



PASTORING IN A PARTISAN AGE

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO HEALTHY CHURCH CONFLICT

CONTENTS

- PAGE 1** Pastoring in a Partisan Age Podcast Series
- PAGE 2** Attack Problems, Not People
- PAGE 3** Positions vs. Interests
- PAGE 4** 10 Emotionally Intelligent Questions to Ask
- PAGE 5** 4 Approaches to De-escalate Conflict
- PAGE 9** Do the Math
- PAGE 11** Art of Navigating Church Conflict

PASTORING IN A PARTISAN AGE

PODCAST SERIES

You're trying to unite a group of people around a shared vision in a time when people are more divided and angry than ever. What do you do when partisan lines run so deep they threaten to tear your teams and congregations apart?

Learn how to lead and unite a divided church this election season with the Pastoring in a Partisan Age podcast series.



Host & Episode 1
Carey Nieuwhof



Episode 2
Andy Stanley



Episode 4
Michael Wear



Episode 6
Mark Sayers



Episode 3
Ed Stetzer



Episode 5
NT Wright



Episode 7
Sharon McMahon



Watch on
YouTube



Listen on
Spotify



Listen on
Apple Podcasts

Of all the reasons you stepped into a leadership position, dealing with conflict, hate, outrage, polarization, and culture wars probably isn't high on your list.

In fact, it may be something you didn't even think about navigating until you were faced with it, but here's something you'll have to accept to succeed in leadership:

Conflict is inevitable. Destructive conflict isn't.

A Barna Group study showed:

- 56% of pastors who thought about quitting ministry cited the immense stress of the job as a chief factor.
- 43% cited feeling isolated and alone.
- 38% said political divisions are a factor.

Whether you're dealing with complaints from someone leaving your church, two staff members who aren't getting along, or board members who share different political opinions, the key is developing the mindsets, skills, and strategies that help you continue to move your mission forward and your people bought in.

What you'll find below is a quick-reference guide of shifts, strategies, and exercises to use when conflict arises, people aren't on the same page, and polarization and divisiveness seem to be sidelining your mission.

ATTACK PROBLEMS, NOT PEOPLE

You and I live in a culture where it's become a sport to attack each other.

Our culture is polarized, tribalized, and polemicized to the point where almost any kind of communication can blow up into an unsolvable mess where **everything becomes personal**.

You hear it all the time, and may not realize it. It sounds like...

"Why aren't you on board with this?"

"What's your issue?"

"How don't you see that this is the right thing to do?"

When you attack people, it often results in people quitting, making allegations of bullying, or worse, storming out and, in some cases, never speaking to each other again.

Instead, work on separating the **people** from the **problem**—this is a critical component of effective negotiation and can also be applied to resolving conflict.

The truth is, it is almost impossible to get movement and momentum on an issue if you are attacking people.

But attacking the problem actually allows you to find common ground and build alliances. Not only does it avoid relational conflict, it truly helps you accomplish what you set out to do.

At the core of attacking a problem (not a person) is uncovering the **interest** they have in their **position** on a particular issue.





POSITIONS VS. INTERESTS

Here's the distinction:

Your position is something you have decided upon.

Your interests are what **caused you** to take your position. They're the reasons behind your position.

And that's what you want to uncover when you're attacking a problem with someone — you want to understand what caused them to take their position.

Here's a great example of this from the book *Getting To Yes* (a book on negotiation):

Two students are studying in a library. One wants the window open. The other wants it closed. They bicker back and forth about how much they want it open: half open, a bit, a crack.

They can't agree.

Enter the librarian. She asks why each wants the window open.

One says, "To get some fresh air."

The other says, "I want it closed to avoid a draft."

The librarian heads to the next room over and opens a window. Now there's fresh air and no draft. Both are happy.

When you take the time to uncover interests, not just positions, a whole new world of possibility opens up.

You suddenly have the potential to generate new options that go way beyond the stated positions of each party.

Attacking the problem at hand not only avoids relational conflict but also allows you to build alliances, create common ground, and help you accomplish what you set out to do.

10 EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT QUESTIONS TO UNCOVER INTERESTS

Knowing which questions to ask (and when) is key to uncovering someone's interests—or reasons—behind their position.

When you show up with curiosity, you unlock solutions and resolutions beyond the immediate options—and you can even prevent future conflicts! Use these 10 questions to help you get to the “why” behind someone's position.

1. Can you share why this is so important to you?
2. Can you help me understand why you see ___ as the right path forward?
3. What do you wish would happen?
4. What will we miss or lose if we move forward with ___?
5. What are you most sad about?
6. How might this decision impact you/your team?
7. What worries you about the future?
8. Of all the possibilities in front of us, what's the one thing that feels like a non-negotiable to you?
9. What excites you about the future?
10. What is something I haven't considered yet about my proposed solution?



4 APPROACHES TO DE-ESCALATE CONFLICT, OUTRAGE, AND HATE.

1. CHOOSE TO BELIEVE THE BEST ABOUT PEOPLE.

Unchecked, it's far too easy to impute bad motives when none actually exist. There may be *some* people who are out to harm you, but most people aren't.

They are just sincerely doing what they believe is best for the future, and their vision just conflicts with yours and that of your team.

When you approach conversations believing the best about people, you'll find that you're more open to listening to what they have to hear and working toward a solution.

2. EMPATHIZE WITH YOUR OPPONENTS.

It's natural not to want to show empathy toward those who disagree with you. In fact, you may even notice your instinct is to dismiss, discount, counter, or even belittle them.

Instead, show empathy toward them and try to understand **WHY** they're upset in the first place.

Approaching without empathy:

"Jack, you and I completely disagree, and I'm not sure we can do anything about it. I just can't see it your way, and you can't see it my way."

Approaching with empathy:

"Jack, I'm grateful we share a commitment to our faith and our mission. I sense that you may be upset with the direction we're heading in, and I do know that a lot has changed. I get it. Can you help me understand why you don't see this as the right path forward?"

3. WAIT A DAY (THE 24-HOUR RULE)

No matter how mature we become, we all react emotionally to things and to act when your emotions are high can be a huge mistake.

Remind yourself of this repeatedly: “I’m not responsible for what I feel, but I am responsible for what I say and do.”

The 24-Hour Rule

A number of years ago, I developed what I call the “24-hour rule.” It’s simple: If you read something or hear something that upsets you emotionally, don’t respond for at least 24 hours.

This works great online, and you can even use this in conversations or meetings. Try this, “Hey, I really appreciate the conversation we’re having right now, and I think I need a bit of time to process everything. Can we continue this tomorrow?”

4. REPLY RELATIONALLY (HUMANIZE THE CONVERSATION)

If you haven’t noticed it already, people get nasty behind a keyboard.

In fact, people say things they would NEVER say in person when they type them out online, in an email, or in a text.



Here's an example of an email that me and my team received, and a great example that people often respond online differently than they would in-person.

A bit of context: I was hosting a free workshop and sent out a last-minute reminder for people who had not registered for it yet.



Hey, a little more lead time would be greatly appreciated. I was working at a family camp without phone reception and just got back to the office. I really like the content you put out, and it has been very helpful.

However, I feel like I was cut out of this one. Why do some of the biggest helpers of ministries give such short lead times (“Hey tomorrow is this really awesome thing and we expect you to drop everything for it instead of planning ahead like a smarter leader would.”).

Sorry for the rant but any thoughts?



Hi [Name],

[Name] here from Carey's team. We're sorry you missed the workshop yesterday.

While I can totally understand the frustration of short notice, we did send an email 10 days ago to announce the workshop, and this email was intended to be a last-minute reminder.

We intend to host this workshop again in a month or two, so you can join the waitlist here (link) if you'd like and be the first to know about it.

We'd love to have you there!

[Name]



Hi [Name]

Thank you for your kind response... three things:

1. I think I worded things a little harsher than I intended and should have taken more time to respond. Please forgive me.
 2. I wish I had seen the previous email... ten-day notice could have worked. I'm not sure what happened to the initial email but thank you for the advanced notice!
 3. I never expected an actual person to respond... THANK YOU!
- Blessings!

When you receive an exceptionally bad comment or message, it's an extremely effective strategy to "humanize" the conversation and reply relationally by asking for a phone call or to meet for a conversation — especially when it's combined with the three approaches above.

When you call them or offer to meet with them, you'll often surprise them and disarm the original criticism or outrage.

Why? Because, chances are, they were expecting you to either fire back an angry message, delete their comment, or completely ignore it... just like everyone else does.

Instead, you've shown them that you've heard them and you're willing to drill down to the bottom of the issue.



EXERCISE: DO THE MATH

The other concepts outline how you interact with other people, but this final piece is an exercise you can do on your own.

Inevitably, you'll encounter an issue or conflict that impacts more than a few individuals within your church or organization and ask yourself, "Who's on my side here? How much opposition is there?"

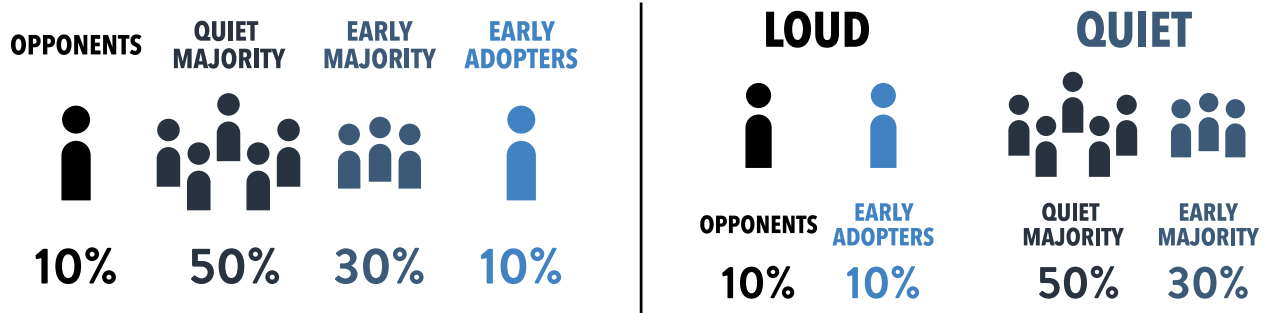
Answer? **Do the math.**

Generally, you'll find that your people land in one of four categories:

1. **Early Adopters (10%)** | Need to be led, or they will leave to find someone who will lead them.
2. **Early Majority (30%)** | Ready to jump on board, but rarely are vocal about it.
3. **Quiet Majority (50%)** | Can shift to advocates or opponents based on how you lead.
4. **Opponents (10%)** | Often vocal in their opposition to change and can influence the quiet majority if left untended.

Here's the problem many leaders face: You confuse **loud** with **large** and end up giving your focus to the opposition.

When you do the math, you'll often find that the source of conflict, rage, and division comes from a small proportion of the people you lead.



FILL IT IN

Use this chart to reflect on who is in your congregation and what potential impact they have as you move forward.

	Who are they? (List names)	What are they saying?	What is the risk in them leaving?
Opponents			
Quiet Majority			
Early Majority			
Early Adopters			

REFLECT

Consider your mission:

- How many people are you trying to reach?
- How many people would you sacrifice to get there?

Consider the opposition:

- Is there a solid argument in what the opponents are saying?
- Are these the kinds of people you can build the future of your mission on?
- If yes, what changes/corrections do you need to make?
- Would you sacrifice 90% for the sake of 10%? Or 99% for the sake of the 1%?

When you give it careful thought and consideration, doing the math will help you avoid letting a small minority ruin a vibrant future for the majority of your church and the community you want to reach.



THE ART OF **NAVIGATING** **CHURCH CONFLICT**

**DON'T LET CONFLICT,
DIVISIVENESS, AND TOXICITY RUIN RELATIONSHIPS
AND STOP YOUR CHURCH FROM GROWING.**

Get the **only** comprehensive training to unite, inspire, and empower your church, navigate conflict, and mitigate criticism. The Art of Navigating Church Conflict is a proven framework to guide your people toward a shared vision and a flourishing church.

This brand new course has the exact strategies, frameworks, hands-on tactics, real-world examples, mindsets, done-for-you templates, word-for-word scripts, and breakthroughs to navigate conflict with wisdom and grace:

Five Pillars of Conflict Resolution — that you can apply to any situation.

How to prevent church conflict from getting so inflamed — the 5 reasons issues get so heated (and so personal) and the antidote to each.

In-depth insight into how power dynamics and emotional health impact conflict — and the safeguards, policies, and guidelines you can put in place to avoid abuse and failure.

How to spot toxic and evil behavior — and put an end to it before it infects your culture.

Step-by-step guides for the most complex situations — like firing a volunteer, conflict between elders, digital conflict, disruptive staff, and more.

RESULTS YOU WON'T FIND ANYWHERE ELSE

Get **instant relief** from the day-to-day whirlwind of dealing with people that aren't on the same page.

Navigate tricky situations with **confidence**, knowing that you have **proven scripts, strategies, templates, and guidelines** that simply work.

Unite your people around a shared vision and **inspire people to buy into your mission** at an even deeper level.

CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE

Or visit theartofchurchconflict.com