

Rule 8: Empower the Third Side

From Greg Giesen's Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict

Christian called the group together. "Gather up everybody. There's one more thing to take care of before dinner."

We were all pretty exhausted after having just hiked for the better part of the day with 60-pound packs on. It was the fourth day of a ten-day Outward Bound trip in the Colorado Mountains and nobody was in the mood for another one of Christian's team building activities.

"We've got a problem," he began before correcting himself. "Actually, *you* have a problem."

We all looked around at each other, wondering what was coming next.

He continued. "Jonathan and David have been going at each other for the past two days and it's time this gets resolved."

You've got to be kidding me! I thought. *Why don't you just tell the two of them to fix the problem? Why do the rest of us need to be a part of this!*

Christian looked right at me, as if he could read my mind. "Greg, did you have a question?"

"Ah, well...no, not exactly," I stammered, before taking a big breathe to regain my confidence. "Actually, I'm a little confused."

"You're wondering why I'm making this a group issue?" he inquired.

Before I could respond, Kelly, one of the nine other participants sitting in this makeshift *tribal council* circle, spoke up. "But isn't it Jonathan and David's responsibility to resolve their differences?"

"If they can, certainly. But when does it become a team issue Kelly?" asked Christian.

Both Jonathan and David were clearly uncomfortable being the focus of this conversation. Neither would look at each other, or the group for that matter.

"I guess if they can't resolve it," she said, as her voice faded away.

“I’m still unclear why that makes it a team issue?” I countered. “It’s an issue between the two of them, not us. Maybe I’m only speaking for myself, but I’m not really impacted by their relationship with each other.”

Half the group nodded with me while the other half looked stunned by what I just said. “I’m just being honest,” I added.

Christian welcomed the debate. “Let me ask you a question. When you are out in the wilderness together for eight days. How important is it for you to be a team?”

“Extremely,” shouted Valerie, another member of the group. “Our lives depend on it.”

Everyone nodded.

“Okay, and what would being a team look like?”

Jonathan raised his hand, deciding it was time to be a part of the conversation instead of the object of it. “We’d collaborate and problem-solve together, support each other, and help each other out.”

“And what about trust?” asked Christian.

Everyone answered at the same time before letting David have the floor. “All those things Jonathan mentioned create the trust.”

“I like that,” said Kelly.

Christian nodded. “So is it important for a team that needs to collaborate, problem-solve, provide support and trust each other to also handle their own conflict effectively?”

“Of course!” shouted the group.

“Then why in the hell aren’t you doing it?” retaliated Christian. “Jonathan and David have been bickering back and forth for two days now while the rest of you look away, as if it’s not your problem. Well I’ve got news for you...it is your problem. If two of your teammates are struggling, then all of you are struggling. Every one of you is a reflection of this team; and a team divided is not a team! It’s time to walk your talk. Let’s see the collaboration. Let’s see the problem solving. Let’s see the support and trust. Show me!”

I was totally blown away. *Of course he’s right*, I thought. *How can we say we are a team when we can’t even address the dynamics within our team! We were living a lie and it was time to step up and be the team that we claimed to be.*

The Third Side

What Christian was trying to instill in us that day was that conflict within a team is a team issue, regardless if the conflict itself doesn't involve every member directly. It's what William Ury refers to as the *Third Side* of conflict. According to Ury, there's more to conflict than *their* side or *your* side; there's the *third side*! The third side is all the people who are *impacted* by the conflict, be it family members, friends, or colleagues.



Rarely is conflict an isolated event between two people or a group of people. As in the Outward Bound example, Jonathan and David's conflict impacted the rest of the team. Specifically:

- It created tension that was felt by everyone
- It created a breakdown in communication between Jonathan and David which meant a breakdown in team communication
- It divided the team (those closest to David versus those closest to Jonathan)
- It revealed that the team values were inconsistent and not being applied in all situations

Until Christian's intervention, we, as a team, disassociated ourselves from Jonathan and David's conflict because we failed to realize both the impact it was having on us and the role we played in enabling the conflict to continue.

Ury believes that there is no middle ground for third siders and calls on them to rise and engage in the conflicts around them so that: 1) the people in the conflict realized the far-reaching impact their conflict is having on others, and 2) those impacted by the conflict, be it directly or indirectly, begin to hold the conflicting parties responsible and accountable to resolve their differences in a supportive and constructive manner.

The moment our Outward Bound team became involved in helping Jonathan and David resolve their difference, I vowed to myself to nip any future conflicts I might have in the butt in order to avoid requiring a team intervention. It was all the motivation I needed.

This is why **Empowering the Third Side** is Rule 8 of my *Eight Simple Rules to Managing Conflict*. It's a call to action, if you will, to the people in the conflicts and the people impacted by those conflicts. Third sides need to take an active role in defining the environment around them so that all conflicts, strife, and disagreements are addressed constructively and respectfully. After all, isn't it time for the environment to define conflict instead of conflict defining the environment?

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