is conducted. Oh yes, there might be emotion, but that emotion is controlled by the intellect.

The Blue Zone begins when a person becomes aware of her own Red Zone and acknowledges this. This is precisely why I emphasized self-awareness in Chapter One. If a person does not have a deepening sense of who s/he is, that person will be at the mercy of internal promptings that often prove not only unhelpful, but quite possibly destructive.

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Awareness of our response sequence helps us to consciously decide about our thoughts, feelings and actions. Note that each of these steps is activating the rational brain center, thus moving the message out of emotional brain center.

- ✓ Notice our reaction in the conflict.
- ✓ Identify our core issues being triggered.
- ✓ Decide on alternative constructive response

We can't control what happens to us, but we can choose how to respond. Accepting responsibility for our behavior allows us to change the behavior that is inconsistent with our most personal values. And the inverse is also true! Accepting responsibility for our own behavior protects us from accepting responsibility for other's behavior.

When disagreements arise, the disagreeers keep their focus on the mission of the organization and what is ultimately in the best interest of that organization. The exhibited behaviors are:

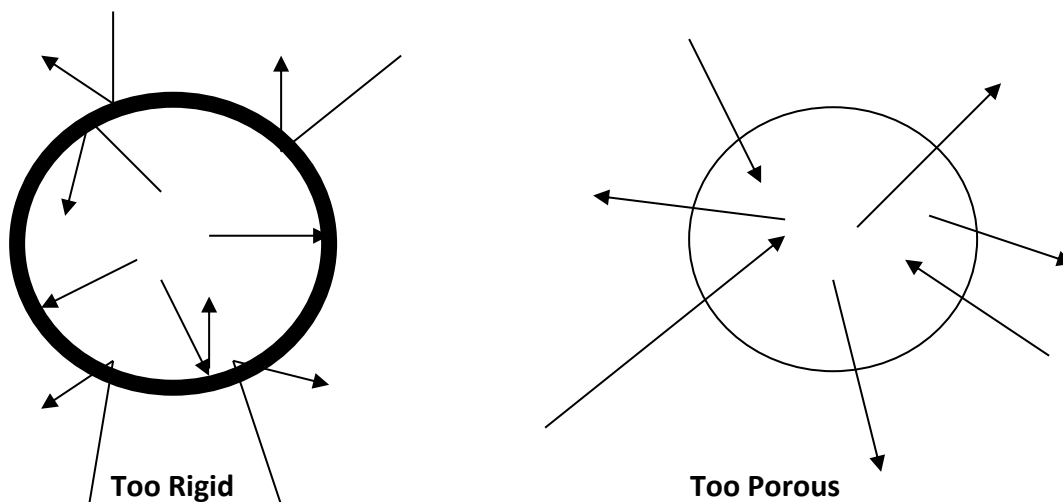
- ✓ Thoughtful
- ✓ Reflective
- ✓ Listen deeply for what the underlying issue might be
- ✓ Do not see negative intent in the other person(s) who is disagreeing.

Boundaries

As we said in an earlier chapter, healthy boundaries identify and separate the self from others and consequently are the foundation of the Blue Zone. Boundaries are the fences, both physical and emotional, that mark off our world, creating zones of safety, authority, privacy, and territoriality.

Boundary difficulties go hand-in-hand with Red Zone issues. As I sink deeper into the morass of the Red Zone, my personal boundaries invariably become involved and compromised, and I engage others in my emotional drama in unhealthy ways.

For some people, boundaries become too rigid. For other people, boundaries become too porous or ambiguous. In such cases, the integrity and cohesion of the person is threatened by a lack of definition -- "Who am I, other than an extension of you?"



Those with porous boundaries are usually the ones who are most noticeably in the Red Zone. They are the ones who seem to be constantly influenced by what others do, say, and think. But those with too rigid boundaries can be just as influenced by the Red Zone.

They've just constructed higher and denser walls to keep out external influences, because of their feelings (Red Zone) of vulnerability.

Boundaries are critical in understanding the Red Zone, because as we have said, sinking into the Red Zone represents a boundary violation. When I am in conflict with another person, it is critical that my thoughts and emotions stay present to the issues upon which we disagree. When I permit old storylines to creep into the equation and color my feelings, I have violated a boundary and I have compromised my thinking. When I begin to see the other person as a person other than who she truly is (to be discussed below), I violate a boundary. For those people who have poor boundaries (too rigid or too porous), the dangers of Red Zoning are all the more prominent.

Take Away

- **Write down your core Red Zone issue as you understand it, and how it affects you personally. Note that everyone can experience all four themes. But one theme usually stands out as the dominate or signature theme, the other three subordinating to that theme.**

Your Core Issue	Your thoughts and behaviors that flow from this issue	The result of these thoughts and behaviors.	Impact this has on other people.
My core issue is acceptance	I'm always trying to be the nice guy so I'm loved.	I can never hold people accountable, fearing they won't like me any more.	People see me as a nice guy, but vacillating.

Now Consider Your Boundaries

Boundaries Questionnaire

See if you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Agree Disagree

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have difficulty making up my mind. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have difficulty saying no to people. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I feel my happiness depends on other people. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I would rather attend to others than to myself. |

- Others' opinions are more important than mine.
- People take and use my things without asking me.
- I have difficulty asking for what I want or need.
- I would rather go along with other people than express what I would really like to do.
- It's hard for me to know what I think and believe.
- I have a hard time determining what I really feel.
- I don't get to spend much time alone.
- I have a hard time keeping a confidence.
- I am very sensitive to criticism.
- I tend to stay in relationships that are harmful to me.
- I tend to take on or feel what others are feeling.
- I feel responsible for other people's feelings.

If you answered "agree" to even two or three of these statements, you have at least some issues with porous boundaries. The more statements you agree with, the greater your tendency in that direction.. If this is the case, you're having trouble knowing where your story ends and other's stories begin.

Now let's see if your boundaries might be too rigid.

- My mind is always made up.
- It is much easier for me to say no than to say yes to people.
- My happiness never depends on other people.
- I would rather attend to myself than to others.
- My opinion is more important than others'.
- I rarely if ever lend my things to other people.
- Most issues appear very black and white to me.
- I know exactly what I think and believe on almost

every issue.

- I have a hard time determining what I really feel.
- I spend much time alone.
- I keep most of my thoughts to myself.
- I am immune to criticism.
- I find it difficult to make and maintain close relationships.
- I never feel responsible for other people's feelings.

If you agreed with two or three of these statements, your boundaries are probably too rigid. As a result, you may find that you are walled off from information and relationships that could prove helpful to you.